




Qualitative Study to Propose Digital Marketing based on Customer experience: Considering Grounded theory (GT)

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Abstract: The paper aims to analyze the potential of Qualitative Study to Propose Digital Marketing in the hospitality industry, with appropriate emphasis on Customer experience. In addition, the study offers valuable insights and guidance for effectively implementing Digital Marketing in marketing strategies. In-depth interviews of 19 seasoned professionals from various positions in the Iranian hospitality industry sector were conducted for the study. A Grounded theory (GT) approach of coding that includes open, axial and selective coding was made to recognize the themes that represent AI-enabled marketing practices. This approach ensured that the themes were precisely identified and comprehensively analyzed. Interviews followed by a rigorous coding process provide valuable insights into the practical implementation of digital content marketing-enabled marketing practices for the hospitality industry. The results indicated that several causal conditions (giving identity to Digital Marketing in the hospitality industry, developing the digital environment), underlying conditions (adopting a focus strategy, promoting digital branding, implementing digital marketing, meeting various needs in the digital environment, and optimizing digital activities), intervening factors (customer insight, environmental factors, digital capabilities), and core categories (behavioral branding, interactive approach, customer expectations of hotel services) influence Customer experience -based digital marketing in the Iranian hospitality industry. This study outlines the potential for enhancing marketing practices by adapting Digital Marketing in the Marketing environment for hospitality industry, highlighting the importance of Customer experience in achieving this goal.

Keywords: Digital Content marketing, Customer experience, Hospitality industry, Grounded theory

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1. Introduction

Digitalization and increased access to online information have made it easier for hospitality industry customers to research, compare, and order offerings and, thus, transformed processes and the overall marketing landscape [1-5]. In addition to, sustain their development, organizations in the highly competitive hospitality industry must successfully adopt and implement new marketing mechanisms to add value. In this environment, digital media is a cost-effective digital platform for attracting potential customers and for promoting tourism products and services through value Customer experience with customers [6-8].

Previous studies have indicated the potential for digital technologies in enhancing customer experience s, improving labor productivity, streamlining booking processes and improving hotel revenue optimization

strategies [9-11]. However, the advent of new technologies such as Digital Marketing (DCM), voice search, chatbots, robotics and the Metaverse suggests the emergence of a new paradigm that warrants thorough exploration [12-14].

Studies of adoption of digital marketing systems by firms in the hospitality industry indicate that the success or failure of such systems depends on customer perceptions of value Customer experience [15-18]. Therefore, the success or failure of digital content based marketing approaches also depends on the fit between the task (marketing) and the technology (social media) and by how the customer subsequently perceives. Digital marketing in hospitality industry refers to the use of electronic information and communication technologies, especially the internet, to achieve marketing targets profitably [19-21]. It includes the use of the internet and other interactive technologies to create and mediate dialogue between hospitality industry and their identified customers in hospitality industry. The primary advantages of digital marketing in hospitality industry are reduced costs, increased customer access and increased business performance. Digital marketing makes it easier for hospitality industry to develop creative ideas that will help them design innovative products in hospitality industry and to improve their performance [13, 22, 23].

Such prevalence as a mainstream Digital Marketing approach makes it difficult for firms to stand out from the mass of available content. Indeed, Otopah et al (2024) finds that hotels customers have become overwhelmed with online information as they navigate complex purchasing processes in buying units that house multiple decision makers [19].

To benefit from digital content marketing, suppliers need to adopt a value-centric approach that offers individual buying unit members unique, valuable content [24-26]. But few hotels firms do so; an interview study with 172 hotels marketers indicates that only half of them believe their content stands out, and only 23% tailor their content to specific individuals. Furthermore, a recent industry study implies that content marketing strategies by hospitality industry commonly rely on Value-centric goals and metrics [20, 27]. Thus, it appears that, even when Managers of the hospitality industry recognize the potential of Digital Marketing as a value Customer experience approach, they generally fall short in achieving its full promise [1].

These Industry do not feel the need to use digital platforms as they get major proportion of their business through word of mouth (WOM) [21]. They are required to adopt and use digital marketing as digital evidence is the need of the hour these days. They use Digital Marketing because everyone else in the market is doing so, and thus, these firms follow the adoption behavior of fellow tourism firms to gain legitimization [13, 28]. Thus, institutional factors might not be important for other SMEs, as per the literature, but are inevitable for hospitality industry [11, 21].

Digital marketing introduces electronic technology to traditional marketing concepts. It uses electronic media, wireless media and digital databases on customers [1, 2, 22]. Instead of using printed media, digital marketing calls for the use of tools such as electronic billboards, videos, mobile phones and internet when marketing [13]. These tools offer attractive visual displays and fast communication speeds while targeting wide audience bases [29].

In practice, Digital Marketing strategies and tactics have been applied for more than a decade [30, 31], but marketing research has addressed the concept only more recently, as indicated by the research contributions. Holliman and Rowley (2014, p. 285) introduce digital content marketing as a strategic B2B marketing communication approach and offer a definition: "Hospitality Digital Marketing involves creating, distributing and sharing relevant, compelling and timely content to engage customers at the appropriate point in their buying consideration processes, such that it encourages them to convert to a business building outcome." Other studies suggest some variations on that definition, but in general, they concur that Digital Marketing entails the creation

and sharing of valuable digital content for engaging customers to achieve performance outcomes, such as sales or improved brand relationships [1].

Many researchers define digital marketing as consumer-oriented advertising/promotion of products and brands through Customer experience. Customer experience is a two-dimensional process that consists of interaction and influence. Interaction and influence are observed in the joint communication between the two parties in online or offline settings. Customer experience ultimately takes place whether a company is actively involved in the interaction or merely provides interaction settings (e.g., platforms or events) for the brand's stakeholders. Customer experience helps companies to offer greater goods and services to their consumers and thus encourage them to participate more in various activities (Nadim et al., 2020).

Amawate (2024) believe that companies can create value for their customers by focusing on customer participation behavior and customer citizenship behavior. The components of customer participation behavior include customer information, sense of responsibility, and personal interaction. On the other hand, customer citizenship behavior benefits companies greatly, as it provides customers with feedback, support, help, and tolerance, and thus raises awareness among customers [32].

Customer experience as an emerging paradigm proposes a change from a firm-centric view to a demand-centric and interactive process that engages resource-integrating participants for a mutually beneficial collaboration [33]. The Customer experience paradigm seeks reciprocal value propositions amongst its stakeholders [34], where actors can create value in collaboration with or influenced by others [26]. The paradigm typifies shifting boundaries, where consumers perform the simultaneous roles of providing firms with value in the form of their Customer experience activity and in the form of their purchase activity [32].

Owing to the predominant service context of the hospitality industry, customers' Digital Marketing is formed mainly from intangible experiences and interactions. Customer experience may thus be contingent on the ability to co-create these customer experiences, such that customers can be active participants in building their own experiences from personalized and interactive moments with the service provider [1-3].

The utility of information and communication technology (ICT) in Customer experience for hospitality services has become apparent in tech-enabled platforms such as online social communities, online booking, virtual tourism experiences, advertising, specialized mobile apps, etc. The online community offers the benefits of social inclusion and information sharing through information dissemination, user-generated content, interaction, and mutual assistance from hotel and fellow community members. Online communities also help to establish valuable relationships between old and new customers [35, 36]. Travelers' comments and reviews on TripAdvisor typify the concept of Customer experience, where potential customers may even preconceive their Digital Marketing based on feedback from other community members. The Customer experience of value approach and its conceptual contributions have also received particular attention in the tourism sector, since 2009 [4, 36, 37]. Studies on the Customer experience of customer value in tourism organizations have also been highlighted by the scientific community, for using different theoretical approaches, namely Service Dominant-Logic [29], Customer Experience Theory [38], Customer-Dominant Logic [31], Social Exchange Theory [28], Complexity Theory [22] and others [20, 39].

Although several authors mention the importance of continuing to develop studies in the context of Customer Experience value in this industry [38], it is worth noting the paucity of systematizing based on Digital Marketing the empirical knowledge produced by the scientific community. Existing studies focus on the tourist Digital Marketing through value Customer experience experience [40], on an agenda for innovative tourism experience

research [36], on a conceptual framework where tourists are situated at three social levels (liminoid, liminoid and post-liminoid) of the tourism experience [31], on the evolution of the value Customer experience concept, through a bibliometric analysis [41], and on the similarities and differences between research method and concepts of value Customer experience [42].

Now, based on the theoretical reviews developed and the specificities found, it is possible to highlight that there is no conceptual model that, through an integrative (holistic) understanding of empirical and conceptual knowledge, emphasizes the different dimensions contained in the literature on content marketing through value Customer experience in the hospitality industry.

Furthermore, it should be noted that, the value cocreation in this industry has been recurrently conceptualized from Yi and Gong (2013) approach, disregarding the relevance of other factors that also shape it. On the other hand, the literature presents a great variety of studies associated with the antecedents and consequences of content marketing through value Customer experience [43]. Hence, an effort is needed to aggregate these different variables into categories, which facilitate a broader understanding of this field of knowledge, not only for academic and research purposes, but also for decision-making in public and private organizations. This study aims to delineate the factors that determine the adoption of digital marketing among hospitality industry and to propose a research model for future research. Digital Marketing is described as digital technology-enabled processes by which firms collaborate with stakeholders to create value by promoting brands, communicating, acquiring, retaining customers and increasing sales [9]. Because the literature on digital marketing among hospitality industry is scarce, a literature review on adoption of digital marketing by hospitality industry is conducted with the objective to map the knowledge trajectory to design a research agenda for hospitality industry as there is a need to study adoption of Digital Marketing in the context of a specific industry [32].

2. Methodology

Given the existing theoretical gap in the research literature, this qualitative study adopted the grounded theory approach of Strauss and Corbin (1998) to develop a model that provides a deeper understanding of Customer experience -based Digital Marketing in the Iranian hospitality industry. Grounded theory is a qualitative research method that uses inductive analysis and a series of systematic procedures to generate a theory that explains a desired phenomenon.

The study population consisted of all relevant academics and hospitality professionals (working in Parsian, Espinas Palace, and Laleh hotels), among whom 19 individuals were enrolled using snowball sampling. Interviewees were asked to help the researcher find other relevant experts. In snowball sampling, researchers enroll participants who can improve their understanding of the research problem and perception of the core phenomenon by introducing other potential participants. The data were collected using semi-structured in-depth interviews. Before initiating the interviews, the researcher provided participants with an overview of the research plan, the main research objectives and questions, and explanations about the main research concepts and keywords either in person or via e-mail or telegram. In addition, researcher briefly described related previous studies at the beginning of the interview session to enhance participants' awareness of the present study.

According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), qualitative researchers use some strategies and techniques to validate their studies. The present research was validated using inter-rater agreement, peer review, and member checking methods. To this end, two individuals (the researcher and a colleague) extracted the research codes separately, and Cohen's kappa coefficient was then used to measure inter-rater agreement. Cohen's kappa

coefficient was calculated to be 86.9% at a significant level of 0.001, indicating almost complete agreement between the two coders (raters). In addition, the researcher drew on the opinions of the supervisor, the advisor, and 3 researchers from the marketing and hospitality fields on the research categories and model to further enrich the research model (peer review). Finally, 3 interviewees (participants) with relevant academic backgrounds were asked to review the results of the coding, analysis, categorization, and modeling processes, and their corrective feedback was then used to modify the final model (member checking).

3. Findings

Based on Strauss and Corbin's (1998) approach, the interviews were recorded and documented and the researcher took notes during the interviews. In the next step, the interviews were transcribed verbatim and the data were analyzed and coded. As shown in Tables 1 to 6, 32 categories were extracted after a complete analysis of the transcribed interviews.

Causal conditions

Causal conditions are a set of events and concepts that create situations associated with a phenomenon. These conditions also explain why and how people and groups react in certain manners (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). In the present study, the causal conditions included categories that lead to the development of digital marketing (the studied phenomenon) in the Iranian hospitality industry through Customer experience. Accordingly, the main categories representing the causal conditions included giving identity to digital marketing in the hospitality industry, organizing digital marketing campaigns, and promoting the influence of hospitality culture. Table 1 presents the causal conditions (categories) that influence the development of Digital Marketing in the Iranian hospitality industry through Customer experience.

Table 1. Causal conditions affecting the development of Digital Marketing through Customer experience

| Category | Concept | Interviewee |
|--|--|-------------------------------|
| Giving identity to digital marketing in the hospitality industry | Increasing changes in digital marketing | P1, P2, P4, P5, P6, P10, P14 |
| | Adaptation to rapid changes by designing websites and interfaces | |
| | Active presence in social networks | |
| | Desire to maintain valuable relationships on digital platforms | |
| Organizing digital marketing campaigns | Building a strong marketing team | P1, P3, P9, P10, P11, and P12 |
| | Recruiting new qualified personnel | |
| | Allocating large budgets for digital marketing | |
| | Creating the necessary conditions | |
| Promoting the influence of hospitality culture | Increasing knowledge and awareness of digital hospitality | P5, P6, P7, and P12 |
| | Expanding information about digital hospitality | |
| | Facilitating customer knowledge management via digital platforms | |

Underlying conditions

Underlying conditions are specific features of the studied phenomenon that refer to the context and place of occurrence of related events. In this study, the underlying conditions consisted of factors that prepare the ground for the development of digital marketing in the Iranian hospitality industry. Underlying conditions provide specific contexts that pave the way for strategies to manage, control, and respond to the studied phenomenon. These conditions consist of several concepts, categories, and contextual variables (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). In this study, key underlying conditions that prepare the ground for the development of digital marketing in the Iranian

hospitality industry through Customer experience included adopting a focus strategy, promoting digital branding, and implementing Digital Marketing (Table 2).

Table 2. Underlying conditions affecting the development of digital marketing through Customer experience

| Category | Concept | Interviewee |
|--------------------------------|--|------------------------------------|
| Adopting a focus strategy | Redefining hospitality customers in the digital space Improving the quality of content Raising awareness among customers about available products and services | P7, P9, P11, and P12 |
| Promoting digital branding | Improving existing websites through SEO (Search Engine Optimization) Expanding digital advertising Promoting social networking activities Developing content marketing activities | P1, P2, P3, P6, P7, and P10 |
| Implementing digital marketing | Development of marketing mix processes Recruitment of experts Development of mass media advertising Innovation in advertising | P1, P2, P9, P11, P12, P13, and P15 |

Intervening factors

Intervening factors are a set of more general factors (*e.g.*, time, space, and culture) that either facilitate or restrict the strategies. The specific function of these factors is to facilitate or restrict actions/reactions. The impact of intervening factors on the studied phenomenon ranges from very weak to very strong. In the present study, customer features, environmental factors, and digital capabilities were the main intervening factors affecting the development of Digital Marketing in the Iranian hospitality industry through Customer experience. Table 3 shows the extracted categories and concepts.

Table 3. Intervening factors affecting the development of Digital Marketing through Customer experience

| Category | Concept | Interviewee |
|-----------------------|---|--|
| Customer features | Analyzing customer response to advertising messages Evaluating the effectiveness of advertising Changing customer behavior patterns Changing customer decision-making patterns | P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, P10, P13, P14, and P15 |
| Environmental factors | Legal obstacles (<i>e.g.</i> , unstable government laws and policies and regulatory problems) Infrastructural problems Internet censorship and filtering | P1, P7, P8, P9, P10, and P12 |
| Digital capabilities | Development of digital sales Expansion of digital sales channels Software and hardware devices and equipment | P2, P3, P4, P11, P12, and P14 |

Core categories

A core category appears repeatedly in the data and represents the central idea of a study. All other main categories are linked to this core category. In other words, there are signs of the core category in all or almost all other categories. A core category can also be defined as a central idea or phenomenon around which all other categories are integrated. As shown in Table 4, this study identified behavioral branding, interactive approach, and

customer expectations of hotel services as the core categories in the model designed for the development of digital marketing through Customer experience in the Iranian hospitality industry.

Table 4. Core categories related to the development of Digital Marketing through Customer experience

| Category | Concept | Interviewee |
|---|--|-----------------------------------|
| Behavioral branding | Expanding branding activities to meet the needs of target customers | P1, P2, P3, P4, P11, P12, and P14 |
| | Strengthening brand identity through strong public relations | |
| | Providing brand services based on social networks | |
| | Creating a unique identity for the hotel brand | |
| Interactive approach | Using digital platforms to quickly and thoroughly present various products and services to customers | P3, P4, P5, P6, P10, P13, and P14 |
| | Promoting information transparency | |
| | Reducing delays in the dissemination of information on online platforms | |
| | Managing large amounts of customer information | |
| | Using online platforms to improve employee and customer communication | |
| Customer expectations of hotel services | Customer expectations of the service provider | P1, P2, P8, P9, P10, P11, and P12 |
| | Customer's understanding of different services | |
| | Customer's perception of various services | |
| | Customer's perspective towards prices | |

Strategies

Strategies are some plans and actions and the outputs of the core category that lead to final outcomes. Strauss and Corbin define strategies as a set of measures that are implemented to manage, control, and respond to the studied phenomenon (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). In the present study, promoting positioning, enhancing communication channels, and expanding content Customer experience were identified as the most important strategies that can contribute to the development of digital marketing through Customer experience in the Iranian hospitality industry. Table 5 shows the extracted categories and concepts.

Table 5. Strategies contributing to the development of Digital Marketing through Customer experience

| Category | Concept | Interviewee |
|---------------------------------------|---|--|
| Promoting positioning | Offering various types of discounts and incentives | P1, P2, P5, P7, P9, P10, P12, and P15 |
| | Promoting the core values of the company | |
| | Offering new products | |
| | Improving the position of the industry in the minds of customers | |
| | Providing a reliable platform for the exchange of customer opinions and ideas | |
| | Building positive associations through digital advertising | |
| Enhancing communication channels | Using energy-saving switches | P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, P10, P13, P14, and P15 |
| | Offering additional incentives for active customers | |
| | Choosing efficient advertising channels | |
| | Collaborating with social media influencers | |
| | Creating a customer club | |
| Expanding content Customer experience | Collaborating with online brokers | P1, P2, P8, P11, and P12 |
| | Producing educational videos | |
| | Updating the content of the website | |
| | Improving the content of the website | |
| | Providing unique information | |

Outcomes

Outcomes are the outputs or results of actions and reactions (Mohammadi, 2014). The last part of the model represents the outcomes of digital marketing development in the hospitality industry. After extracting the concepts associated with the outcomes in the open coding process, the main categories (outcomes) were derived from the identified themes and concepts. Accordingly, the outcomes of Digital Marketing development through Customer experience in the Iranian hospitality industry were identified and categorized into three groups of competitive advantage, digital transformation, and organizational outcomes. Table 6 presents the extracted categories and concepts.

Table 6. Outcomes of Digital Marketing development through Customer experience

| Category | Concept | Interviewee |
|---------------------------|--|--|
| Competitive advantage | Attracting potential customers | P1, P7, P9, P11, and P12 |
| | Increasing awareness of competitors' market position | |
| | Penetrating into a huge market of advertising | |
| | Maintaining long-term relationships with customers | |
| | Setting long-term goals | |
| | Increasing business profitability | |
| Digital transformation | Using novel advertising approaches | P3, P5, P6, P7, P8, P10, P14, and P15 |
| | Using blockchain technology | |
| | Using modern digital tools | |
| | Optimizing the digital value chain of the hospitality industry | |
| | Creating online stores | |
| Organizational outcomes | Developing hospitality startups | P2, P3, P4, P5, P9, P11, P12, P13, and P15 |
| | Improving profitability | |
| | Enhancing customer communication capabilities | |
| | Facilitating service accessibility | |
| | Increasing price transparency | |
| | Increasing productivity | |
| | Reducing operating costs | |
| Reducing hotel costs | | |
| Developing hotel products | | |

As illustrated in Figure 1, a paradigm model was designed to explain the development of digital content marketing through Customer experience in the Iranian hospitality industry. The final model was approved by the participants.

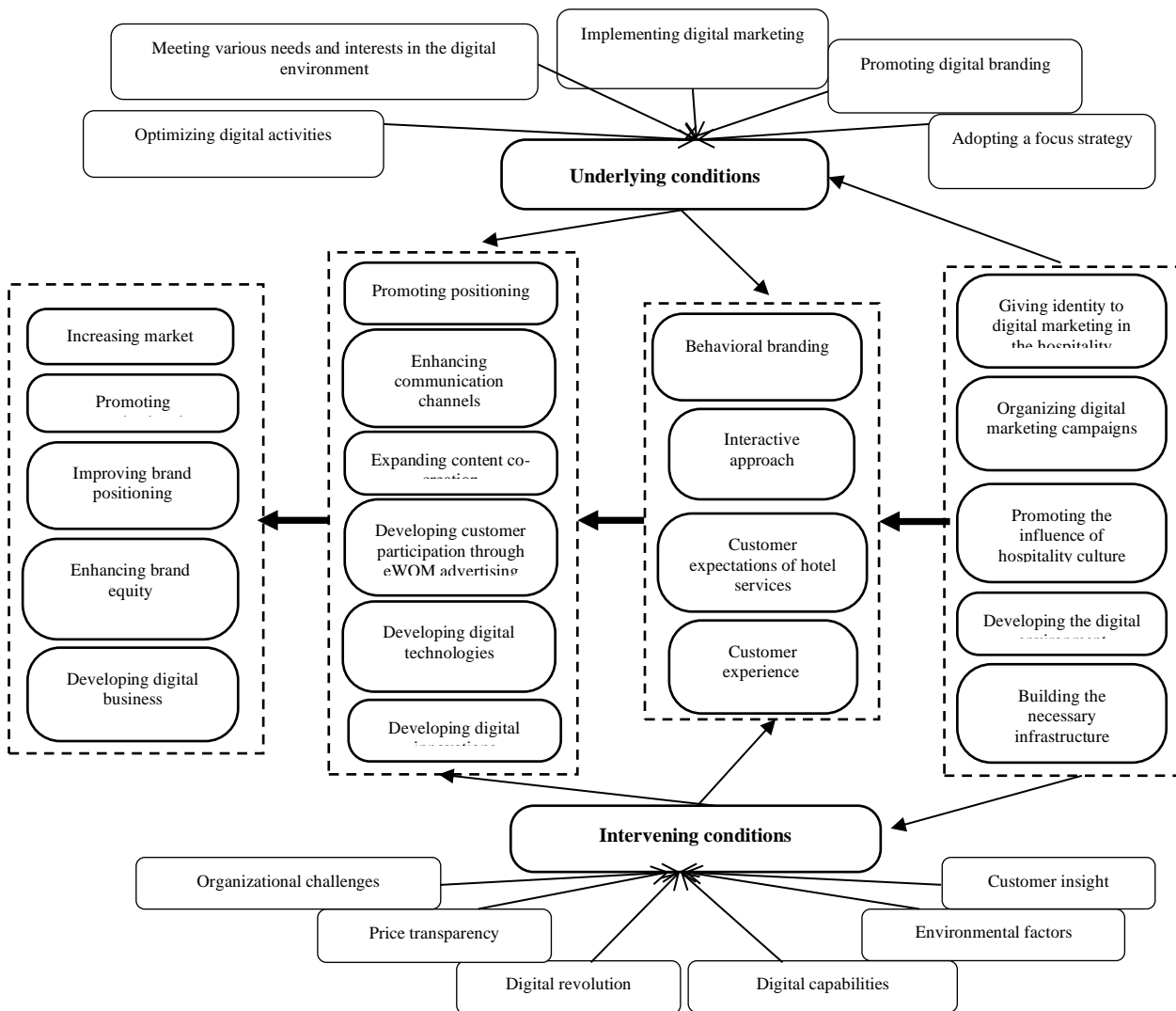


Figure 1. A paradigm model that explains digital marketing development through Customer experience in the Iranian hospitality industry

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The aim of this study was to develop a systematic literature review of Digital Marketing through value Customer experience in the hospitality and tourism industry. The study reveals that, in the literature, manifestations of Digital Marketing are related to customer behaviours and factors that shape Customer experience. The antecedents of Customer experience are closely linked to the customer, social environment, service provider and technological resources. The outcomes resulting from customer value Customer experience can be grouped in six dimensions of the grounded theory approach.

This study offers three theoretical contributions. First, we propose an activity-based conceptualization of Digital Marketing through value Customer experience in Hospitality Industry based on an extensive, qualitative grounded theory study in which we conducted 19 interviews with of 36 Managers of the hotel industry [44]. The resulting conceptualization advances Digital Marketing research that acknowledges that reaping benefits from digital content marketinrequires a value -centric approach [24, 32, 44] but has lacked a systematic and comprehensive conceptualization specifying how those value -centric ideals should be operationalized as concrete activities.

Importantly, we provide rich insights into the nature of these activities by specifying their sub-activities and components, which, together, offer an actionable framework for implementing Digital Marketing through value Customer experience in the hospitality industry, as well as providing a guiding frame for structuring related digital marketing operations [21, 45, 46]. The conceptualization is not tied to any specific technology but, instead, offers a stable framework for supporting strategic Digital Marketing activities by integrating technologies as they evolve.

As well as, This study contributes to the academic literature in several ways. Firstly, this study responds to previous calls highlighting the importance of continuing to develop studies, in the context of customer value Customer experience, in the hospitality and tourism industry [38].

Secondly, the current study extends the literature, using for the first time a systematic literature review, emphasizing the different dimensions contained in the literature on Digital Marketing and value Customer experience in the hospitality and tourism industry, through a holistic understanding of empirical and conceptual knowledge. Finally, this research highlights factors less addressed in the literature, which are relevant to understanding the concept of Digital Marketing

and value Customer experience, as well as introduces new dimensions associated with the antecedents and outcomes of Digital Marketing through value Customer experience. This contribution facilitates a better conceptual understanding, which is extremely important for the creation of more robust empirical models.

This study supports the value proposition offered by practitioners in this industry, driven by Digital Marketing indicators, in order to increase customer involvement in value Customer experience. Thus, the findings emphasize that the tourist or guest's

attitude towards Customer experience can be stimulated by organizations, through a communication more oriented towards the benefits of value Customer experience. In turn, interactions between tourists or guests and residents should be encouraged, through Digital Marketing activities in hotels (in lounges or bars). In addition, tourism organizations should promote interactive and user-friendly information technologies, which facilitate personalization and learning experiences.

The findings also reveal the importance of tourism organizations encouraging the participation of tourists and guests in content sharing on social networks, through the creation of contests and other measures, such as offering prizes or discounts, in order to

make them less averse to technology adoption and more prone to value Customer experience. Furthermore, the highlighted category 'digital transformation and Customer experience for customers through content production' should be seen by these organizations as a new "tableau de bord" in their management control.

This study also opens up future lines of research, namely new empirical studies, through empirical validation of a questionnaire measuring the categories identified resulting from a holistic perspective of several theoretical approaches and coming from the different sectors of the hospitality and tourism industry. Another suggestion, considering the categories of antecedents observed, is to understand how the dimensions of antecedents grouped in this study can influence the dimensions of customer value cocreation identified, as well as understand how the dimensions of Digital Marketing can impact on outcomes of value Customer experience, through the development of new empirical studies in this industry.

Authors' Contributions

Authors equally contributed to this article.

Ethical Considerations

All procedures performed in this study were under the ethical standards.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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