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The Role of Relational and Exchange Norms in Hotel Chains' Facebook Engagement

Abstract

In the digital landscape of hospitality marketing, Facebook has emerged as a vital platform for fostering customer engagement and influencing decision-making. This study explores the digital strategies of leading hotel chains on Facebook, focusing on user engagement patterns and the impact of communal versus exchange relationship norms on interactions and behaviours. Using the Facebook page, data were collected from Facebook pages during the low season following the second COVID-19 lockdown. Additionally, insights from 23 professionals in the hospitality and tourism sectors were analysed to understand the perceived relational norms established by ten hotel chains. Findings highlight the evolving role of social media in shaping customer expectations and loyalty. The results also indicate that digital engagement on Facebook is driven by visual content, with photos generating the highest user interactions, and bilingual posts (in Portuguese and English) being the most predominant. Furthermore, consumer engagement is significantly influenced by relationship norms, with hotels adhering to exchange norms achieving higher levels of interaction than those adopting communal norms. The study concludes with theoretical contributions and practical recommendations for leveraging social media engagement strategies in the hospitality industry, as well as suggestions for future research avenues.

Keywords: social media, engagement, Facebook, chains of hotels, communal and exchange relationships

1. Introduction

The digital revolution has transformed the tourism and travel industry into a “smart” ecosystem. Expressions such as *smart tourists*, *smart cities*, *smart destinations*, *smart glasses*, *smart cards*, *smart cars*, and *smart ecosystems* are now commonly used (Pencarelli, 2020). In fact, even during the consumption phase of the tourism product, digital travellers remain constantly connected, continuously downloading information about places, restaurants, hotels, and other service providers (Bilgili & Koc, 2021; Egger & Wassler, 2020; Ivanov, 2023; Pencarelli, 2020). This essentially constitutes a digital space created by people, for people, providing an environment conducive to interaction and networking across different levels—personal, professional, business, marketing, political, and societal (Kapoor et al., 2018).

The growth of digital platforms has elevated the strategic importance of social media for corporate investment (Dwivedi et al., 2023; Ren et al., 2024). Among social media followers of brands, 63% acknowledge that advertising enables free access to platforms, yet 59% perceive an overabundance of ads (Hootsuite, 2024). Facebook remains one of the ten fastest-growing social media platforms, although it ranks fourth in terms of delivering a positive return on investment (ROI) for organisations.

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This study explores the role of social media in supporting hotel chains' online communication with customers during crisis periods (Cho et al., 2023; Manningham et al., 2024; Sigala, 2011). It aims to determine whether such contexts foster the development of communal or exchange relationships with customers (Clark & Mills, 1979, 1993). The COVID-19 pandemic heightened the relevance of digital tools in tourism (Fakhriddinova, 2024). Understanding hotel chains' online strategies during such crises, particularly during the low season, is therefore essential.

The chosen timeframe corresponds to the second lockdown, a low-season period when hotel chains are typically more active in engaging with their audiences. The research seeks to address a gap by examining whether hotel chains communicate uniformly online. If differences exist, what drives them? Additionally, what insights do industry experts offer regarding these digital practices?

Accordingly, this study investigates the digital communication strategies adopted by hotel chains in Portugal on their Facebook pages during the second lockdown. Specifically, it examines whether, in times of crisis, hotel chains focus on reinforcing digital relationships with guests or adopt a more transactional approach centred on bookings. To address these questions, the study defines the following objectives:

(i) to investigate the activity levels and content strategies of hotel chains' Facebook profiles during crisis periods; (ii) to evaluate consumer engagement in response to different types of posts; and (iii) to assess the role and impact of relationship norms—communal and exchange—on consumer engagement in the context of hotel chains' digital marketing strategies. To achieve these objectives, the Facepager software was employed to analyse the digital presence of ten hotel chains (six Portuguese and four international) on Facebook.

2. Literature review

2.1. The role of social media and user-generated content

The term 'social media' was first used in 1994 in a Tokyo online media environment called Matisse. It is commonly defined as a group of Internet-based applications that builds on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, which allows the creation and exchange of user-generated content (Chandrasekaran & Annamalai, 2023; Cho et al., 2023; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Social media comprises various user-driven platforms that facilitate the dissemination of compelling content, foster dialogue, and enable communication with a broader audience (Kapoor et al., 2018). Social media platforms, such as Facebook, have contributed to converting visitors into customers (Abuhashesh et al., 2019), which is the primary objective of many companies. Social media can be classified into ten categories, considering their different performances: e-commerce websites (e.g., Amazon, group buying, auction, crowdfunding), third-party review sites (e.g., TripAdvisor, E-opinions, Expedia, IMDB), microblogs (e.g., X – formerly Twitter, Weibo), user-controlled online communities (blogs, forums), firm-controlled online communities (e.g. firms' website/forums), social network sites (e.g., Facebook, LinkedIn), organizational systems (e.g., innovation systems), content communities (e.g., Flickr, YouTube), wikis (e.g., Wikipedia) and social tagging (e.g., Delicious) (Khan & Abir, 2022; Wang et al., 2021).

Social networks (Facebook, LinkedIn, X, YouTube, Pinterest, or Instagram, among others) customise communication with their followers depending on the type of network used and the target audience. In this case, the content promoted within the online marketing strategy plays a central role, because the success or failure of the marketing strategy depends on its quality (Patruti-Baltes, 2016). Social networks offer companies a wide range of resources, including the ability to inform followers, promote their establishment, interact with customers, and internationalise the brand, among others (Malheiro et

al., 2019). Furthermore, social media, information sharing, and user-generated content have significantly transformed the tourism and hospitality industry (Cai et al., 2019; Khan & Abir, 2022). The underlying reasons are related to their ability to offer the necessary information on a wide range of hotels that might be difficult to obtain via 'traditional information routes'. Individual questions can be answered with a combination of authentic insights (reviews, comments, ratings, pictures, and videos) which allow them to create a 'bigger picture' and make more informed decisions based on previous visitors' experiences (Varkaris & Neuhofer, 2017).

In a study conducted by Malheiro et al. (2019), it was found that the resource most used by hotels is the publication of content related to the establishment, that is, high-quality photos of the establishment, its surroundings, and its cuisine, as well as informative publications related to upcoming events or even of award nominations. Additionally, through activity on their social media pages, hotels can gather feedback on how their communication is having a positive or negative impact. It was found that links and comments are the most received types of interaction (Shahbaznezhad et al., 2022). For hotels, social media represents a fast, direct, effective channel to keep followers constantly informed (Anaya et al., 2022). A similar trend was observed in the food and beverage sector. As noted by Chan et al. (2023), when using social media for marketing, restaurant professionals should prioritise the memorability of their content. Using multiple photos in a post improves content recall and drives customer action.

From the perspective of content consumers, user-generated content offers the opportunity to obtain free information and access authentic data provided by others, which is often offered directly by brands themselves (Krumm et al., 2008). This process is rewarding for users who share content, as it allows them to receive recognition for their contribution (Ozuem et al., 2023).

2.2. Exploring online engagement strategies in hospitality

The importance of customer engagement in fostering brand loyalty is growing (Li et al., 2020). To build online engagement with consumers, marketers invest heavily in social networks, which have transformed the way consumers interact with one another and with brands (Dolan et al., 2019). Jayawardena et al. (2022) specifically recommend the use of gamification to achieve more effective online engagement. A precise definition for social media customer brand engagement remains elusive. However, the most closely aligned definition can be summarised as follows: customers exhibit a range of behaviours that foster a stronger connection to the brand, surpassing conventional measures of customer loyalty like visit frequency, purchasing patterns, and intended actions, and which may include activities such as sharing, commenting, and liking the brand page (Gummerus et al., 2012). Users are not looking for promotional content, but interesting and informative content, and to have fun (Ryan, 2014). Moreover, Salas-Pilco et al. (2022) used engagement in online learning during the recent pandemic.

Attfield et al. (2011) articulate user engagement as a connection that encompasses the encompassing emotional, cognitive, and behavioural dimensions which manifest between a user and a resource, potentially enduring both in the present moment and over an extended duration. Furthermore, engagement can be demonstrated through various manifestations, including interaction (Moon et al., 2013; Oh et al., 2017; Subramaniam, 2013), active participation (Agostino & Arnaboldi, 2016; Hu et al., 2017; Zheng et al., 2015), and meaningful conversation (Yang et al., 2016), as shown in Table 1.

Online engagement has been studied extensively in the hospitality and tourism sectors by authors such as Hao (2020), So and Li (2020), and Xie-Carson et al. (2023). Regarding hotel engagement on social media, Shin and Perdue (2023) have contributed relevant insights. Table 1. presents examples of standard metrics used on social media platforms.

Table 1
Metrics used on social media platforms

Metrics	Features that allow users to	References
Like	Express their positive feelings of liking content. a "like" is a way for users to show their approval or support for a post or content.	Kabadayi et al., (2014); Maiz et al., (2016); Oh et al., (2017); Tsai et al., (2017)
Share	"share" means reposting or distributing content to make it visible to one's network.	Oh et al., (2017); Lim et al., (2012); Oh et al., (2017); Tsai et al., (2017)
View	The number of times content has been seen.	Campbell et al., (2011); Lim et al., (2012); Rapp et al., (2013)
Follower	individual who subscribes to or follows a specific user's account or profile to receive updates, posts, and content shared by that user.	Ashley and Tuten (2015); Oh et al., (2017); Rapp et al., (2013)
Ratios	It provides a quantitative measure of engagement, reach, or popularity within the context of social media platforms.	Agostino & Arnaboldi (2016)

Source: Adapted from Perreault and Mosconi (2018).

2.3. Facebook as a strategic tool for customer engagement

As of the fourth quarter of 2023, Meta (formerly Facebook) had a total of 3.98 billion monthly active users globally, representing an increase of over 1 billion users since the fourth quarter of 2021 (Statista, 2022). The top social platforms by monthly active users in 2023 are: Facebook (Meta): 3.98 billion; YouTube: 2.7 billion; WhatsApp (Meta): 2.2 billion; Instagram (Meta): 1.6 billion

Meta's total revenue in 2023 was \$134.9 billion, up from \$116 billion in 2022 (Investing.com, n.d.). In the last quarter of 2023, an average of 3.19 billion people used at least one of Meta's core products (Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, Messenger) daily, up 8% year-over-year (Shepherd, 2025). Overall, Meta's platforms, especially Facebook, continue to dominate the global social media landscape, with significant user growth and strong financial performance in 2023, despite some operational challenges, and remain the most popular social network worldwide.

For hotel marketers, Facebook remains the most effective advertising platform for targeting new audiences and driving brand awareness, according to research from the travel industry marketing platform Sojern. It combines mass media, such as television, with digital channels, enabling travellers to access diverse content, from text and photos to videos and brand pages. Facebook supports branding and direct business goals (Mutalik, 2021) and can enhance hotels' competitiveness, reputation, and sales (Wang & Kubickova, 2017). Facebook pages are key tools for identifying customer needs, creating tailored offers, and boosting satisfaction. While users spend limited time on hotel pages, reliable and beneficial content encourages participation, satisfaction, and voluntary promotion, influencing decisions (Kang, 2018). Hospitality organisations should maintain consistent, engaging feeds that showcase their services and offer value to convert visitors into followers and buyers (Abuhashesh et al., 2019).

Consumers trust Facebook ads when making decisions, emphasising the need for accurate, updated content that meets their needs. Credible ads boost perceived value and eWOM, increasing purchase intentions (Chetioui et al., 2021). Hotels must listen to customer interactions online and deliver preferred content to optimise marketing outcomes (Abuhashesh et al., 2019)

2.4. Communal and exchange relationships - insights into customer dynamics

Clark and Mills (1979, 1993) introduced the concept of communal versus exchange relationships, proposing that interpersonal connections may evolve from initially transactional dynamics into more communal forms.

Hon and Grunig (1999) further developed this concept by classifying relationship types, shedding light on the attributes that determine the quality of relationships.

There has been increasing academic interest in understanding the impact of communal and exchange relationships on customer responses (Aggarwal, 2004; Batson, 1993; Clark & Mills, 1993; Hon & Grunig, 1999; Shuqair et al., 2022; Yang & Aggarwal, 2019). These two relationship types differ fundamentally in the norms that govern the provision and receipt of benefits. Exchange relationships operate on self-interest and a transactional mindset—typically encapsulated by the notion of "you get what you pay for"—while communal relationships are characterised by genuine concern for the partner's well-being (Aggarwal, 2004; Clark & Mills, 1993).

In social psychology, it is crucial to distinguish between relationships primarily driven by economic motivations and those shaped by social bonds. Exchange relationships are based on the expectation of reciprocation and typically occur between strangers or business associates (Aggarwal, 2004). In contrast, communal relationships involve giving benefits as a sign of care, without anticipating direct reciprocation, reflecting a more profound social commitment to the other's needs (Aggarwal, 2004; Clark & Mills, 1993).

The authors distinguish between exchange relationships and communal relationships, classifying them based on the prevailing norms regarding the provision of benefits to the partner. Within exchange relationships, the impetus behind bestowing a benefit upon the partner lies in the expectation of reciprocation, representing a *quid pro quo* dynamic. These relationships commonly manifest between strangers or individuals engaged in business interactions (Aggarwal, 2004). Conversely, in communal relationships, individuals extend benefits to others as a means of expressing care and attending to their needs, thereby embracing a perspective that surpasses the sole emphasis on self-interest (Aggarwal, 2004). The strength of a communal relationship often depends on one's motivation to be responsive to the other person's needs. According to Batson (1993), the stronger the motivation, the more significant the communal bond becomes. He argues that communal relationships are, for most people, the most important connections in their lives.

Distinct behavioural norms govern these two types of relationships. In exchange relationships, individuals expect monetary compensation or comparable benefits and prompt reciprocation for the support offered (Aggarwal, 2004). In contrast, individuals in communal relationships do not expect financial return, are open to receiving non-equivalent benefits, and do not require immediate reciprocation (Aggarwal, 2004). The rewarding nature of communal relationships, even without a clear exchange, can be explained by this theoretical framework. In this context, "benefits" refer to something voluntarily provided by one person to another, which proves advantageous or meaningful to the recipient (Clark & Mills, 1993).

In summary, the distinction between communal and exchange relationships, as proposed by Clark and Mills (1979, 1993), offers a fundamental framework for understanding human relational dynamics. The growing scholarly interest in their influence on customer behaviour highlights their relevance across marketing, psychology, and service contexts, reinforcing the enduring significance of communal bonds in fostering loyalty and trust.

3. Methods

3.1. Separate study

Before the main study, a preliminary investigation was carried out to identify hotel chains perceived as adhering to either communal or exchange norms in their customer relationships. Ten hotel chains with the most significant presence in Portugal, measured by the number of rooms, were selected.

The snowball sampling technique was employed to identify and recruit 23 professionals in tourism and hospitality for this study. This method is particularly effective when targeting specific populations, as

initial participants recommend other individuals who meet the criteria, ensuring access to a network of qualified professionals (Baltar & Brunet, 2012). By leveraging this approach, the study was able to gather insights from a diverse yet interconnected group of experts, enhancing the reliability and depth of the findings.

We asked 23 Portuguese professionals in hospitality and tourism ($M = 46.48$, $SD = 7.24$; 69.6% female) to evaluate the relationship norms of each of the ten hotel chains they believe the hotels establish with their customers. The statements used in the expert assessment were adapted from Aggarwal (2004), whose work provides a robust theoretical foundation for understanding brand relationships and consumer attitudes. These items were selected because they capture key dimensions of emotional connection, perceived care, and transactional value, which are essential for evaluating the relationship between hotel brands and their customers. Additionally, the scale has been empirically validated in prior research, demonstrating its reliability and applicability across contexts involving service-oriented industries. Participants classified the following items on a seven-point Likert scale (1 – *Strongly disagree* to 7 – *Strongly agree*) (Aggarwal, 2004): “have warm feelings for this hotel”, “feel a special bond with this hotel”, “the extent to which you would miss the hotel”, “the extent to which they care about you as a person”, “the extent to which you personally care about the hotel”, “the extent to which they help would you even if it is not good for business”, “the extent to which they give you good service because they like you”, “the extent to which they give you good service to get something back”, and “the extent to which you go there because it is good value for money”. The last two of these seven items were reverse-scored, and together, these seven items were combined and are referred to as the communal norm score. All variables created by combining items from the same hotel chain demonstrate good reliability, with Cronbach’s alpha ranging from 0.798 (the lowest value, VIP) to 0.878 (the highest value, Pestana).

Descriptive results reveal that the chains Accor ($M = 3.43$, $SD = 0.68$), Hoti ($M = 3.75$, $SD = 0.95$), SANA ($M = 3.82$, $SD = 1.17$), Turim ($M = 3.53$, $SD = 1.17$), and VIP ($M = 3.34$, $SD = 0.93$) presented mean values lower than 4 (neutral point) and, therefore, can be considered as hotel chains with exchange norms. Moreover, descriptive results reveal that Intercontinental ($M = 4.43$, $SD = 1.15$), Marriot ($M = 4.21$, $SD = 1.30$), Minor ($M = 4.37$, $SD = 1.20$), Pestana ($M = 4.72$, $SD = 1.16$), and Vila Galé ($M = 4.21$, $SD = 1.17$) presented mean values higher than 4 (neutral point) and, therefore, can be considered as hotel chains with communal norms.

To verify mean differences across the chains of SANA (the hotel with the highest mean) and Marriott and Vila Galé (the hotels with the lowest means), we performed paired-samples T-tests. The results suggest that the difference between SANA and Marriot is marginally significant ($t(22) = -1.56$, $p = .067$) and that the difference between SANA and Vila Galé is significant ($t(22) = -2.13$, $p = .022$). Therefore, if there are statistical differences between these hotels, we can consider dividing them into two groups: all hotels with means lower than 4 are classified as having exchange norms, and all hotels with means higher than 4 are classified as having communal norms.

3.2. The main study

An experimental study was conducted to investigate the impact of relationship norms on online consumer engagement. The design employed was a single-factor experimental setup with two distinct levels of relationship norms: exchange and communal.

3.2.1. Data collection

To collect data, the Facebook digital tool was used to gather data from Facebook. Such data can be scraped directly from web pages or retrieved through an application programming interface (API). This

tool enables the collection of content in text format, such as posts and comments, or multimedia, including photographs and videos, from websites like Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), and YouTube. The data is downloaded according to the user's interests, for which the parameters for collection are selected, such as the start and end periods of data extraction, the quantity, and the identification of each publication, as well as the number of likes and comments. Therefore, we collected data from October 2021 to February 2022 (a low season in Portugal, following the second lockdown) for all publications that appeared on the Facebook pages of the ten hotel groups. Since the tool did not allow the extraction of all the indicators that were to be analysed, it was necessary to manually extract the remaining indicators. That is, the Facebook pages of each hotel group were analysed, looking for the relevant publications and extracting the information into an Excel spreadsheet.

3.2.2. Codification of variables

Therefore, having gathered all the necessary information, the following indicators were analysed: type of publication, reactions (like, love, ha ha, wow, sad, angry, care), comments, and shares. Consumer engagement was created by grouping all participants reactions, comments, and shares into the same variable.

4. Findings and discussion

4.1. Hotel groups' profiles

A total of 586 publications were analysed. Descriptive results show that SANA was the most active hotel group on Facebook, having published the most significant number of posts (116) within the period under analysis. On the contrary, Minor Hotels published only four times during the four months analysed, which demonstrates the inactivity of this hotel group on the social network. Hoti and VIP also stand out due to the low number of publications on Facebook. It can also be concluded that Portuguese hotel groups (Pestana, Vila Galé, Hoti, SANA, VIP, and Turim) published more (396) compared to foreign groups based in Portugal (190), as shown in Table 2.

Table 2
Summary of data from the Facebook pages of the hotel groups

Hotel Group	No. Posts
Pestana	78
Vila Galé	89
Accor	50
Minor	4
Hoti	20
Marriott	68
SANA	116
VIP	27
Intercontinental	68
Turim	66
Total	586

Findings indicate that the predominant languages featured in the hotel groups' posts are Portuguese (228 posts), English (19 posts), a combination of Portuguese and English (266 posts), and Spanish combined with English (46 posts). Additionally, some posts lack descriptions entirely, containing only photos or videos (27 posts). Most of both Portuguese and international hotel groups opted to create their posts predominantly in Portuguese and English. Table 3 summarises the information regarding all publications from the ten hotel chains from the data collection period. The main type of publication was photos, followed by videos.

Table 3
Number of publications of hotel groups on their Facebook pages

Total Number of Posts	586
Photos	413
Videos	31
Photos with link	112
Reactions*	62396
Comments	2370
Shares	5950
Likes	56460
Love	5723
Haha	48
Wow	77
Sad	8
Angry	9
Care	71

Analysis of this table shows that reactions depend on the type of post, with some generating more interaction from users. Reactions are the sum of likes, loves, ha ha, wow, sad, angry and care. These results allow us to generalise and conclude that Facebook is one of the social networks favoured by large hotel chains to contact their customers online. This aligns with Chetioui et al. (2021), who perceived Facebook as a trustworthy source of information. Also, Kang (2018) found that people spent more than an hour per week checking hotel Facebook pages, meaning that this is a reliable channel of communication. Likewise, the same research finds that Facebook impacts the way consumers search for information and make decisions. Regarding the type of content, photos are the most frequently posted type, as indicated by the results. This confirms the results of the study by Malheiro (2019), who states that hotels primarily use content to showcase their property, including high-quality photos of the establishment, its surroundings, cuisine, and informative posts about upcoming events and award nominations. As suggested by Ibrahim (2021) regarding Facebook studies, future research can explore contextual factors through moderation analyses, considering socio-demographic groups such as gender, age, income, or personality traits.

4.2. Consumer engagement according to the type of publication

Consumer engagement was analysed by summing all engagement metrics, considering the total number of reactions (6,2751), comments (2,370), and shares (5,950).

Table 4 shows that reactions, shares, and comments stood out considerably as the resource most used by followers as a way of interacting with hotel groups' posts. It is worth noting that the four foreign hotel groups analysed obtained the highest number of engagements in all metrics. Since the hotel groups did not make the same number of publications, the average was calculated for each engagement variable. Accor achieved a much higher average in all variables compared to the other hotel groups. On the other hand, regarding reactions, Hoti was the hotel group with the lowest average in this indicator. Additionally, several hotel groups achieved very low values or even zero comments and shares. It should be noted that there were five publications with no reaction, 374 posts with no comments and 228 with no shares. 26% of the posts with no comments and 32% of the posts with no shares belong to the SANA group.

While findings of this study present how consumers engage with brands, whether through social media metrics (reactions, comments, shares), Shin and Perdue (2023) analyse broader engagement behaviours (experience, innovation, relational, functional values). Although both studies aim to understand consumer behaviours and the impact of these behaviours on brand perception and loyalty, within the context of the hospitality industry, to improve understanding of consumer interactions with tourism brands, as shown in Table 4.

Table 4
Engagement metrics received by each hotel group in publications

Hotel Groups/ Engagement Metrics	Reactions	Comments	Shares
Pestana	42	2	2
Vila Galé	145	8	13
Accor	706	23	72
Minor	27	1	4
Hoti	16	0	4
Marriott	50	1	4
Vip	30	1	7
Sana	33	0	2
Intercontinental	18	3	1
Turim	23	1	4
Total	1090	40	102

4.3. The impact of relationship norms on consumer engagement

We created a relationship norms variable by grouping the hotel chains into two distinct groups based on the separate test results. Therefore, Accor, Hoti, SANA, Turim, and VIP were classified as exchange norms, whereas Intercontinental, Marriott, Minor, Pestana, and Vila Galé were classified as communal norms.

The findings from a one-way ANOVA reveal that relationship norms influence consumer engagement ($F(1, 558) = 3.94; p < .05$). Specifically, consumers indicated higher levels of engagement with exchange norms hotels ($M = 183.98; SD = 910.83$) than with communal norms hotels ($M = 77.22; SD = 221.61$). Moreover, we controlled our results by the type of publication. The ANCOVA results show that despite the effect of publication type on consumer engagement being significant ($F(1, 558) = 5.15; p < .05$), the relationship norms effect remained significant ($F(1, 558) = 5.90; p < .05$). Therefore, consumer engagement depends on the type of relationship norm shared with the hotel whereas the type of publication does not influence this effect. The findings of Aggarwal (2004) support the theory of communal and exchange relationships utility, particularly the guiding behaviour norms within these relationships, as a valuable tool for studying consumer behaviour.

Here, cooperation among all the hotels within the hotel group brand conveys a unique message, showcasing a robust and cohesive online strategy. Cooperative behaviours among members should be further stimulated (Almeida et al., 2023). From the perspective of acquiring new customers, the research provides insights into consumer behaviour on social media platforms, specifically Facebook. This can help hotel chains gain a more thorough understanding of their audience's preferences and behaviours, allowing them to tailor their digital marketing efforts to meet customer expectations and strengthen brand loyalty.

5. Conclusion

This study set out to analyse the communication strategies of both Portuguese and international hotel chains on the social network Facebook during a low-season period (October to March), specifically during the second pandemic-induced lockdown. With tourism activities suspended, hotels were compelled to adapt their communication strategies to the unprecedented global situation. Drawing on the lessons from the first lockdown, the aim was to explore how hotel chains leveraged social media—particularly Facebook—to attract new guests and strengthen online engagement with their audiences.

The central research question was: *What are the perspectives of industry experts on these practices?* Moreover, in crisis times, are hotel chains more inclined to enhance their digital relations with guests, or do they take advantage to be more aggressive concerning bookings? To address this, three research objectives were defined,

and the results are summarised as follows: for the first objective, which investigated the activity levels of hotel groups' Facebook pages, a total of 586 posts were published by the ten hotel chains under analysis. Reactions were the most common form of interaction, totalling 62,751. SANA Hotels had the highest number of posts, while Minor Hotels had the fewest. Portuguese hotel chains accounted for 390 posts—more than double the 190 posts published by international chains operating in Portugal. As noted by Almeida et al. (2021), maintaining a robust online presence is crucial for the hotel sector. Strengthening the design and management of digital strategies is therefore essential, particularly considering the expected growth in hotels' digital visibility and its potential for unlocking business opportunities.

Regarding the second objective—evaluating user engagement by type of publication—it was observed that the four international hotel chains received the highest engagement across all metrics. Accor stood out with significantly higher averages across reactions, comments, and shares compared to the other groups. In contrast, Hoti registered the lowest average number of reactions, and several chains received minimal or no comments and shares. Across all types of content, photos generated the highest number of reactions (55,673), comments (1,916), and shares (4,981), confirming the visual appeal of image-based posts in driving engagement. The third objective focused on the influence of relationship norms on consumer engagement. Based on expert evaluation, hotel groups were categorised into those following exchange norms (Accor, Hoti, SANA, Turim, VIP) and those adopting communal norms (Intercontinental, Marriott, Minor, Pestana, Vila Galé). Results indicated that consumer engagement was consistently higher with exchange-norm hotels than with those operating under communal norms. Although the type of content also significantly affected engagement, the influence of relationship norms remained statistically significant. This suggests that the underlying relationship dynamic between consumers and hotel brands has a more substantial impact on engagement than the specific content type.

In conclusion, the principal contribution of this research lies in establishing a triangular relationship between three key elements: hotel chains, online engagement, and relational norms. Hotel chains utilise online platforms—most notably Facebook—to engage with their customer base. This engagement, measured through interactions such as reactions, comments, and shares, is influenced by the type of relationship norm applied. Hotels guided by exchange norms—emphasising promotional or transactional interactions—achieve higher engagement than those prioritising relational, communal interactions. This implies that consumers are more responsive to transactional communication approaches, particularly during periods of crisis.

5.1. Theoretical and management contributions

This research offers several theoretical contributions that enrich the current body of knowledge in digital marketing, particularly within the hospitality sector. One of the key contributions is the introduction of the concept of *relationship norms* and the demonstration of their influence on consumer engagement with hotel chains' Facebook pages. This concept offers a novel perspective on how consumers interact with brands on social media and holds potential for application beyond the hospitality industry. The study categorises hotel groups according to two distinct relational norms—*exchange* and *communal*—and reveals notable differences in user engagement between these categories. This classification introduces a new analytical lens for examining how relational dynamics shape user behaviour and engagement in digital marketing contexts. Additionally, the study explores the interaction between relationship norms, content type, language use, and levels of engagement, offering a more comprehensive framework for analysing digital communication strategies. It also underscores the importance of reactions, comments, and shares as key indicators of user engagement. These findings enhance our understanding of how users prefer to engage with branded content on social media, providing valuable insights for businesses seeking to optimise their content strategies in the digital environment.

This research offers several valuable managerial insights for hotel chains and businesses in the hospitality sector as they navigate the complexities of digital marketing. By analysing Facebook strategies, the study underscores the importance of user engagement metrics—specifically reactions, comments, and shares—and offers practical guidance on optimising content strategies. Hotel managers can focus on creating engaging content, such as photos and videos, that is tailored to their audience's language preferences. Moreover, understanding these engagement patterns enables hotels to craft content that stimulates conversation and encourages sharing—especially important during low-season periods when maintaining visibility and interaction is more challenging. The classification of hotel chains into "exchange norms" and "communal norms" provides actionable differentiation strategies. Hotels that adopt communal norms should focus on building emotional connections through personalised content, such as storytelling, community involvement, and customer-centric posts, to foster meaningful engagement. In contrast, hotels that operate under exchange norms may achieve greater success by emphasising transactional value—offering promotions, exclusive deals, or tangible benefits aligned with their audience's expectations.

These strategic distinctions enable hotel managers to align brand communication with the relational norms that drive consumer engagement and enhance market positioning. Additionally, the use of web-scraped data offers benchmarking opportunities, enabling hotel chains to assess their digital performance in relation to competitors. By identifying effective engagement patterns within their relational category, managers can refine their digital strategies to maximise impact and strengthen their competitive advantage in the hospitality market.

5.2. Limitations and future research

One limitation of this research is that it reports only on the observable performance of hotel chains on Facebook without explaining why these engagement patterns occur. A second limitation relates to time constraints, which restricted the study's capacity to explore cross-border collaboration in tourism development in greater depth. This may have resulted in a more superficial understanding of the broader phenomenon under investigation. Additionally, the research focuses exclusively on a low-season period—when hotel professionals typically have more time and flexibility to communicate with current guests and attract new ones. This context may not reflect engagement dynamics during high-demand periods. A further limitation involves language and cultural barriers. Conducting research via the World Wide Web often involves audiences from multiple countries and regions with diverse languages and cultural norms. These differences can create communication challenges and interpretive discrepancies that may affect data collection, analysis, and the overall quality of findings.

Future research should consider expanding the scope beyond Facebook to encompass a broader range of social media platforms. Comparative studies across platforms could offer a more nuanced understanding of hotel chains' digital strategies and performance. Another promising avenue for future research involves exploring the underlying motivations behind the engagement behaviours identified in this study. To this end, a qualitative approach—such as interviews with hotel chain managers or social media strategists—could yield deeper insights into the reasons behind users' interactions with branded content. Such findings would enrich understanding of digital engagement and offer practical suggestions for enhancing hotel brands' connection with customers.

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Appendix

The used scale for specialists was adapted from:

Aggarwal, P. (2004). The effects of brand relationship norms on consumer attitudes and behavior. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 31(1), 87-101. <https://doi.org/10.1086/383426>

Items:

1. Have warm feelings for brand
2. Feel a special bond
3. Extent to which you would miss the brand
4. To what extent do they care about you as a person
5. Extent to which you personally care about the brand
6. To what extent would they help you even if it is not good for business
7. Extent to which they give you good service because they like you
8. Extent to which they give you good service to get something back
9. Extent to which you go there because it is good value for money paid

Specialist Survey about hotel chain Brands

This questionnaire aims to evaluate the perceptions that Tourism experts have about ten hotel chain brands.

The following questions serve exclusively to characterize a sample.

Sex: Feminine Masculine Prefer not to answer Age

Sub-areas of Tourism in which you work:

Accommodation Catering Service Rent-a-car
 Transport Service Travel Agencies and other reservation services
 Cultural Services Leisure and Recreation Services
 Education and Training Another one:

Which? _____

Occupation: _____

Please rate your level of agreement with each of the items presented below on a scale of 1 to 7 (1 = Strongly Agree and 7 = Strongly Disagree).

ACCOR hotel chain

Choose a value from the scale below (between 1 and 7) and place it in front of each of the items.

	I strongly agree	I agree	I partially agree	Neutral	I partially disagree	I disagree	I strongly disagree
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1	I have warm feelings for this brand						
2	I feel a special bond with this brand						
3	Which extent you would miss the brand						
4	To what extent does this hotel brand care about you as a person						
5	Extent to which you personally care about the brand						
6	To what extent would this hotel brand help you even if it is not good for business						
7	To what extent this hotel brand gives you good service because they like you						
8	To what extent this hotel brand gives you good service to get something back						
9	To what extent you go there because it is good value for money paid						

These group of questions was repeated for the other nine hotel chains:

ACCOR hotel chain
INTERCONTINENTAL hotel chain
MARRIOT hotel chain
MINOR hotel chain
PESTANA hotel chain
SANA hotel chain
TURIM hotel chain
VILA GALÉ hotel chain
VIP hotel chain

Thank you very much for your collaboration!

I hope you can send the questionnaire back,
duly completed