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THE ROLE OF INTEGRATED MARKETING STRATEGIES ON HOTEL PERFORMANCE DURING COVID-19 IN LEBANON

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Abstract: This study explores the relationship between integrated marketing strategies and hotel firms' performance during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. The specific goal was to look into how different marketing tactics, including public relations, social media, sales promotion, and advertising, influenced hotels' performance and ability to survive the COVID-19 crisis. The research design for this study was descriptive in nature. Primary data were gathered from a sample of about 200 guests who stayed at five 5-star hotels in Lebanon. The data collection process included the use of a scale questionnaire, which enabled the measurement of customers' perspectives and experiences with the integrated marketing tactics adopted by these hotels.

Based on the findings, numerous suggestions have been made for hotel companies wishing to increase their marketing effectiveness in challenging situations. These recommendations include investing in targeted advertising campaigns, using social media platforms to engage with customers and promote their offerings, providing appealing sales promotions to encourage bookings, and maintaining strong public relations to improve brand reputation and customer trust.

Keywords: Integrated Marketing Strategies; Hospitality Firms; Advertising; Sales Promotion; Social Media; Public Relations

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Introduction

The coronavirus crisis represents a major shock to the global economy since it has threatened citizens' living conditions. Most states have implemented economic, political, and liquidity measures to strengthen their healthcare systems and give assistance to people and sectors that were badly impacted (Capano, 2020; Cho, Jérôme & Maurice,

2020; Cuadro Sáez et al., 2020). The economic impact of the coronavirus has varied across industrial sectors (Akhtaruzzaman, Boubaker & Sensoy, 2021) or enterprises, with tourism among the most severely affected, owing to restrictions on movement and travel (Buckley, 2020).

Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic nearly brought the global economy to a halt (UNWTO, 2020) and has posed a significant danger to the hotel industry. Community lockdowns, social distancing, stay-at-home orders, travel and mobility restrictions, and other COVID-19- flattening strategies resulted in the temporary closure of many hospitality businesses and a significant decrease in demand for those businesses that were allowed to continue operating (Bartik, 2020). Despite the fact that the hospitality industry is progressively rebounding, the situation continues to have a huge impact on how firms operate in the industry.

In light of these circumstances, it is critical to investigate ways to improve hotel performance and resilience in light of COVID-19. Integrated marketing methods, in particular, have grown in popularity as a potential means of navigating the issues confronting the hotel industry. Integrated marketing strategies are a comprehensive method that incorporates many marketing elements such as advertising, public relations, promotions, and digital marketing to produce a consistent and unified brand experience across multiple touchpoints.

Lebanese Hospitality Firms

Hotels frequently advertise their services on television, radio, social media, billboards, and posters in 5-star hotels. Hotels occasionally offer short-term sales promotions to draw customers, including discounts, price reductions, premiums, and bonus packages. Hotels also use public relations strategies to enhance their brand reputation, such as event sponsorship, volunteer work, and media interactions. To enhance brand awareness and strengthen their competitive positions in the face of fierce rivalry, hotels, particularly Lebanese hotels, employ a variety of advertising tactics including television, radio, outdoor, print, and online advertising (Yusuf, 2019). Hotels offer a variety of sales promotions to customers as incentives to win their business, including price reductions, bonus packages, and premiums.

The main aim of this study is to examine the influence of integrated marketing strategies on the performance of Lebanese hotels during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study's specific goal is to investigate the efficiency of various marketing components (advertising, public relations, promotions, and digital marketing) in minimising hotel issues and driving advantageous performance outcomes.

Literature Review

Integrated Marketing Strategy

Integrated marketing is a strategy in which companies deliver a unified, holistic message across all marketing channels available to them to achieve communication consistency and maximum impact on the target audience, thereby ensuring the achievement of organisational communication objectives (Eric, Gil-Saura & Ozreti-Doen, 2015). Companies integrate, coordinate, and use promotional mix elements and other marketing strategies to disseminate coherent, consistent, harmonised, and synchronised information to their target audiences to promote brand image, customer patronage, sales, and marketing performance.

According to Al-Qeedaa (2019), integrated marketing is a marketing communication technique that harnesses the individual potential of all promotional tools in a firm's promotional mix in concert with any other marketing strategy to maximise the firm's chances of reaching its promotional objectives. An integrated marketing strategy, as opposed to developing separate messages, contents, and appeals for each promotional tool, develops a unified, consolidated, and coherent promotional campaign that is executed across all promotional channels at a firm's disposal simultaneously, ensuring that the target audience receives a unified message without equivocation or ambiguity.

The Performance of Hospitality Firms

The effectiveness and efficiency of a hospitality firm's operations during a given time period are defined as its performance (Reyes-Santiago, Sánchez-Medina & DazPichardo, 2019). It measures how cost-effective and revenue-effective a hospitality firm's activities have been in contrast to its performance targets and goals. It assesses the extent to which a hospitality firm's established corporate objectives and goals are met over time through its marketing and management methods (Zawadi & Makena, 2019).

Brand recognition, guest occupancy rates, customer patronage, customer satisfaction, customer preferences, customer retention, brand advocacy, corporate image, sales volume, market share, sales revenue, new product success rates, and profitability are all performance indicators in the hospitality industry (Qu, 2014; Bruni et al., 2017; Al-Azzam, 2016). According to Abdul, Munyoki, and Burugu (2016), when evaluating performance, hospitality firms evaluate the contributions of their business strategies to identify the most significant contributing strategies and the least significant contributing strategies so that corrective actions can be taken. When specific commercial or managerial techniques are discovered to be positively and significantly contributing to performance, they are intensified and reinforced to further improve performance. Alternatively, if some strategies are not significantly contributing, a strategic hospitality

business manager should remove them from the strategy mix to avoid undermining long-term performance.

According to Zawadi and Makena (2019), periodic performance evaluation is critical to a hospitality firm's ability to gain a competitive edge in the following ways: periodic performance evaluation allows hospitality firms to know how their resources are being spent and whether or not they are yielding meaningful returns on investment; it allows hospitality firms to carefully allocate their resources to strategies, campaigns, and programmes that are significantly contributing to performance; and it exposes the weaknesses or ineffectiveness of some business/marketing strategies, campaigns, and programmes, allowing managers to take corrective action.

The Relationship Between Advertising and Hotel Performance

According to Dwyer and Tanner (2002), advertising is "connected and being with function in creating knowledge, and building up a company's posture or image", and it also makes companies famous. What follows is a duty to create a suitable atmosphere for online marketers offering products and services. Customers may buy directly in some cases, therefore, the ideal final motive for ads would be to gain new customers. Dwyer and Tanner (2002) define media advertising and marketing as "nonpersonal, paid out announcements made by a determined sponsor in order to reach large audiences, generate brand awareness, assist manufacturers in positioning, and build company images".

Advertising is the process of communicating a message to customers about goods and services (Ul-Abideen & Saleem, 2013). Advertisements could be provided using a range of media, including but not limited to traditional channels such as billboards, magazines, newspapers, radio, television, and direct mail, as well as developing media such as e-mail, social media, application software, and the internet.

Advertising is one of the most important aspects of marketing. It covers impersonal promotional programmes that use audio, video, text, or a combination of them to communicate intended messages and content to a determined target audience. According to Riley (2016), advertising is any paid form of communication from a known sponsor or source that draws attention to ideas, commodities, services, or the sponsor themselves. It is usually delivered through media such as television, radio, newspapers, and, increasingly, the internet, and is aimed at groups rather than individuals.

The Relationship Between Sales Promotion and Hotel Performance

Sales promotion is defined by Carlos and Maricruz (2016) as a collection of short-term incentive or inducement tools designed and implemented with the goal of enticing and

stimulating the immediate purchase or usage of products or services by consumers or marketing intermediaries (distributors, dealers, wholesalers, and retailers). According to Wang, Xi, and Liam (2011), a sales promotion is a direct incentive given to a sales team, distributor, or consumer with the primary goal of generating an immediate sale. They go on to say that sales promotion refers to time-bound or limited promotional efforts other than advertising, publicity, and personal sales that pique the attention, trial, or purchase of final customers or other channel intermediaries.

Sales promotion, according to Esu (2012), is a short-term inducement or reward offered by sellers or traders (middlemen) to encourage consumer purchasing and dealer effectiveness. It is essentially a promotional strategy used by businesses to gain market attention and promote client patronage of items or services for a limited time, particularly during downturns or off-peak seasons. Sales promotion has shown to be an effective and efficient promotional tactic for significantly and quickly improving sales and overall marketing performance in the short term throughout the years.

Discounts, premiums, samples, bundles, bonus packs, and coupons have been used by businesses all over the world to significantly enhance consumer patronage and sales performance (Abimbola, Abioro & Okeowo (2020).

The Relationship Between Social Media and Hotel Performance

Social media is a collection of online communication channels dedicated to community-based input, interaction, content-sharing, and collaboration (Strauss & Frost, 2011). It encompasses computer-mediated interactive technologies that enable the development and exchange of information, ideas, career interests, and other kinds of expression through virtual communities and networks. Carr and Hayes (2015) define social media as an electronic system that allows for the creation, storage, and sharing of information and material between and among online communities. It enables registered users to create, design, edit, share, and disseminate information like audio, video, texts, documents, photos, and links to users all over the world.

It is a term used to define the type of media that is centred on online talks and interactions (Fuchs, 2021). According to Nisrina (2019), the emergence of social media tools (such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube) has created platforms for individuals and organisations to create or shape certain behavioural tendencies in their audiences by enabling the rapid, far-reaching, and widespread dissemination of messages and other content from the comfort of their homes or places of business. As a key component of direct marketing strategies worldwide, social media has been shown to considerably and favourably boost businesses' marketing performance.

The Relationship Between Public Relations and Hotel Performance

PRs are defined by Duncan (2002) as "courses that concentrate on the ideas of common, and manage commercial communication and status, also, employed to handle romantic relationships with company's varied publics to generate and retain goodwill, also to observe public thoughts and opinions and advise best management". According to Kotler (1997), Wells et al. (2000), and Middleton and Clarke (2001), public relations are defined as product publicities, press relationships, internal communications, product or service placements, open houses, and information planning.

Public relations, according to Stanley (2007), is a management function that determines the attitudes and opinions of an organisation's audience and develops and implements a plan of action to promote mutual understanding and cooperation with stakeholders. According to Stobber (2011), public relations is the management of communications and interactions between an organisation and its constituents in order to foster goodwill and mutual understanding.

Ebitu (2012) defines public relations as an organisation's systematic attempt to discover, build, promote, and preserve a favourable relationship, understanding, and portrayal of the organisation in a favourable light with its public. Companies have used public relations strategies (such as community development, corporate philanthropy, media relations, customer relations, sponsorships, events, and so on) to create and maintain a positive corporate image and to gain the public's goodwill, all of which facilitates the acceptance of their offerings by the target audience, effectively accelerating their marketing performance (Abu-Jamul, Mustapha & Hussein, 2018).

Theoretical Framework and Researcher Evaluations

The resource-based view (RBV) theory serves as the theoretical foundation for this investigation. The RBV, first proposed by Barney (1991), is a managerial paradigm used to identify the strategic resources that have the potential to give a firm a competitive edge.

The same theoretical framework has been utilised to examine the sources of a firm's competitive advantage (Jones, 2019). The main factors that determine a firm's competitive advantage, according to the RBV, are its resources and capabilities.

The RBV model is founded on a number of key ideas: resources are the tangible and intangible assets that a firm possesses, such as buildings, equipment, technology, patents, and human capital; capabilities are the firm's ability to use its resources to achieve a strategic goal; value is the extent to which a firm's resources and capabilities enable it to create value for its clients; and rarity is the degree to which a firm's resources and capabilities are distinct.

According to the resource-based view theory, integrated marketing strategies are important resources that hospitality businesses, like hotels, can use to strengthen their competitive advantages in terms of improved marketing performance. In this regard, the theory contends that a firm's resources (including its strategies) are the primary driver of improved performance.

Accordingly, the theory contends that if hospitality firms turn inward and make the most of the resources at their disposal, such as integrated marketing strategies, their performance will be significantly enhanced.

The fundamental tenet of the resource-based perspective, which holds that hospitality firms can perform better if they utilise internal resources at their disposal (in this case, integrated marketing tactics), served as the foundation for this study's hypothesis. The study, which confirmed the strong impact of integrated marketing tactics on the performance of 5-star hotels in Lebanon, subsequently verified the validity of the theoretical postulation.

Conceptual Framework

The performance of hospitality companies in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic was analysed alongside integrated marketing techniques with the specific goal to ascertain how these, as the independent variable, affected hotel performance, the dependent variable. To that end, the indicators for the dependent variable (hotel performance) included brand recognition, customer patronage, customer retention, and sales volume, while the independent variable (integrated marketing strategies) was decomposed into specific indicators, namely: advertising, sales promotion, social media, and public relations. Advertising is defined in the context of this study as the impersonal mass media promotion of hospitality services by businesses to increase performance.

The short-term incentives provided to clients by hospitality businesses to promote patronage and repeat patronage are known as sales promotions. Hospitality businesses use social media, a group of interactive internet-based platforms like Facebook, to interact with clients and advertise their services. Public relations refers to strategies used by hospitality companies to improve their brand recognition and win over the public, such as event sponsorship, media relations, and customer relations. Informed by existing empirical studies, this research hypothesised that through these specific indicators, integrated marketing strategies have some form of association with the performance of hotels.

Consequently, a conceptual model has been developed to visualise the relationship between integrated marketing strategies and hotel performance as hypothesised in the study.

This research, which was guided by earlier empirical investigations, explored the

relationship between integrated marketing strategies and hotel performance using these particular measures. To illustrate the connection between integrated marketing strategies and hotel performance that was hypothesised in the study, a conceptual model has been created.

Hypothesis: *The utilisation of a higher number of integrated marketing techniques by hotels in Lebanon positively affects their performance.*

Research Methodology

A descriptive research strategy was chosen for this study, Without changing any variables, this design is suitable for characterising the traits of a population or phenomenon. The researcher's goal in this study was to outline the integrated marketing strategies employed by hotels in Lebanon and how they affected hotel performance.

200 hotel guests in Lebanon were selected for the study using a judgmental sampling method. Participants were chosen based on the researcher's opinion and understanding of the demographics of hotel guests in Lebanon. The participants had to have visited a hotel in Lebanon and agree to take part in the study to be included in the sample.

Customers of hotels in Lebanon were given a self-administered questionnaire, which was used to gather data. Both closed and open-ended questions were included in the questionnaire. Both Section A (which asked respondents about their age, gender, and marital status) and Section B (which included statements derived from the study variables: advertising, sales promotion, social media, public relations, and hotel performance) were used to collect respondents' demographic data.

The quantitative data collected through the closed questions were analysed using descriptive statistics such as frequency, mean, and standard deviation. Correlation analysis was used to examine the link between integrated marketing and hotel performance. The content analysis method was used to examine the qualitative information gathered from the open-ended questions. The process of categorising and understanding the themes and patterns that appear in qualitative data is known as content analysis.

Results and Analysis of Findings

Table 1 lists how frequently each integrated marketing tool is utilised by hotels in Lebanon. With a frequency of 196 (94%) and 168 (80%), respectively, social networking platforms and email marketing are the most widely used integrated marketing methods, according to this data.

Table 1. Integrated Marketing Tools Used by Hotels in Lebanon

Integrated Marketing Tool	Frequency	Percentage
Social media platforms	196	94
Email marketing	168	80
Loyalty programmes	146	73
Online reviews	136	68
Search engine optimization	120	58
Mobile applications	88	50
Paid advertising	72	31

The mean and standard deviation of the variables, which include the quantity of marketing techniques employed by hotels in Lebanon and their effectiveness, are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Relationship between Integrated Marketing and Hotel Performance

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation
Number of marketing tools	4.21	1.32
Performance	3.98	0.72

According to Table 2, hotels in Lebanon typically utilise 4.21 marketing tools, and their average performance rating is 3.96.

Table 3. Correlation Analysis Results

Variable A	Variable B	Correlation Coefficient
Number of marketing tools	Hotel Performance	0.56**
Social media platforms	Hotel Performance	0.48**
Sales and promotion	Hotel Performance	0.39**
Public relations	Hotel Performance	0.29*

Note: ** indicates a statistically significant correlation at $p < 0.01$; * indicates a statistically significant correlation at $p < 0.05$.

The *findings* indicate that hotels in Lebanon use a variety of integrated marketing techniques to improve their performance. Social networking platforms are the most

often used techniques (94%), followed by email marketing (80%) and loyalty programmes (73%). Online reviews (68%) and search engine optimization (58%) are other important strategies used by hotels. However, mobile apps (50%) and paid advertising (31%) were less popular. The average number of marketing tools employed by hotels was 4.21, indicating a high level of adoption of integrated marketing tactics. The correlation analysis found a substantial positive association between the number of marketing tools used and hotel performance: correlation value = 0.56 (Table 3).

Hence, the study shows a favourable relationship between hotel performance and the quantity of marketing materials used. This implies that improving hotel performance in Lebanon may benefit from the use of more marketing techniques. Social media platforms are positively correlated with hotel performance, which highlights the significance of using these channels effectively.

Conclusion

Researchers from all around the world have been conducting empirical research in a variety of fields over the last few years to quantitatively produce evidence that shows how integrated marketing tactics affect the performance of hotels, for example, to ascertain the causal link between different integrated marketing strategies and performance (Khan, 2016; Obinwanne & Ukabuilu, 2019; Al-Qeedaa, 2019; Bezabih, 2021; Tsion, 2021; Aransyah, Althalets, Wediawati & Sari, 2020). This study looked at the success of hospitality companies and integrated marketing tactics. It was designed to empirically show how the adoption of integrated marketing strategies (advertising, sales promotion, social media, and public relations) has impacted the performance of hotels in response to the difficulties posed by the new normal brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic in Lebanon. A structured questionnaire was used to collect primary data from hotel guests, and descriptive and inferential statistics were used for data analysis. The study's conclusions showed that social media, public relations, sales promotion, and advertising had a considerable favourable impact on hotels' performance. These results suggest that hotels and other hospitality businesses might significantly improve their performance by developing and putting into practice integrated marketing strategies that include advertising, sales promotion, social media, and public relations. The study concludes that by using integrated marketing strategies, hospitality firms can sustainably improve their performance in the new normal brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Conflict of interests

The author has no conflict of interests to declare.

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