

THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING ON TOURIST DECISION-MAKING

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Abstract

The development of social media has significantly influenced tourist decision-making in the hospitality industry. This study analyzes the impact of social media marketing on hotel promotion, focusing on differences between urban and rural contexts in Romania. Using a comparative approach based on secondary data, the research shows that urban hotels rely on advanced digital strategies and online platforms, while rural hotels emphasize authenticity, user-generated content, and social media engagement. The findings highlight that social media plays a key role in shaping tourists' perceptions, trust, and accommodation choices. Its effectiveness varies depending on infrastructure, digital capabilities, and market characteristics. Overall, social media marketing is a crucial factor in modern tourism promotion and has a direct influence on tourist behavior.

Keywords: social media, hotel promotion, urban tourism, tourist decision, marketing strategies

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INTRODUCTION

The hospitality industry represents a fundamental pillar of the tourism sector, with hotels functioning as essential infrastructure for both leisure and business travelers. Promotional strategies in this sector vary significantly depending on geographic context, particularly between urban and rural environments, where distinct challenges and opportunities shape marketing approaches. Urban hotels typically operate in highly competitive environments characterized by a high density of accommodation options, diverse customer segments, and well-developed marketing infrastructure. These establishments benefit from access to advanced promotional tools and large-scale distribution channels, which allow them to reach both domestic and international markets efficiently. In contrast, rural hotels are generally located in less saturated markets and tend to capitalize on authenticity, natural landscapes, and cultural heritage. However, they often face constraints related to limited market access, reduced promotional budgets, and weaker infrastructure. According to the World Tourism Organization, understanding the specific

promotional needs of different hospitality segments is essential for designing effective marketing strategies. In Romania, the tourism sector has experienced notable development in both urban and rural areas, making comparative analysis particularly relevant for stakeholders aiming to optimize promotional effectiveness. From a marketing perspective, hotel promotion can be analyzed through several interrelated dimensions. Traditional marketing channels, such as print media, billboards, radio, and television, continue to play a role, although their importance has declined in favor of digital approaches. Digital marketing has become increasingly dominant, including websites, social media platforms, online travel agencies, and search engine optimization techniques. At the same time, relationship marketing strategies, such as loyalty programs and customer retention initiatives, contribute to long-term competitiveness. Experiential marketing has also gained importance, focusing on events, collaborations with influencers, and immersive brand experiences. The evolution of consumer behavior, particularly the increasing reliance on digital platforms for travel planning and booking, has significantly transformed hotel promotion strategies worldwide. Nevertheless,

the implementation of these strategies differs considerably between urban and rural contexts, reflecting variations in resources, target audiences, and market conditions. Therefore, the aim of this study is to analyze how social media marketing influences tourist decision-making in the hospitality sector, with a comparative focus on urban and rural hotel promotion strategies.

MATERIAL AND METHOD

The present study examines promotional practices employed by urban and rural hotel establishments in Romania. Urban hotels are defined as those located in cities with populations exceeding 100,000 inhabitants, while rural hotels are situated in villages or small towns with populations below 10,000 inhabitants.

The research methodology is based on a comparative approach, supported by the analysis of aggregated secondary data. The study relies on published academic literature, industry reports, and case studies that describe promotional characteristics specific to both environments. Key data sources include tourism statistics provided by the National Institute of Statistics, reports issued by the Romanian Hotel Industry Association, and relevant scholarly works in the field of hospitality marketing.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

In the context of contemporary tourism, social media marketing has emerged as a decisive factor influencing tourist decision-making processes. Digital platforms not only facilitate access to information but also shape perceptions, preferences, and trust in accommodation choices. The differences identified between urban and rural hotel promotion strategies can therefore be interpreted through the lens of how social media is utilized to influence potential customers.

The empirical and comparative analysis conducted within this study highlights a series of structurally embedded differences in the promotional strategies of urban and rural hotel establishments, differences that are intrinsically linked to their operational environments, resource endowments, and market positioning. These distinctions are not merely contextual, but rather systemic, reflecting broader

transformations within the hospitality industry under the influence of digitalization, globalization, and evolving consumer behavior [7], [9].

Urban hotels, predominantly located in major Romanian metropolitan areas such as Bucharest, Cluj-Napoca, Timișoara, Iași, and Constanța, operate within highly competitive and saturated markets characterized by a significant concentration of accommodation facilities and a diversified demand structure. These urban ecosystems facilitate access to multiple customer segments, including business travelers, conference participants, international tourists, and short-duration leisure visitors, whose expectations are shaped by efficiency, convenience, and service standardization [12].

In response to these market dynamics, urban hotels have adopted increasingly complex and technologically advanced promotional strategies, with a pronounced orientation toward digital platforms. Online travel agencies (OTAs), such as Booking.com, Expedia, and Hotels.com, constitute central distribution and promotion channels, offering global visibility and facilitating real-time booking behavior. These platforms are complemented by integrated digital marketing strategies, including search engine marketing through Google Ads, as well as targeted social media campaigns conducted via Instagram, Facebook, and LinkedIn. Such approaches enable precise segmentation and data-driven targeting, thereby enhancing marketing efficiency and conversion rates [19].

Moreover, urban hotels actively engage in corporate partnerships and business-to-business (B2B) marketing practices, particularly in relation to multinational corporations, event organizers, and conference planners. Participation in international tourism fairs and industry exhibitions further consolidates their market presence and facilitates strategic networking. From a branding perspective, urban hotels emphasize a cosmopolitan and professional identity, projecting reliability, consistency, and high service standards. This positioning is frequently reinforced by affiliation with international hotel chains, which benefit from established brand equity and standardized operational frameworks [9].

The communicational dimension of urban hotel promotion is largely centered on functional and rational value propositions, including accessibility, proximity to key urban

infrastructures, modern amenities, and competitive pricing structures. Such messaging aligns with the utilitarian expectations of their primary customer segments. At the same time, the digital maturity of urban hotels is reflected in their substantial investments in website optimization, user experience design, online reputation management, and, increasingly, mobile application integration. These digital ecosystems facilitate personalized interactions, enhance customer engagement, and support long-term relationship management.

Nevertheless, the strategic advantages of urban hotels are counterbalanced by a number of structural challenges. The intensity of competition necessitates continuous innovation and differentiation, while heightened market transparency, largely driven by digital platforms, increases price sensitivity and compresses profit margins. Furthermore, reliance on OTAs introduces significant cost pressures due to commission structures, which may reach levels of 15–25%, thereby affecting overall profitability and encouraging the development of direct booking strategies [11].

In this framework, social media platforms play a central role in influencing tourist choices, particularly through targeted advertising, online reviews, and visual content that enhance perceived credibility and attractiveness.

In contrast, rural hotels operate within fundamentally different socio-economic and geographical contexts, typically located in regions such as Maramureș, Bucovina, traditional Transylvanian villages, and the Danube Delta. These destinations are characterized by lower levels of market saturation but also by limited infrastructure and reduced access to advanced marketing resources. The demand structure in rural tourism is more specialized, consisting primarily of domestic tourists seeking relaxation, eco-tourism experiences, cultural authenticity, and family-oriented activities [1], [10].

Promotional strategies in rural settings are consequently shaped by these contextual constraints and opportunities. Unlike urban hotels, rural establishments rely extensively on informal communication channels, with word-of-mouth recommendations representing a primary driver of customer acquisition. This organic form of promotion is often supported by high levels of customer satisfaction and repeat visitation. In addition, rural hotels utilize niche travel platforms, maintain a presence on

social media—particularly Facebook—and collaborate with local tourism associations to enhance visibility at the regional level.

In recent years, the role of travel blogs and influencer marketing has gained increasing importance in rural tourism promotion, reflecting broader trends in experiential consumption and digital storytelling. These channels enable rural hotels to reach wider audiences despite limited budgets, while simultaneously reinforcing authenticity and credibility. The promotional discourse adopted by rural establishments emphasizes emotional and experiential dimensions, including tranquility, connection with nature, traditional lifestyles, and local gastronomy. Such narratives are frequently constructed through storytelling techniques, which contribute to the creation of a distinctive and memorable brand identity [13].

The ownership structure of rural hotels, often characterized by family-based businesses, further reinforces personalized service and hospitality, which constitute key differentiating factors in this segment. However, digital capabilities remain unevenly distributed. While some rural hotels have developed functional websites, many rely predominantly on social media for communication and promotion, with limited implementation of search engine optimization strategies. Consequently, their visibility in international markets remains constrained.

From a financial perspective, promotional budgets in rural hotels are significantly lower, typically ranging between 2% and 5% of total revenue. This limitation necessitates a more efficient allocation of resources and encourages the adoption of low-cost, high-impact strategies, such as user-generated content and community-based promotion. At the same time, rural hotels face a number of structural challenges, including limited marketing expertise, infrastructural deficiencies, and pronounced seasonality in demand patterns, which can lead to fluctuations in occupancy rates and revenue streams [6].

In rural contexts, social media functions as a critical visibility tool, where authenticity, user-generated content, and influencer collaborations significantly shape tourist perceptions and decision-making behavior.

The comparative analysis reveals that, while urban and rural hotels operate under markedly different conditions, they share certain strategic imperatives. Both segments recognize the critical importance of customer

relationship management and online reputation, particularly in the context of increasing reliance on digital information sources during the travel decision-making process [19]. However, the level of digital sophistication and resource availability remains a key differentiating factor.

Urban hotels benefit from economies of scale, advanced technological infrastructure, and access to professional marketing expertise, enabling them to implement comprehensive and data-driven promotional strategies. In contrast, rural hotels leverage authenticity, personalization, and emotional engagement as core competitive advantages, often achieving high levels of customer loyalty despite limited resources.

Promotional channel selection further illustrates this divergence, with urban hotels prioritizing structured, paid digital campaigns, while rural establishments rely more heavily on organic reach and interpersonal communication. Branding approaches also differ significantly, reflecting contrasting value propositions centered on modernity and efficiency in urban contexts, and authenticity and tradition in rural environments.

Finally, seasonality emerges as a critical issue, particularly for rural hotels, which must adopt innovative promotional approaches, such as thematic events, experiential packages, and off-season discounts, in order to stabilize demand throughout the year. Despite these challenges, rural hotels demonstrate a capacity for adaptive and resilient marketing strategies, which, when effectively implemented, can generate substantial returns on investment and contribute to sustainable tourism development.

Table 1 provides a structured comparative framework that facilitates the understanding of how contextual factors shape the promotional environment of urban and rural hotels. Rather than offering a detailed description of individual strategies, the table synthesizes the key structural conditions that

influence marketing decision-making in the two settings.

The differences presented reflect broader disparities in market organization and development. In urban environments, the combination of extensive infrastructure and strong digital connectivity creates a favorable context for the implementation of complex, technology-driven promotional strategies. These conditions support scalability and allow hotels to operate within highly dynamic and interconnected markets. In contrast, rural environments are characterized by more constrained structural conditions, where limited infrastructure and variable connectivity influence the feasibility and scope of marketing activities.

Additionally, the contrast between large and diverse markets in urban areas and more narrowly defined market segments in rural regions highlights the need for differentiated approaches to audience engagement. This distinction is not only quantitative, but also qualitative, as it affects how value propositions are formulated and communicated.

The variation in seasonality further underscores the importance of contextual adaptation in promotional planning. While urban markets benefit from relatively stable demand patterns, rural markets require a higher degree of flexibility and responsiveness due to fluctuations in tourist flows. These structural characteristics influence not only the timing of promotional activities but also their strategic orientation.

Overall, the table does not simply present isolated differences, but rather illustrates a systemic contrast between two distinct promotional ecosystems. It serves as a conceptual tool that supports the interpretation of the empirical findings and provides a basis for understanding how environmental factors condition marketing practices in the hospitality sector.

Table 1. Key Differences in Urban vs. Rural Hotel Promotion Contexts

Aspect	Urban Hotels	Rural Hotels
Competition level	High	Low to moderate
Target market size	Large, diverse	Niche, specific
Infrastructure access	Extensive	Limited
Seasonality impact	Moderate	High
Digital connectivity	Strong	Variable

Source: Adapted from [6, 10]

Table 2. Comparative Overview of Promotional Strategies

Criterion	Urban Hotels	Rural Hotels
Primary channel	OTAs, corporate sales	Word-of-mouth, social media
Brand focus	Efficiency, modernity	Authenticity, tradition
Content type	Professional photography, virtual tours	User-generated content, storytelling
Customer relationship	CRM systems, loyalty programs	Personal communication, repeat guests
Pricing strategy	Dynamic pricing, packages	Seasonal rates, inclusive experiences
Partnership approach	Airlines, corporations, event planners	Local producers, tourism associations

Table 2 synthesizes the strategic orientation of promotional activities in urban and rural hotel contexts by illustrating how different marketing logics are operationalized across key decision-making dimensions. Rather than reiterating specific characteristics of each segment, the table reflects how hotels translate their broader positioning into coherent sets of promotional choices.

A central distinction emerges in the way promotional systems are structured. Urban hotels tend to operate within highly formalized and standardized marketing frameworks, where activities are integrated across multiple channels and supported by data-driven decision processes. In contrast, rural hotels rely on more flexible and adaptive approaches, where promotional practices are often shaped by local context, available resources, and direct interaction with customers.

The table also reflects differences in how value is constructed and communicated. In urban settings, promotional strategies are aligned with clearly defined performance indicators and measurable outcomes, emphasizing consistency and predictability. Conversely, rural hotels adopt a more

interpretative and experience-oriented approach, where meaning is co-created with the customer and communication is less standardized.

Another important aspect highlighted is the degree of formalization in customer engagement processes. Urban hotels implement structured systems that allow for scalability and efficiency in managing customer interactions, while rural hotels maintain a more informal and situational approach, which enables greater flexibility but limits standardization.

Furthermore, the comparison illustrates how decision-making horizons differ between the two contexts. Urban hotels typically operate with short- to medium-term optimization in mind, adjusting strategies in response to market signals and performance metrics. Rural hotels, on the other hand, often adopt a longer-term perspective, focusing on relationship continuity, reputation building, and the preservation of local identity.

The partnership dimension included in the table also suggests contrasting integration patterns within the tourism ecosystem. Urban hotels are embedded in broader, often globalized networks that support scale and

market reach, whereas rural hotels are more closely connected to localized systems, where collaboration contributes to place-based development and differentiation.

Overall, Table 2 should be interpreted as a conceptual representation of how different strategic environments shape the configuration of promotional practices. It highlights not only operational variations, but also deeper differences in managerial logic, coordination mechanisms, and the role of context in influencing marketing decisions within the hospitality sector.

Overall, the findings suggest that social media marketing operates as a key mediating factor between promotional strategies and tourist decision-making, with its influence varying depending on the structural and contextual characteristics of urban and rural environments.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this study emphasize the necessity of adopting context-sensitive promotional strategies within the hospitality sector, highlighting the extent to which marketing effectiveness is conditioned by environmental, structural, and organizational factors. Rather than supporting a uniform approach, the analysis demonstrates that successful promotion depends on the alignment between strategic choices and the specific characteristics of the operating context.

In the case of urban hotels, the results suggest the need for a gradual transition from dependency-driven promotional models toward more autonomous and strategically controlled systems. This involves not only the diversification of distribution channels, but also the consolidation of direct communication pathways with customers. The capacity to differentiate within highly competitive environments emerges as a critical success factor, requiring a coherent integration of branding, data-driven decision-making, and customer experience management. Additionally, the increasing relevance of sustainability in consumer preferences indicates that environmental positioning should be incorporated not as a peripheral element, but as a core component of strategic communication.

For rural hotels, the implications are oriented toward strengthening structural and organizational capabilities that support visibility and market access. The development

of a consistent digital presence represents a foundational requirement, not only for improving accessibility but also for enhancing credibility in broader tourism markets. At the same time, the study highlights the importance of collaborative frameworks, where partnerships at the regional level contribute to amplifying promotional reach and reinforcing destination identity. The management of demand fluctuations further requires adaptive strategies that extend beyond traditional peak-season approaches, encouraging the diversification of tourism offerings and the creation of year-round engagement opportunities.

At a systemic level, the analysis indicates that both urban and rural segments are increasingly influenced by common trends, particularly the growing importance of sustainability, digitalization, and customer-centered communication. These shared dynamics create opportunities for knowledge transfer and strategic convergence, while still preserving the distinctiveness of each segment. In this context, cross-segment collaboration can facilitate the development of integrated tourism experiences, enhancing the overall attractiveness of destinations and supporting regional development.

Moreover, the findings underline the importance of human capital in shaping promotional effectiveness. Investment in skills development, particularly in the area of digital marketing and strategic communication, emerges as a key factor in ensuring adaptability and long-term competitiveness. Finally, the role of customer feedback mechanisms is reaffirmed as a central element in reputation management, influencing both immediate consumer decisions and the sustained positioning of hospitality providers.

Overall, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how promotional strategies are shaped by contextual conditions, offering a conceptual basis for future research and practical implications for stakeholders seeking to enhance performance within the evolving landscape of the tourism industry. The study confirms that social media marketing plays a pivotal role in shaping tourist decision-making, acting as both an informational and persuasive tool. Its impact is particularly evident in the way visual content, online reviews, and digital interactions influence perceptions of quality, trust, and authenticity across different hospitality contexts.

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