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Challenges in Marketing Communications during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Insights from Tourism and Hospitality Managers

Abstract

The purpose of this study is to explore how tourism and hospitality firms managed marketing communications (*marcom*) since the COVID-19 outbreak and to propose a conceptual framework on *marcom* challenges that the pandemic crisis has brought to the industry. In-depth interviews were conducted with tourism and hospitality managers in Croatia, a destination that registered remarkable tourism results in 2021. The proposed conceptual framework reflects the adaptation process and major changes in B2C (business-to-consumer) and B2B (business-to-business) communication since the COVID-19 outbreak on one hand and resulting strategic opportunities for *marcom* managers on the other, discussed in terms of practical implications. To the best of the authors' knowledge, this is the first study that presents an integrative overview of major challenges in marketing communications in tourism and hospitality since the COVID-19 outbreak by examining managers' viewpoints through in-depth interviews. The study not only proposes a conceptual framework for understanding changes and opportunities that emerged in a situation of a systematic health emergency but also provides meaningful guidelines and implications for the global tourism and hospitality industry, as managers from many countries have been facing similar difficulties and challenges during the pandemic.

Keywords: marketing communications, crisis communication, conceptual framework, qualitative method, tourism and hospitality managers, COVID-19

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1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic is a health emergency and disaster crisis that has negatively impacted society and the economy more than any other epidemic crisis, putting into question the general setting of human life due to unprecedented pervasiveness, intensity, and duration (Zenker & Kock, 2020). The tourism industry has notably been paralyzed for many months, enduring a severe market contraction. According to World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 2022), the worldwide percentage change over 2019 for international tourist arrivals was -73%, -71%, and -67% for 2020, 2021, and 2022 (January), respectively. It should be recognized that this negative trend in tourist flows, in addition to the limitations imposed by governments on individual mobility (from February 2020), has been determined by the overall attitude towards traveling worsening. Because of the pandemic, consumers' existential priorities, needs, attitudes, and behaviors have changed (Hoekstra & Leeftang, 2020; Ngoh & Groening, 2022). Tourists in particular are currently led to give greater importance to health and safety values and are often influenced by emotions of anxiety and fear

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(Zenker et al., 2021). From a business perspective, this context harm crisis represents a big challenge for survival and defense or the construction of reputation assets and competitive advantage in the “post-COVID world” (Nikbin et al. 2021). From a marketing perspective, it is crucial to understand how a crisis communication strategy can reduce negative consequences during a health emergency and facilitate the recovery stage.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, tourism scholars have mostly examined communication strategies in terms of message framing (e.g., Huang & Liu, 2020), health communication (e.g., Atadil & Lu, 2021), consumers’ responses to different communication styles and appeals used in the communication of prevention measures (e.g., Kang et al., 2021), as well as consumer media exposure and attention to COVID-19 (e.g., Sung et al., 2021). However, qualitative studies on marketing communications in hospitality during the COVID-19 outbreak are completely absent. Deeping managers’ viewpoints on the implementation of marketing communications will provide meaningful guidelines on effective communication management in critical situations.

The objective of this work is twofold: we propose a conceptual framework for understanding the challenges that the pandemic has brought to the industry, with important theoretical implications for this area of knowledge. Within the proposed framework, we also provide practical guidelines for tourism and hospitality *marcom* managers through a number of strategic opportunities that emerged from the crisis.

2. *Marcom* during the COVID-19 outbreak in the tourism industry

Strategic and operational marketing has been strongly affected by the scenario of systemic uncertainty (He & Harris, 2020) and has demonstrated a vital role in intercepting new needs and values of consumers and satisfying them through product and service innovations (Grimmer, 2022; Jiang & Wen, 2020). Marketing communications best practices have proactively “moved forward” based on a consumer-centric approach on one hand (Šerić & Mikulić, 2020) and have tried to adapt to the crisis waves on the other (e.g., Nikbin et al., 2021). In light of these contextual conditions and considering the current media environment saturated with false and contradictory information online and offline, tourism businesses need to manage marketing communications by carefully redefining strategies, objectives, content, tools, and media mix (i.e., *marcom* mix).

According to Situational Crisis Communication Theory (Coombs, 2007), when the firm is not responsible for the crisis (as in the case of the COVID-19 outbreak), the communication strategy should be based on an ethical approach and be expressed through the combination of “instructing” (i.e., explaining the crisis to stakeholders) and “adjusting” information (i.e., assisting stakeholders in coping with the crisis). Regarding the tourism *marcom* in the pandemic crisis, Hesse et al. (2021) argue that the brand should take on a role as spokesperson, by “educating, guiding, and informing their audiences in line with governmental or institutional policies” (p. 1804) and demonstrate solidarity, by providing support. However, little research has been undertaken concerning crisis *marcom* strategies for the tourism industry.

Marketing scholars (e.g., Cambra-Fierro et al., 2022; Martín-Critikián et al., 2021) have pointed out that it is essential for survival to orient marketing communications towards the defense and development of destination awareness, image, and reputation to prevent and mitigate negative performance consequences, such as attractiveness and loyalty decline. Regarding the key content of marketing communications to achieve the objectives mentioned above during the COVID-19 pandemic, previous desk studies (i.e., based upon advertising content analysis) highlighted how, at the country or destination level, abstract and institutional messages were often privileged instead of more concrete and persuasive marketing messages linked, for example, to the distinctive features of the services offered (Martín-Critikián et al., 2021). Therefore, the focus has shifted to abstract concepts consistent with the mood and concerns of consumers, such as health, hope, trust, solidarity, and resilience, trying to address a sense of compassion and care (Ertimur & Coskuner-Balli, 2021). In the hotel marketing and management context, Jiang and Wen (2020) have instead emphasized how to prioritize

messages related to hygiene, cleanliness, and health care services. However, to the best of the authors' knowledge, there has been no empirical investigation of tourism players to explore this phenomenon through in-depth interviews. Regarding communication channels, Nikbin et al. (2021) have theoretically analyzed marketing mix strategies during and after the COVID-19 pandemic and recession based on a systematic review not focused on tourism. Their findings show how previous literature declares a significant shift of investments towards digital and social touchpoints, promotional activities, and personalized communications such as email marketing. Although the choice of *marcom* mix, i.e., communication tools (e.g., advertising vs public relations) and media mix (e.g., owned media vs paid media), is crucial for companies, according to the authors' knowledge, there are no studies that empirically analyze the strategic choices made by tourist businesses during the COVID-19 pandemic and the effectiveness of these practices from a managerial perspective.

3. Research method

To address this research purpose, a qualitative method was adopted by conducting in-person in-depth interviews with eight tourism and hospitality service providers in Croatia at the end of 2021. The research had national coverage as the eight interviewees operated in all regions of the country and represented the study's target population. As for the respondents' gender, six out of eight of them were women, whereas two were men. They were owners/directors/managers operating in different industries such as hotel/lodging, restaurant/bar, and destination management. The interviewees' profile and the type of industry they were operating in are presented in Table 1.

Table 1
Interviewees' profile and type of industry

No.	Gender	Position	Industry
1	Woman	Revenue manager	Hotel, holiday resort & campsite
2	Woman	Sales & marketing manager	Hotel (five-star)
3	Man	General manager	Hotel (four-star)
4	Woman	Sales & marketing manager	Hotel (three-star)
5	Woman	Owner & manager	Restaurant & bar
6	Woman	Owner & manager	Restaurant & bar
7	Man	Owner & manager	Destination management (MICE)
8	Woman	Project manager	Destination management (luxury travel)

The following questions were posited to the participants:

Q1. How did you manage marcom since the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak?

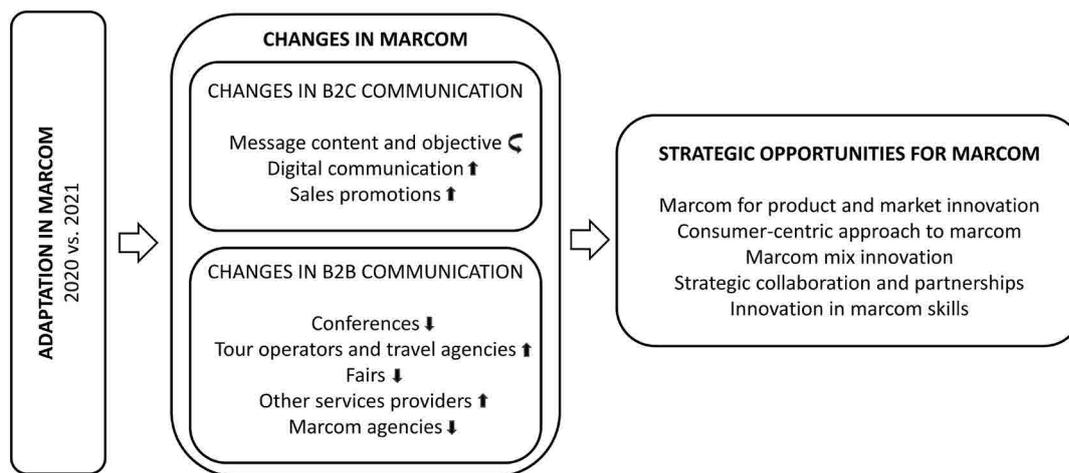
Q2. Has the marcom adoption changed since the COVID-19 pandemic started and if so, how?

The interviewees took approximately 30 minutes to answer the questions. The interview data were transcribed and analyzed. The analysis consisted of three phases: 1) data reduction, 2) data reorganization, and 3) data representation (Roulston, 2014). During the first phase, we reduced the data by eliminating repetitive statements and data that were not relevant to the research purpose. During the second phase, we reorganized and reassembled the data by assigning codes and classifying data into different categories. During the third phase, we generated themes via coding and classification. During the entire process, we made sure that communicative validity and reliability were accomplished (Sandberg, 2005).

Overall, three main themes emerged from the data analysis. The first theme referred to the *Adaptation in marcom* process that tourism and hospitality service providers were going through since the COVID-19 outbreak. The second theme was about *Changes in marcom* during the pandemic, which was further divided into two subthemes: *Changes in B2C communication* and *Changes in B2B communication*. The third theme is labeled as *Strategic opportunities for marcom* that emerged from the crisis and are interpreted in terms of practical

implications. Each of these themes and subthemes contained its own categories. All of them are gathered in the framework presented in Figure 1. Its findings and implications are presented in the next section.

Figure 1
The conceptual framework on marketing communications (*marcom*) challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic



Note. ↔ is for switch, ↑ is for increase, and ↓ is for decrease in communication

4. Findings and implications

4.1. Adaptation in *marcom*

All tourism and hospitality service providers stated that they had to adapt to the new reality considering new circumstances related to travel restrictions, health and safety measures, frequent closings, and changing working hours. These circumstances affected significantly their entire marketing plans, with important changes in their marketing communications.

From a more global perspective, the director of revenue management of the tourism company that owns and manages hotels, holiday resorts, and campsites (hereafter named tourism company) pointed out that the pandemic had affected all marketing processes in the company, which is why its business had to adapt to the new conditions and quickly redefine all the marketing elements. Similarly, the five-star hotel sales and marketing manager underlined that the process of doing the sales and marketing plan has changed completely and specified that:

“We do not elaborate them as before because the market conditions change so frequently that we need to adapt quickly. We actually do the basic planning that allows us a great amount of flexibility even on a daily basis.”

As a consequence, marketing communications have been changing constantly as well, depending on the communications of both the National Body of Civil Protection of the Republic of Croatia and the Croatian Tourist Board, in addition to health and prevention measures, which were also frequently changing. The respondents from the hotel industry stated that, despite the initial tendency to implement the standard marketing communications when the pandemic first started, many of them changed quite quickly and some changed dramatically as the pandemic was evolving. As reported by the the five-star hotel sales and marketing manager:

“We were undertaking a variety of promotional activities including some of them that we never did before, as well as “playing” with prices and investing in our product, all this for the purpose of “saving” our revenue, but also reinforcing our market position, which, in turn, has ended up relatively well.”

Hospitality service providers from the restaurant and bar industry reported difficulties they experienced in *marcom* management:

“Due to all these turbulences caused by closings and changes in work hours, it was really difficult for us to manage our marketing communications sustainably. We had to adapt quickly to every new situation and it was very challenging.”

Finally, the project manager of the Destination Management Company (DMC) for luxury travel also stated that the company continued B2C and B2B communications with all clients, although with significant changes in their implementation.

Undoubtedly, nothing in marketing communication management was the same since the COVID-19 outbreak. Some differences and similarities between 2000 and 2021 were pointed out by the respondents. Since the COVID-19 outbreak in 2020, it was no longer possible to attend in-person conferences and fairs. Business meetings with key accounts (e.g., tour operators, travel agencies, professional conference organizers, incentive houses) were limited to a small number of clients. Owing to these changes, both online communication and communication by phone increased in 2020, a tendency that persisted in 2021. However, in 2021, the conference and fair markets have started to recover and business meetings increased as well. The flexibility with tour operators and travel agencies was also enhanced in 2021, compared to 2020. What remained the same in both years is a clear focus on health and safety measures in promotional messages sent to final consumers. More information on changes in B2C and B2B communication is provided in the next section.

4.2. Changes in *marcom*

4.2.1. Changes in B2C communication

Three categories were established under this sub-theme, namely: message content and objective, digital communication, and sales promotions. All of them are discussed in the following subsections.

4.2.1.1. Message content and objective

Health and safety measures were clearly the focus of marketing communication messages during the pandemic. Tourism and hospitality service providers continuously provided information to their customers on the conditions of crossing the border (according to the country of origin of their guests), on prevention measures that were in place for both the area (i.e., the county) and the property they intended to visit, in addition to all the necessary information affecting the guest safety. Some hotels also communicated flexibility in their services, like the possibility of cancellation on the day of arrival, which were extra benefits provided to their potential customers.

One of the respondents from the restaurant and bar industry reported that guest safety was in the core of B2C communication. In order to promote restaurant attributes that meet satisfactorily hygiene and safety concerns, videos were created showing spaces of the restaurant, with a particular focus on outdoor areas, distances among the tables, availability of gels for disinfection, employees using face masks and gloves when serving the customers, and possibility that indoor restaurant space could be completely open due to movable glass windows. The same message approach was adopted among hoteliers who increased phone and e-mail communication in order to explain their customers the current pandemic situation in the country and all the adopted prevention measures. The sales and marketing manager of the three-star hotel stated that:

“Over the last two years we emphasized the safety of our resort, our distance from big cities and related crowds, and our location surrounded by gardens and beautiful nature further afield.”

However, it seems that the purpose of B2C messages was somehow different. While the director of revenue management of the tourism company stated that the primary objective in communications with customers was to receive their reservations either online or through the company's reservation system, one restaurant

and bar manager stated that the main purpose was to reinforce the position of two very different restaurants, by emphasizing their characters in marketing communications, especially their decoration and ambiance. On the other hand, the message approach of DMC for luxury travel was completely different. The respondent from this business stated that, because of the great sensitivity of their clients they, never implemented “aggressive” promotion and they maintained this strategy during the pandemic, but with one new core message, i.e., health:

“When communicating to our clients by phone or e-mail, we only did so to ask about their health in a truly friendly and very caring way. We would not even mention anything related to business unless they want. Our communication strategy was to be supportive to them and act only if they need something from us. I know that this may be contrary to the rules of promotion, but we have adopted this approach, which, in turn, has proved to be good. When the pandemic started getting under control (especially with vaccination), all our clients started contacting us for travels.”

4.2.1.2. Digital communication

The respondents pointed out an increased use of technology-based communication through different digital channels. For example, the manager of the tourism company reported the intensified use of digital marketing communications such as website, e-mail, search engine marketing (SEM), social media, and online media buying. The company maximized the use of digital channels to promote health and safety measures to existing and new customers, reply to all their questions, and meet all their needs and special requests.

Restaurant and bar managers stated that they carefully analyzed their customers before deciding which digital channels to use to reach them. One of them specified that the company significantly increased the number of news and posts, including highly attractive video content that was placed on social media, particularly Facebook and Instagram. It also used other digital channels such as the restaurant’s website, through which it received an increasing number of reservations every year, and as of 2022 Google Business. The respondent concluded that:

“Even though we have used social media and other digital channels before the pandemic, only now we actually realize how effective this is. Now we are using them heavily.”

The sales and marketing manager of the five-star hotel also reported increased use of social media on Facebook and Instagram, in addition to online advertising through Booking.com and Expedia, with the purpose of increasing the company’s visibility. The three-star hotel marketing manager was the only one who reported limited use of social media during the pandemic.

4.2.1.3. Sales promotions

Sales promotions were undoubtedly the most employed *marcom* tool during the pandemic. Service providers used many different forms of this tool, mostly in terms of monetary incentives, such as price discounts, coupon sales, sales promotions deals and packages, as well as saving cards, although some companies also used product promotions.

A number of respondents pointed out that some of these incentives have never been used in the past in their businesses or were employed under different conditions. The five-star hotel implemented sales promotions for a domestic market offering low prices on domestic portals mostly in periods of low demand, which is something the firm never did in the past. Similarly, the four-star hotel employed several sales promotion tools during winter 2020/2021, such as discounts of 25% and packages for early reservations for spring and summer. The manager of this hotel concluded:

“We have done similar types of sales promotions even before the pandemic, but now during the pandemic, we are having more of them and for longer (until the end of March, while before pandemic they were usually until the end of January.)”

Similarly, one participant from the restaurant and bar industry stated that:

“We made special offers for our restaurant, something that we usually do for the groups, but since we knew that many local customers had experienced a fall in their revenues due to pandemic, we decided to lower our restaurant prices for all.”

Thereby, the pandemic brought more special deals for the final customer, with more flexible and favorable conditions, which in turn produced certain revenues for hospitality providers.

Some providers also used saving cards, normally in terms of loyalty cards with discounts for the next purchase. Finally, product promotions were also implemented, especially in the restaurant and bar industry. Customers were treated with free beverages such as cocktails, prosecco, and wine, among others. One respondent stated that:

“This approach has created really good energy and such a positive impact that many of them were coming back to us saying they wanted to return the favor by consuming in our place again. It was so touching and now that I remember tears come from my eyes. This personal touch with our guests is very important even though it is more common in smaller places and not so frequent in big restaurants and bars like the ones we have, but we wanted to promote it to our customers even more during this pandemic.”

4.2.2. Changes in B2B communication

The pandemic brought significant changes in B2B communication among tourism and hospitality services providers. These changes concerned their collaboration with conferences, tour operators, and travel agencies, their participation in fairs, and their relationships with other tourism and hospitality service providers and external *marcom* agencies. All of these represent five categories of this theme.

4.2.2.1. Conferences

The conference market and related promotional activities are the areas in which tourism and hospitality service providers witnessed the greatest changes during the pandemic. This market has been probably hurt the most because of the big number of persons (i.e., big groups) and related restrictions (i.e., a limited number of persons), but also due to frequent changes in those restrictions.

To mitigate these restrictions some hoteliers implemented new technology solutions. The five-star hotel sales and marketing manager stated that the focus was on platforms that offered live virtual tours through the hotel establishment, which enabled virtual site inspections of the hotel and its spaces. The hotel also introduced the program that allowed professional conference organizers to see the conference rooms of the hotel virtually and set them up in various styles (theater, banquet, cabaret, etc.), something that was usually done in person while promoting conference facilities.

The conference market is of particular interest for DMCs for MICE, as their clients are mostly professional conferences and incentive houses, meaning that they conduct most of the *marcom* activities in form of direct B2B, with the focus on personal selling. The participant operating in this industry stated that, when the pandemic started, the B2B contacts with clients went on but were held mostly by phone calls, e-mails, and instant messaging through WhatsApp and/or Viber, occasionally also by video calls. This respondent observed that the pandemic had some positive effects as the interaction with clients was stronger during the pandemic than ever before and resulted in more efficient communication management:

“We were all exchanging a lot of information (what is going on, will it be possible to travel, what hotels are open, what are the restrictions, how we adjust our programs, prices, conditions, etc.). After some time, we all got used to this kind of communication and concluded that it was actually more efficient (“get-to-the-point”) than personal meetings and related travels that we all used to do before the pandemic. Of course, the human touch, i.e., personal presence, was missing, which, for me, is a very important part of my work, but we all had to adapt.”

4.2.2.2. Tour operators and travel agencies

Different from the tendencies in the conference market, communication with tour operators and travel agencies was enhanced during the pandemic. Most of the respondents stated that they introduced flexibility in their relations with these providers, especially in 2021, owing to the greater number of flights operating in that year compared to 2020 and the greater demand that tour operators and travel agencies had from consumers in 2021. The five-star hotel sales and marketing manager specified:

“We actually gave them a greater number of rooms than usual because many of them have experienced greater demand than usual. This summer many countries in the world were closed or were on the red list, while Croatia was relatively safe (on the orange list) and close (to Europeans) so we experienced big demand from tour operators.”

The DMC for luxury travel also intensified B2B communication with travel agencies, underlying that health and safety measures were the focus of communication messages:

“Our clients were highly concerned with health and safety, asking us to examine ourselves all the prevention measures that each service provider in Croatia has, send these measures to them for further analysis, then ask the service providers in Croatia if they could adopt more measures if needed, etc. We have spent a lot of time with this type of communication, not only with our key accounts but also with the customers who contact us directly.”

This communication was accomplished through a number of webinars that the DMC organized for its clients, i.e., travel agencies. It also put in place virtual walking tours to present the luxury offerings of Croatia that provide both top quality and top intimacy (e.g., high-end boutique hotels, villas, yachts).

The two firms from the restaurant and bar industry also increased their promotional activities with travel agencies in order to reach their final consumers. One of them stated that travel agencies were actually key players in attracting their main target.

4.2.2.3. Fairs

Fairs have for a long time been valuable marketing communication tools in the industry. The respondents stated that at the beginning of the pandemic in 2020 almost all fairs were canceled and some switched to virtual mode (e.g., IBTM in Barcelona), while in 2021 some of them were onsite so participants could finally attend in person (e.g., IMEX in Las Vegas, IBTM in Barcelona, and ILTM in Cannes).

An interesting observation was reported by the manager of DMC for MICE when saying that the fair attendance of professionals from that industry was actually in decrease before the pandemic: *“Because they have become more like big shows than the places at which you can actually have productive meetings in peace.”*

But as the pandemic started and everything changed, it seems that attending the fairs again started to be appealing and turned out to be satisfactory.

4.2.2.4. Other service providers

New partnerships have emerged during the pandemic, especially between restaurants and bars on one hand and other tourism and hospitality service providers on the other. These partnerships resulted in significant increases in breakfast revenues, especially in the main summer season. One restaurant and bar manager pointed out that promotion activities conducted in partnership with other tourism and hospitality providers were the most powerful *marcom* strategy of the year:

“This year we decided to take it even a step further by treating the entire front office staff from each hotel in our restaurant to taste our food and learn about our offer, thus recommending us to the guests in their hotels. We organized this in spring and we did it separately for each hotel so that their front office employees feel special when they dine in our restaurant. This approach has brought us good revenues because every night during this last summer season we had from 10 to 20 tables reserved by guests arriving from three hotels that we work with.”

Over time the restaurant staff started developing friendships with all front office employees working in these hotels and they decided to implement the same approach with some other service providers in the area (e.g., taxi companies, tour guides). The results were the same and the respondent concluded that:

“The dinners we organized were actually the most important promotional activity we had this year.”

4.2.2.5. Marcom agencies

Pandemic had negative effects on B2B communication between tourism service providers and external marketing agencies that were in charge of companies' marketing communication campaigns. Some of these contracts were permanently canceled due to financial reasons, while some were frozen only during the pandemic's peaks. One restaurant and bar manager stated that:

“Before the pandemic, we had a public relations agency doing a lot of work for us, but unfortunately we could no longer pay it and use its services since the pandemic has significantly affected our business so we had to cut certain costs as part of our cost control strategy.”

This resulted in a shift in marketing communication planning, which from then was conducted internally in the company, through weekly meetings with responsible managers of each of the three food and beverage outlets and brainstorming on the most appropriate marketing communication activities to be adopted.

A similar situation occurred among some hoteliers, who had contracts with several marketing communication agencies but had to freeze them in the worst periods of the pandemic, while in other periods these contracts were implemented. These external *marcom* agencies were mostly in charge of advertising campaigns on national radio stations and digital channels.

Only one hospitality service provider stated that during the pandemic the company maintained the relationship with the *marcom* outsourced specialist who was in charge of promotional activities of the company, especially those on social media.

4.3. Strategic opportunities for *marcom*

A number of opportunities emerged with the COVID-19 pandemic, which will be discussed in the following subsections as practical implications for the industry. They are grouped in the following five categories, named as: 1) *Marcom* for product and market innovation; 2) Consumer-centric approach to *marcom*; 3) *Marcom* mix innovation; 4) Strategic collaboration and partnerships; and 5) Innovation in *marcom* skills.

4.3.1. Marcom for product and market innovation

Changes in the market that were provoked by the pandemic resulted in the need of creating new products and services, which had to be communicated correctly to the new markets with new clients. One respondent explained that:

“Before the pandemic, our customers were mostly Americans and Australians, but last year we had big decreases of traffic from these markets, so we had to approach other customers, mostly those from continental Europe. Therefore, I redefined menus and introduced special offers, mostly in the periods before and after the main summer season. We were communicating our menus and special offers on the restaurant board onsite, as well as on our website and on social media, targeting mostly foreign customers in summer and domestic customers before and after summer.”

Tourism and hospitality service providers, therefore, need to quickly adapt to the new circumstances that have been produced in the market upon the COVID-19 outbreak and create new products and services if necessary to address the needs of new clients. Appropriate *marcom* tools need to be selected to reach those clients in the right place and at the right time.

On some occasions, companies had to redirect their marketing communications of the already existing products and services to the new type of customers. Significant changes in customers' profiles have been pointed out by

several respondents, especially regarding customer nationality (which changed due to travel restrictions) and travel companions (with significant decreases in organized groups coming into the country). These changes required redirection of marketing communications to individual customers, with more personalized messages, and attraction of new types of customers that emerged in major cities in Croatia, i.e., ex-pats and digital nomads.

4.3.2. Consumer-centric approach to marcom

All the previously mentioned changes have pointed out the need for communication messages to be fully aligned with customers' new concerns and needs. This requires a consumer-centric approach to *marcom*, which is at the core of the Integrated Marketing Communications process, according to which *marcom* managers need to create their messages in order to satisfy consumers' current needs. This means that consumers' safety and well-being will have to persist in the focus of *marcom* messages for a while. Today's consumers are highly sensitive as since the COVID-19 breakout most of them have been deprived of the pleasure of travel and experiences that can satisfy their hedonic needs. Reminding them of "small joys" in promotional messages should be something that marketing communication managers should take particular care for. One respondent embraced very well this approach:

"First, we analyzed our local customers, what they were missing during the lockdown and how to promote ourselves to them. We found out that the best way to start is to promote the smell of fresh coffee and relax on the terrace! Therefore, we made a video featuring fresh coffee being made in the coffee machine and served on our bar terrace."

The consumer-centric approach also requires integrating consumers into *marcom* strategies. Nowadays consumers are more powerful than ever, have strong opinions about brands, and participate actively in *marcom* message delivery. With this regard, one respondent from the restaurant and bar industry employed a "restaurant-specific card", containing a QR code with a link to TripAdvisor. This encouraged customers to leave their comments about the restaurant they visited, which not only enhanced the company's visibility on TripAdvisor, but more importantly, made out of customers valuable ambassadors of the brand. By this means, consumers were involved in *marcom* activities of the company through electronic word of mouth, which has been confirmed as the most powerful *marcom* channel in the new area of extremely powerful and informed customers.

4.3.3. Marcom mix innovation

The pandemic has evidenced the need for a more intensified use of some *marcom* tools and channels. According to the results of this study, sales promotions have been the most employed *marcom* tool during the COVID-19 outbreak. However, they have been used mostly in terms of monetary incentives, leaving behind some other tools that might be helpful during crisis management. For example, chances to win a prize might be introduced in hospitality *marcom* programs, designing attractive contests, considered as games of skills, and sweepstakes, considered as games of luck. Owing to their entraining dimensions, these sales promotions tools could actually help people get close again, have fun, make them forget about the pandemic, and by doing so, increase engagement with the hospitality brand.

Direct marketing is another tool that was highly implemented among respondents. Tourism and hospitality companies should use more often this tool in their communication with clients during the pandemic. As all the clients are highly sensitive, have a number of concerns, and seek highly personalized messages during the pandemic, direct marketing through new media should be one of the priorities. Besides, direct marketing enhances relationship building, which is something tourism and hospitality service providers should strive for during these challenging times. Successful database management is at the core of this process. Possession of valuable data on customers and mining this information can mitigate the risk, and monitor or even predict customers' behavior, with important implications for service providers.

Moreover, more emphasis should be placed on public relations. This is one of the most powerful marketing communication tools in critical situations, as it helps in the management of a good brand reputation, creation

of a positive image, and generation of trust towards the company, which are all highly relevant in the pandemic context. The sales and marketing manager of the five-star hotel that participated in the study reported some novelties in standard *marcom* activities, because of two public relations programs introduced by the hotel chain: the first one promoting luxury properties and the second one promoting properties with luxury suites. These two programs not only enhanced the brand's global visibility and image but also resulted in increased revenues.

Finally, the use of digital channels has been confirmed as an imperative both in B2B and B2C communication during the pandemic. Social media helped in reaching new clients and informing them about new products and services. Virtual tours through companies' facilities were useful for keeping alive the conference market and for addressing the concerns of the most demanding customers in the leisure market. Modern reservation systems and guest experience online platforms helped integrate all the information and data related to the reservations process, contacts from customers, and products and services they consume, among others which resulted in more successful operations management. Tourism and hospitality service providers should, therefore, take advantage of digital platforms and touchpoints in order to provide their clients a high-quality service and increase communication and interaction with them.

4.3.4. *Strategic collaborations and partnerships*

Opportunities also raised upon customers' increased demand for tour operators and travel agencies' services in 2021, compared to 2020, as more people traveled in 2021. This influenced the relationship of other tourism and hospitality service providers with these intermediaries, resulting in greater flexibility in service offerings and intensified communication. This flexibility needs to persist during these turbulent times not only among tourism and service providers but also in serving their final clients.

Moreover, the manager of DMC for the MICE sector stated that, because of the pandemic, professionals operating in that sector actually started looking forward to attending the fairs again, something that was rather neglected before the pandemic, owing to the doubts regarding the efficiency of this *marcom* tool. Thereby, fairs with a more limited number of attendees might actually be more efficient in terms of increased personal contacts and more successful communication with prospects and clients. This type of event should be intensified as this novel format can encourage more successful compliance with COVID-19 safety measures and more powerful communication among fair participants.

The pandemic also brought some new partnerships among different hospitality services providers. Hospitality firms with food and beverage outlets started some new collaborations with hotel properties, taxi companies, and tour guides, which according to some, was the most efficient promotional strategy during the pandemic as it resulted in increased revenues for all. Joint communication strategies should therefore be perused to create necessary synergies to accomplish the maximum impact. Different stakeholders involved in these new partnerships need to strive for the "one-voice" message embedded in the Integrated Marketing Communication process, meaning that a central theme needs to be delivered through their promotional activities. This is a rather challenging task for tourism and hospitality service providers in the times of COVID-19, considering an increased number of information sources and actors involved, in addition to uncertainties and the rapidly changing evolution of the pandemic. Launching a common and consistent message, however, is now more important than ever and marketers need to pay particular attention to this matter when designing their communication in synergies.

4.3.5. *Innovation in marcom skills*

The pandemic has provoked a number of negative effects in B2B communication, especially concerning relationships with external marketing communications that were in charge of the company's promotional campaigns. The contracts with these agencies were mostly canceled or frozen because of the costs of their services in moments when revenues were hardly even generated. However, this opened some new possibilities for companies, as they decided to create their own *marcom* departments with few persons in charge for future

marcom activities. This required time and effort in an adequate formation of employees, but also reduced the need of hiring external agencies in the future. On the other hand, owing to the increased demand for communication coming from customers, who were highly concerned about travel restrictions and prevention measures, some companies had to hire new employees responsible for pandemic-related requests only, thus creating new communication staff that was not needed before.

Thereby, hospitality and tourism service providers around the world are now confronted with new communication tasks, mostly based on adequate training of the new communication staff. Clear and unambiguous communication is of fundamental importance in addressing new customers' concerns and fears. The most prominent communication skills should embrace active listening of customers' new needs, which will help in shaping new products, new services, and new *marcom* campaigns that will promote them. However, new training programs need to go beyond teaching communication skills for the purpose of selling. They must include new communication patterns based on empathy, respect, and confidence, which need to be constantly transmitted to final customers.

Regarding technology-mediated communication, Information and Communication Technology skills play a vital role in reaching and communicating with stakeholders, participating in collaborative networks, and promoting tourism and hospitality services. New digital skills are needed for the creation and use of novel digital tools and virtual working platforms and must be taught and learned through training programs. As for in-person communication, a number of important non-verbal communication stimuli completely vanished during the pandemic, especially those communicated through facial expressions, which ended up invisible because of the use of masks, or those communicated through space (i.e., proxemics), which changed dramatically because of social distancing. Considering the relevance of non-verbal stimuli in communication processes, new communication skills require a meticulous use of other non-verbal elements that might help replace those that remained invisible, such as adequate use of body language (i.e., kinesics) and paralanguage (i.e., vocalics).

5. Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore how tourism and hospitality firms managed marketing communications since the COVID-19 outbreak and to observe whether and how these practices have changed due to prolonged health crises. The contribution of this work lies in proposing a conceptual framework on challenges in *marcom* during the COVID-19 pandemic. The framework explains the adaption process and changes that have been produced in B2C and B2B communication and proposes a number of strategic opportunities for the management of marketing communications in tourism and hospitality firms during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The study provides an important body of insights for the global tourism and hospitality industry, as managers from many countries have been facing similar difficulties and challenges. However, the study is limited to one tourist destination, i.e., Croatia, which is why future works could repeat the research in other countries. Moreover, the purpose of this work was to obtain insights from tourism and hospitality managers. Future works should also approach consumers and examine their perception and interpretation of *marcom* messages during the pandemic. Finally, this study is qualitative in nature. Quantitative studies should be conducted in order to understand the impact of *marcom* on tourism and hospitality firms' performance.

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