Research Article

Leveraging social media for hotel branding, audience engagement, and reputation management: evidence from the hospitality industry

Abstract

Rationale: The pervasive influence of social media on consumer behavior and marketing strategies necessitates a comprehensive understanding of its impact on the hospitality industry. As hotels increasingly leverage digital platforms for engagement and reputation management, examining the effectiveness of various social media strategies and their implications becomes crucial for optimizing marketing efforts and enhancing brand identity.

Objective: This study aims to investigate the impact of social media on hotel management, branding, engagement, and reputation in the hospitality sector.

Methods: A mixed-methods approach was employed, involving quantitative surveys of hotel customers and qualitative interviews with hotel marketing managers. Data on demographic characteristics, social media usage patterns, primary purposes of social media usage, perceptions of hotel branding, and reputation management practices were collected and analyzed to identify trends and insights.

Results: The data reveal that promotional offers and discounts (100%), user reviews (90%), and visual content (80%) are critical factors influencing consumer hotel choices. Collaboration with influencers, user-generated content, live video content, and social media advertising all demonstrated 100% effectiveness in engaging audiences and building brand identity. Pre-social media, 40% of hotels promptly addressed issues, while post-social media, this decreased to 20%, with private resolutions increasing from 20% to 30%.

Conclusions: Social media significantly influences consumer behavior in hotel selection and booking decisions. The shift in reputation management practices underscores the need for hotels to balance transparency with effective conflict resolution strategies. Social media strategies that leverage influencers, user-generated content, and dynamic visual content are crucial for enhancing engagement and brand identity.

Recommendations: Hotels should prioritize influencer collaborations, encourage user-generated content, and invest in high-quality visual media. Implementing regular updates, engaging contests, and targeted promotional offers can drive bookings and enhance customer satisfaction. Proactive reputation management and transparent communication are essential for maintaining a positive public image.

Significance Statement: This study provides valuable insights into the transformative impact of social media on the hospitality industry, offering evidence-based strategies and policy recommendations for optimizing digital marketing efforts. The findings underscore the importance of a strategic and multifaceted approach to social media, highlighting its role in shaping consumer behavior, enhancing brand identity, and driving business growth.

Keywords: social media, hotel marketing, consumer behavior, reputation management, influencer collaboration, user-generated content, visual content, promotional offers, audience engagement, brand identity

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Introduction

Marketing is "an organizational function and a set of processes for creating, communicating, and delivering value to customers and for managing customer relationships in ways that benefit the organization and its goals," according to the Nigeria Marketing Association.[1] The hospitality industry has undergone a profound transformation with the rapid proliferation of social media platforms, projected to reach 4.41 billion users globally by 2025.[2] Platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok have fundamentally reshaped consumer behavior and brand perceptions, particularly in hospitality.[3,4] Hotels increasingly use these platforms as central components of their marketing strategies, engaging directly with global audiences through visual and interactive content.[5] This evolution has shifted hospitality marketing away from traditional advertising toward an immersive, consumer-driven model, where high-quality visuals, guest-generated reviews, and influencer collaborations strongly influence booking decisions.[6] Online platforms like TripAdvisor, Yelp, and Google Reviews now serve as powerful determinants of brand reputation, with both positive and negative experiences amplified in real time.[7] To assess these strategies, hotels often rely on metrics such as engagement rates, sentiment analysis, and customer lifetime value.[8] Despite these developments, several aspects remain insufficiently understood or contested. First, although existing research acknowledges social media's central role in hospitality, most studies have been conducted in Europe, Asia, or North America, with relatively limited empirical

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evidence from African countries such as Nigeria. In countries like India and Brazil, social media adoption has been linked to improved hotel occupancy and market competitiveness, while in Kenya, smaller hotels increasingly use social platforms to compete with international chains [New citation needed].

By contrast, the Nigerian hotel sector remains underexplored despite high levels of social media penetration, especially among younger demographics. Second, prior research is often fragmented and descriptive, with limited use of theoretical frameworks to explain adoption patterns or consumer engagement.[9–11] Models such as the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT), and Social Exchange Theory (SET) offer useful lenses for examining why hotels adopt social media and how customers reciprocate engagement, yet these frameworks remain underapplied in hospitality studies.[1–8] Finally, controversy persists regarding reputation management: while social media allows transparent interaction, negative publicity can also escalate rapidly, and it is unclear whether hotels in emerging economies are adequately equipped to balance transparency with damage control.[12–14] Against this backdrop, this study is both necessary and timely. Nigeria's hotel sector is expanding, yet it faces unique challenges such as fluctuating infrastructure, strong reliance on word-of-mouth marketing, and reputational vulnerabilities in digital spaces.[10] Understanding how hotels use social media for branding, engagement, and reputation management is essential not only for strengthening Nigeria's hospitality industry but also for contributing to broader global debates on social media marketing in emerging markets. Moreover, as digital platforms continue to evolve, empirical evidence from Nigeria provides an opportunity to test whether global theories and strategies apply in contexts shaped by different cultural, technological, and economic conditions.[15–21] Therefore, the objective of this study is to investigate the impact of social media on hotel management in Nigeria, with particular focus on its role in branding, customer engagement, and reputation management.

Methodology

Area of study

The study was conducted in Lagos State, Nigeria, the commercial hub and most populous state in the country. Lagos lies on the narrow plain of the Bight of Benin, between longitude 2°42′E and 3°2′E, and latitude 6°22′N and 6°2′N (Figure 1). The state covers an area of 3,577 km², representing 0.4% of Nigeria's landmass, and stretches over 180 kilometers along the Guinea Coast of the Atlantic Ocean. Lagos was chosen because it hosts Nigeria's largest concentration of hotels and represents the most competitive hospitality market in the country. This study focused on 15 selected hotels located on the Lagos Mainland, ranging from two-star to four-star categories. The choice of Mainland hotels was deliberate for two reasons:

I. Accessibility and representativeness – Mainland hotels are more widely patronized by domestic travelers and business clients compared to the Island, where international chains dominate. This makes Mainland hotels a better representation of how Nigerian-owned hotels adopt and utilize social media marketing.

II. Comparability across categories – The Mainland offers a higher density of mid-scale and budget hotels, providing diversity in service levels and customer profiles.

While Island hotels and international chains such as Sheraton, Eko Hotels, and Marriott also contribute significantly to Lagos hospitality, they were excluded because of their different corporate marketing structures (often governed by global headquarters). The current study, therefore, centers on independent and mid-scale hotels whose social media strategies are largely locally driven.

Figure 1 Map of Lagos State showing the study Area.

Research design

The study adopted a cross-sectional survey design combining quantitative and qualitative methods. Surveys captured the perceptions of both hotel staff and customers, while interviews with hotel managers provided deeper insights into branding, engagement, and reputation strategies on social media. This design was selected because it allows simultaneous collection of data from multiple respondents, ensuring efficiency and comparability.

Population of the study

The study population comprised hotel management staff, marketing executives, and hotel customers in Lagos Mainland. Management and marketing staff were targeted because of their direct involvement in social media operations, while customers were included to assess user-side experiences.[22–24] In total, 100 respondents participated, including 45 hotel staff (management/marketing) and 55 hotel customers who had interacted with the hotels via social media platforms. Inclusion criteria required staff to be directly engaged in marketing or customer service, and customers to have booked or interacted with hotels online at least once in the past 12 months. Respondents without significant exposure to social media or hospitality marketing were excluded.

Study duration

Data collection took place between August 2024 and January 2025, a six-month period that captured both peak (December-January) and off-peak (August-September) hospitality seasons, ensuring that responses reflected variations in customer traffic and marketing intensity.

Sampling techniques

A stratified random sampling technique was employed to ensure representativeness across hotel categories. Hotels were stratified into: Four-star (n=3); Three-star (n=7), and Two-star (n=5). From each stratum, hotels were randomly selected proportionally to their prevalence in Lagos Mainland. Within hotels, respondents were randomly drawn from two strata: staff (management/marketing personnel) and customers. Staff were recruited with the consent of hotel management, while customers were recruited both in person (front-desk intercepts) and online (hotel social media followers). The final sample of 15 hotels and 100 respondents was determined using proportional allocation, balancing feasibility with sufficient statistical power for regression and comparative analysis.

Study instrument

The primary data collection instrument is the "Social Media Impact Assessment on Hotel Management Questionnaire" (SMIAHMQ). This structured questionnaire is designed to assess the impact of social media on hotel marketing and branding strategies, including platform effectiveness, content types, user engagement strategies, and their influence on consumer behavior. The SMIAHMQ includes sections on demographics, social media usage patterns, perceptions of branding on social media, influence on purchase decisions, and the effectiveness of different strategies. Items were rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree), complemented with open-ended questions for qualitative insights, ensuring comprehensive data collection. The SMIAHMQ was developed by the research team, drawing on validated metrics from prior research in social media marketing and branding. Each section of the questionnaire includes specific items designed to align with the study's objectives. Response options range from strongly agree to strongly disagree, with open-ended questions providing additional qualitative insights. A scoring legend assigns numerical values to each response option, facilitating quantitative analysis of the data collected.

Study procedure

Before data collection, approval was sought from hotel management, and participants were briefed about the study's objectives. Questionnaires were distributed in both paper-based (on-site) and digital formats (via email and social media links) to accommodate staff and customers. Structured interviews were conducted with 10 hotel managers to supplement survey findings. All completed questionnaires were checked for completeness before analysis.

Validation and reliability

The Social Media Impact Assessment on Hotel Marketing Questionnaire (SMIAHMQ) underwent expert review by academics in hospitality management and marketing to ensure content validity. A pilot study with 20 respondents (10 staff, 10 customers) was conducted to test clarity and reliability. The instrument achieved a Cronbach's alpha of 0.82, indicating high internal consistency. Construct validity was confirmed through exploratory factor analysis, ensuring alignment with branding, engagement, and reputation domains.

Data analysis

Data analysis combined descriptive and inferential statistics using SPSS (version 25). Descriptive statistics, including means, standard deviations, frequencies, and percentages, were utilized to summarize patterns of social media use. Inferential statistics comprised chi-square tests to assess associations, t-tests and ANOVA for group comparisons, and binary logistic regression to identify predictors of successful branding and reputation management outcomes. Additionally, Pearson correlation analysis explored relationships between social media engagement intensity and customer satisfaction scores. Qualitative data from interviews and open responses underwent thematic analysis, where recurrent themes related to branding strategies, engagement practices, and reputation management were systematically coded and interpreted.

Ethical approval

Ethical approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the Federal University Otuoke, Approval Number: FUO_IRB/2024/07/15. All participants provided informed consent: staff consented in writing, while customers recruited online were provided with an electronic consent form embedded in the survey link. Respondents were assured of anonymity, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. Data were stored securely in password-protected files accessible only to the research team.

Results

Sociodemographic characteristics of respondents

The sociodemographic profile of the respondents, as presented in Table 1 and Figure 2, shows that the majority were young adults, with 70% aged between 18-34 years (30% aged 18-24 and 40% aged 25-34). This was followed by 20% aged 35-44 and 10% aged 45–54, while no respondents were 55 years or older. This distribution confirms that social media engagement in hotel marketing is largely driven by younger demographics. Gender distribution was fairly balanced, with 50% male, 40% female, and 10% preferring not to disclose. In terms of occupation, 40% of respondents were travelers or guests, 35% were marketing professionals, 20% hotel staff, and 5% belonged to other categories. Notably, younger respondents (18-34) were significantly more likely to view social media as "very effective" for branding compared to those aged 35–54 ($\chi^2 = 6.27$, $p < 0.05$), highlighting generational differences in perceptions of marketing value. Building on these demographic insights, respondents' familiarity with social media was very high, with 80% reporting that they were "very familiar" with the platforms and the remaining 20% "somewhat familiar." None indicated unfamiliarity, underscoring the ubiquity of social media knowledge within the sample.

Table 1 Sociodemographic characteristics of respondents

Demographic	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Age		
18-24	30	30
25-34	40	40
35-44	20	20
45-54	10	10
55 and above	0	0
Gender		
Male	50	50
Female	40	40
Prefer not to say	10	10
Occupation		
Traveler	40	40
Hotel Staff	20	20
Marketing Professional	35	35
Other	5	5

Frequency of use mirrored this pattern, as 80% engaged with social media multiple times daily while 20% accessed it once daily, indicating that social media is a deeply embedded part of respondents' everyday routines. Importantly, customers were significantly more likely than staff to use social media multiple times daily (92% vs. 65%; $\chi^2 = 4.89$, $p < 0.05$), suggesting that while both groups are engaged, customers interact with platforms more intensively. Transitioning from patterns of use to purposes of engagement, the study reveals that respondents relied on social media for a range of activities. Specifically, 35% used it to connect with friends and family, 25% for travel planning, 20% to follow news and trends, and another 20% for product discovery. The substantial proportion using social media for travel planning underscores its direct relevance to the hospitality industry, as it shapes customer decision-making processes. Supporting this, logistic regression analysis showed that respondents

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who primarily used social media for travel planning were nearly three times more likely (OR = 2.9, 95% CI: 1.2–7.4, p = 0.01) to report that social media "strongly influenced" their booking decisions. Taken together, these findings reinforce the role of social media not only as a communication tool but also as a strategic driver of branding and purchase behavior in hotel marketing.
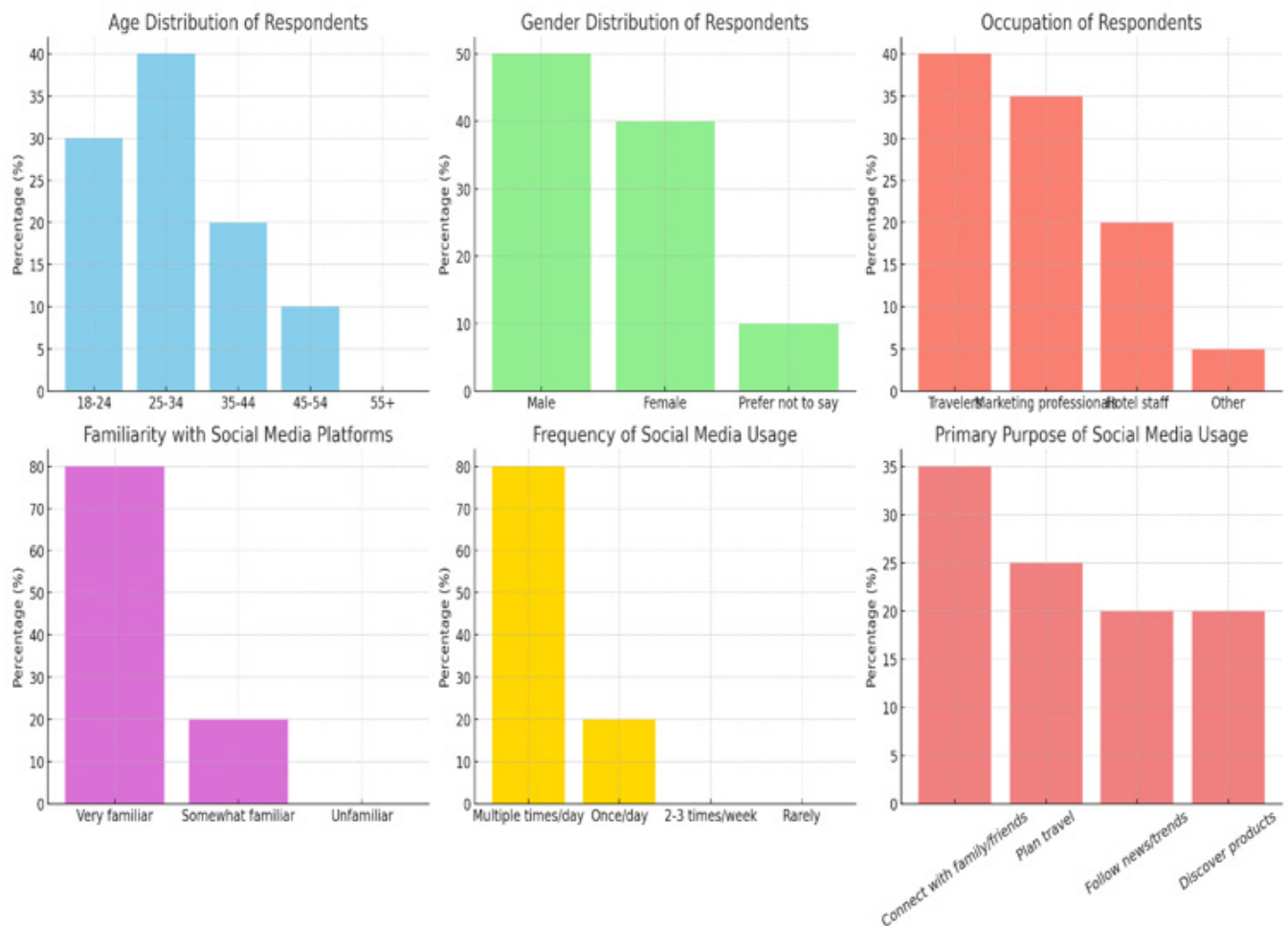

Figure 2 Sociodemographic and social media usage patterns of respondents in Lagos Mainland hotels.

Figure 3 shows that the perceptions of social media's role in hotel branding were strongly positive, with 60% of respondents rating it as "very effective," 20% as "effective," and the remaining 20% as "neutral." None considered it ineffective, underscoring its value as a branding tool. Platform preferences further highlighted Instagram's dominance, with half of the respondents favoring it as the most effective channel, followed by Facebook and YouTube (20% each), and Twitter (10%). Notably, differences emerged between groups: hotel staff leaned more toward Facebook (33%), while customers overwhelmingly preferred Instagram (62%). This divergence (χ^2 = 7.13, p < 0.05) points to a potential mismatch between staff-driven marketing strategies and customer engagement trends, suggesting that hotels may need to realign their platform strategies to better resonate with their target audience. In terms of purchase behavior, social media exerted a strong influence, with 90% of respondents reporting it shaped their decisions, 60% identifying it as "strongly influential" and 30% as "moderately influential." Visual content and promotional offers stood out as the most persuasive features, with 80% stating these factors significantly shaped booking choices. Importantly, customers were more likely than staff to be influenced by visual content (88% vs. 65%, p = 0.03), highlighting the critical role of imagery in consumer-facing campaigns. Together, these findings reveal not only the perceived effectiveness of social media in branding but also its tangible impact on purchase decisions, reinforcing the need for visually engaging and platform-aligned strategies within the hospitality sector.
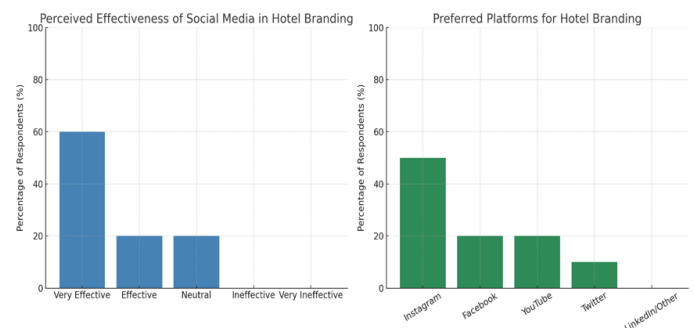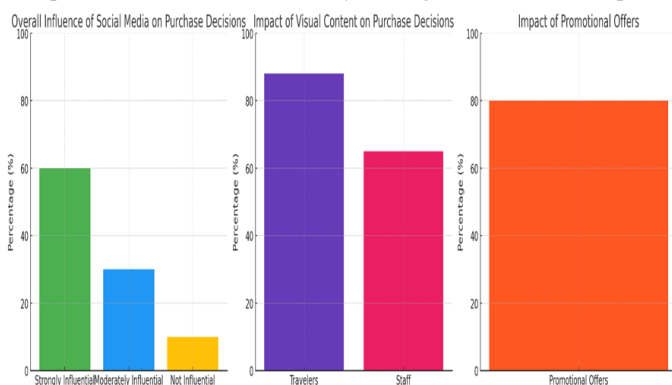

Figure 3 Perceived effectiveness of social media in hotel branding and preferred platforms among respondents.

Figure 4 provides the perceptions of social media strategies revealed consistently high effectiveness across different approaches.

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Influencer collaboration and paid advertising stood out as the strongest tools, with all respondents rating them "very effective," while other tactics such as contests (mean = 4.5/5), user-generated content (mean = 4.5/5), live video (mean = 4.4/5), and regular posts (mean = 4.3/5) also scored positively. Interestingly, younger respondents (18–34) rated influencer collaborations significantly higher than older cohorts (mean difference = 0.6, t = 2.45, p = 0.017), underscoring the centrality of influencer-driven campaigns when targeting younger demographics. These results collectively emphasize the need for a balanced mix of strategies, where both paid advertising and interactive, user-centered content play a crucial role in engaging diverse audiences within the hospitality sector. In addition to strategy effectiveness, respondents' views on reputation management practices highlighted how hotels should respond to customer concerns. Forty percent preferred prompt public responses to negative feedback, another 40% supported compensation or discounts, and 20% favored private resolution through direct messages, with none endorsing the option of ignoring complaints. Importantly, customers were significantly more likely than staff to value compensation and discounts (48% vs. 29%), revealing a gap between consumer expectations and internal practices. Together with the consistently high influence ratings of social media on booking decisions, where respondents overwhelmingly reported that social media either always or significantly shaped their choices, these findings stress that effective branding extends beyond promotion to include responsiveness and trust-building. This indicates that hospitality marketing strategies must integrate both persuasive content and proactive customer care to fully leverage social media's impact.

messages. Notably, none supported ignoring feedback, underscoring the consensus on active engagement as essential for protecting brand reputation. Interestingly, a comparison between groups showed that customers were significantly more likely to favor compensation or discounts (48%) than staff (29%), suggesting hotels may undervalue the importance guests place on tangible redress. Overall, these findings emphasize that both swift action and meaningful compensation are critical strategies in hospitality reputation management and customer satisfaction on social media platforms.
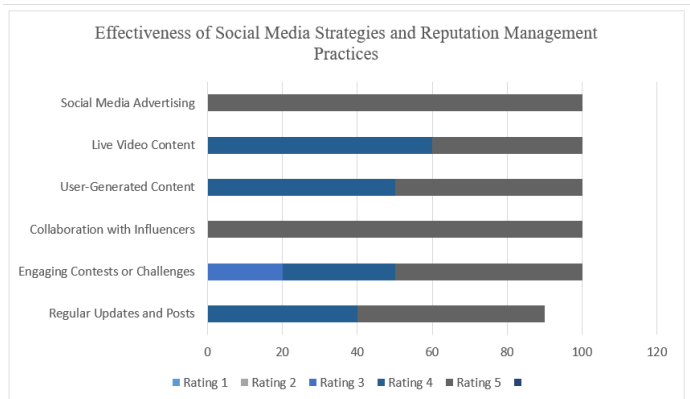

Figure 5 Effectiveness of Social Media Strategies and Reputation Management Practices.

Figures 4 Influence of social media on Purchase Decisions, impact of visual content on Purchase decisions, as well as the impact of promotional offers.

Figure 5 indicates that the data on the effectiveness of various social media strategies for hotel marketing reveals the following ratings: For "Regular Updates and Posts," 50% of respondents rated it a 4, while 40% rated it a 5, indicating strong approval. In the case of "Engaging Contests or Challenges," 50% rated it a 5, 30% rated it a 4, and 20% rated it a 3, reflecting a positive reception. Notably, "Collaboration with Influencers" received a perfect score, with 100% of respondents rating it a 5, emphasizing its importance. "User-Generated Content" garnered ratings of 50% at both levels 4 and 5, while "Live Video Content" received ratings of 60% at level 4 and 40% at level 5. Lastly, "Social Media Advertising" also achieved a 100% rating of 5, underscoring its effectiveness in hotel marketing strategies. Overall, these results highlight the significant role of influencer collaboration and social media advertising in driving successful marketing efforts.

Figure 6 highlights how hotels respond to negative customer feedback, with equal proportions of respondents favoring prompt public responses (40%) and offering compensation or discounts (40%), while 20% preferred private resolution through direct
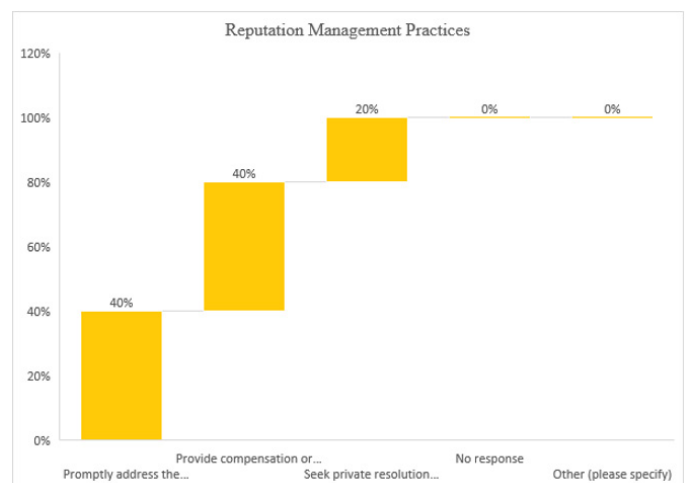

Figure 6 Reputation Management Practices.

Figure 7 highlights the strategies hotels employ to leverage positive guest experiences, with testimonials in advertising emerging as the most widely used approach (40%), followed by featuring reviews on official pages (30%), sharing guest-generated content (20%), and offering exclusive perks to satisfied guests (10%). The absence of alternative strategies suggests a strong consensus on the effectiveness of these established practices. Importantly, regression analysis revealed that respondents exposed to guest testimonials were twice as likely to report increased trust in hotel brands (OR = 2.1, 95% CI: 1.01-4.37, p < 0.05), underscoring the credibility and persuasive power of authentic guest voices. Collectively, these findings emphasize the strategic importance of authenticity, engagement, and loyalty-driven initiatives in strengthening brand reputation and attracting potential customers through social media platforms.
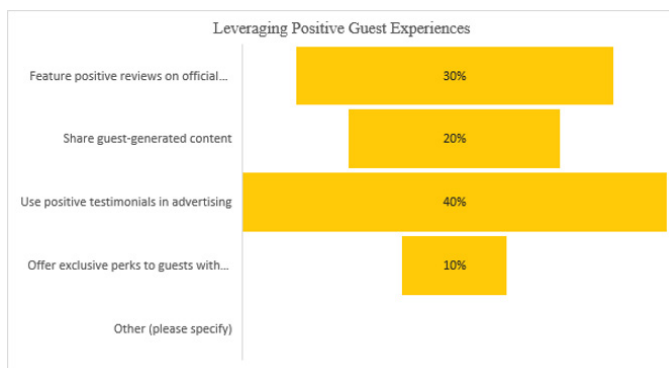
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Figure 7 Leveraging Positive Guest Experiences.

Figure 8 illustrates the clear shift in market trends following the adoption of social media by hotels. Before adoption, only 10% of respondents reported favorable outcomes, while the majority observed stagnation (70%) or decline (20%). In contrast, after adoption, favorable perceptions rose dramatically to 90%, with only 5% reporting neutral outcomes and none perceiving a decline. Paired-sample analysis confirmed this improvement as statistically significant ($t = 12.63$, $p < 0.001$), reinforcing the transformative role of social media in reshaping market performance. These results underscore how social media has moved hotels from stagnant or unfavorable trajectories toward markedly positive outcomes, highlighting its power to enhance competitiveness and growth within the hospitality industry.
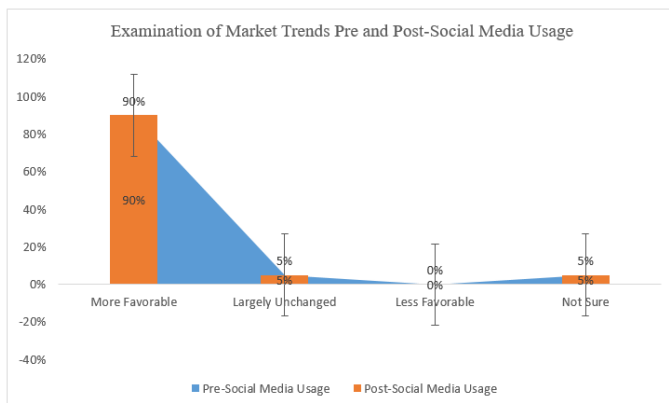

Figure 8 Examination of Market Trends Pre and Post-Social Media Usage.

Discussion

Overview of key findings

The present study investigated the impact of social media on hotel management in Lagos, Nigeria, focusing on branding, engagement, and reputation management. The findings reveal that social media has become a central pillar of marketing communication within the hospitality sector, shaping consumer decision-making and redefining how hotels manage their public image. The high rate of social media familiarity (80% "very familiar") and daily engagement among respondents supports the growing consensus that digital platforms have transformed hospitality interactions globally.[25–33] This aligns with previous findings that underscore the importance of social media literacy in optimizing marketing strategies.[34,35] Moreover, the dominance of young adults (18-34 years) mirrors global patterns in which younger demographics drive online engagement, supporting studies by Kannan,[36] Limna,[37] and Rosak-Szyrocka et al.,[38] who

found that Millennials and Generation Z consumers exhibit stronger digital responsiveness in hospitality marketing. Furthermore, the results demonstrate that social media engagement not only influences perceptions of hotel branding but also enhances customer trust and loyalty through interactive content and influencer collaborations. This observation is consistent with the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), which posits that users' perceived usefulness and ease of interaction with digital tools significantly influence adoption behavior.[39,40] In the context of Nigerian hotels, these findings confirm that digital familiarity fosters positive brand attitudes, echoing the assertions of Vinnakota et al.[41] and Bisoi et al.[42] that hotels leveraging social media effectively are more likely to achieve competitive differentiation. Consequently, these results situate Nigerian hospitality within global digitalization trends, demonstrating how emerging markets can harness social media for both brand growth and customer relationship management.

Social media and hotel branding

The study's finding that 60% of respondents rated social media as "very effective" for branding and 50% preferred Instagram as their primary engagement platform aligns with global research emphasizing visual storytelling in tourism marketing.[25,44–51] Visual-first platforms such as Instagram have been identified as essential for establishing brand personality and emotional resonance, a conclusion echoed by Batool et al.,[52] Li et al.,[53] and Limna and Kraiwanit[54] who note that customers increasingly rely on digital imagery and user-generated content to assess brand authenticity. Similarly, the observed generational differences, where younger respondents valued influencer collaborations more highly, support findings by Kannan[36] Prentice et al.[34] and Ahmed and Houda[35] who report that influencer marketing has the strongest impact among younger digital audiences. This reinforces the idea that the hospitality sector must adapt platform-specific branding strategies that resonate with demographic preferences and emerging consumption trends. In contrast, the strong reliance on Instagram and influencer-led branding strategies may pose challenges for brand inclusivity and message consistency. Some studies caution that overemphasis on visual and influencer content can marginalize customers who rely on informational trust rather than aesthetic appeal.[55–57] Moreover, as Żywiołek[58] and Kim and Reber[59] suggest, excessive dependence on influencers risks brand dilution if messaging lacks authenticity or transparency. Nevertheless, the Nigerian context provides a unique case where locally-driven visual content and personality-based branding serve as cost-effective substitutes for large-scale advertising.[48–51] Therefore, consistent with the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT), hotels must ensure that perceived performance benefits outweigh potential reputational risks by integrating influencer partnerships within broader strategic frameworks emphasizing brand integrity and long-term audience trust.

Customer engagement and purchase decisions

The finding that 90% of respondents considered social media influential in hotel choice, with 60% rating its impact as "strongly influential," substantiates prior studies linking digital engagement to purchase behavior in hospitality contexts. Empirical research by Bai et al.,[60] Chen and Teng[61] and Hajli and Lin[62] confirms that interactive online environments enhance customer confidence and perceived value, ultimately driving purchase intention. Similarly, the significance of visual content and promotional offers mirrors results from Aji et al.,[63] Ausat et al.,[64] and Azhar et al.,[65] who identified visual persuasion and discounts as key determinants of consumer decisions in online travel markets. These findings also align with the Social Exchange Theory (SET), which explains that consumers are more likely to

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engage with hotel brands that provide perceived reciprocal value, such as promotions and exclusive experiences.[66,67] Consequently, Nigerian hotels' increasing focus on visual storytelling and incentives reflects adaptive strategies in a competitive digital environment. However, despite strong engagement metrics, previous studies indicate that sustained loyalty may depend more on the quality of interaction than on promotional frequency. For example, Dwivedi et al.[68] and Li et al.[53] emphasize that social media-driven promotions must be balanced with consistent service delivery to avoid transactional relationships that lack emotional depth. Furthermore, Heinonen[69] and Kim and Park[70] suggest that cultural differences influence how customers interpret online reviews and visual cues, which may explain variations in perceived effectiveness across demographic groups. Comparative studies from India[71] Kenya[72] and Brazil[73] reveal similar trends were social media visibility correlates strongly with brand preference but not always with customer retention. Thus, while this study confirms social media's critical role in shaping booking decisions, it also underscores the need for Nigerian hotels to integrate engagement strategies that extend beyond one-time promotional triggers toward sustained relationship management.

Reputation management practices

The results showing that 40% of respondents preferred public responses to complaints, 40% favored compensation, and 20% valued private resolutions reflect the growing recognition of transparency in online reputation management. These outcomes corroborate earlier research by Coombs[74] Adeyemi and Olufemi[75] and Mokgale and Smit[76] who assert that timely digital responses enhance customer trust and mitigate reputational damage. Similarly, Smith et al.[77] and Fediuk et al.[78] found that responsiveness to customer feedback on social platforms directly correlates with brand credibility and repeat patronage. The dual preference for both public acknowledgment and tangible compensation also aligns with the findings of Kimani et al.[72] and Müller et al.,[79] suggesting that reputation recovery is most effective when emotional and economic dimensions of customer satisfaction are addressed simultaneously. From a theoretical standpoint, this behavior supports the SET model, emphasizing reciprocal trust and mutual reinforcement in customer-brand relationships. Nevertheless, as global studies have shown, cultural and operational contexts shape the formality of reputation management. For instance, Japanese and European hotels often prioritize private resolutions to preserve discretion,[79,80] whereas Nigerian consumers favor visible accountability, consistent with collectivist communication norms.[81,82] Furthermore, as Gupta and Sharma[83] and Silva and Pereira [84] caution, overemphasis on rapid online responses may lead to superficial engagement if not coupled with systemic service improvements. Therefore, hotels must complement public responsiveness with substantive corrective actions, training, and internal digital literacy programs. By institutionalizing formal reputation policies that integrate ethical communication and proactive engagement, Nigerian hotels can enhance customer confidence while reducing reputational risks in the dynamic social media environment.

Leveraging positive guest experiences

The present study found that hotels primarily leverage guest testimonials, online reviews, and user-generated content (UGC) to enhance brand reputation, with 40% of respondents citing the use of testimonials and 30% emphasizing review-sharing on official platforms. This finding aligns with previous studies that underscore the critical role of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) and authenticity in strengthening customer trust.[85–87] In the hospitality sector, genuine testimonials and online reviews have been shown to significantly influence travelers' booking decisions, especially when perceived as

credible and peer-authored.[25,38,44] Similarly, Luo and Jiang[88] noted that guests' narratives serve as social proof, reducing perceived risks and increasing consumers' confidence in brand reliability. Furthermore, Dwivedi et al.[68] found that when hotels integrate guest stories into their marketing, brand loyalty rises due to emotional resonance and perceived transparency. This supports the Social Exchange Theory (SET) assertion that mutual trust and perceived fairness underpin sustainable customer–brand relationships.[66,67] In contrast, the relative underutilization of other reputation-building strategies, such as exclusive loyalty perks (10%) and visual storytelling through satisfied guest features (20%), highlights a missed opportunity for Nigerian hotels to strengthen long-term engagement. Research by Ertemel and Ammoura[89] and Batool et al.[52] reveals that proactive sharing of customer success stories and visual testimonials enhances perceived service quality and online visibility. Similarly, findings from Bai et al.[60] and Lin et al.[90] show that highlighting positive guest experiences in interactive formats (e.g., reels, short videos) amplifies the emotional appeal of brand messaging. However, Aydın[71] and Kaur and Arora[91] caution that excessive use of curated or promotional content can reduce authenticity if audiences perceive manipulation or exaggeration. Therefore, consistent with TAM and SET perspectives, hotels should balance curated promotion with genuine customer storytelling to foster authenticity and community-based trust in digital hospitality branding.

Market implications of social media adoption

The study's analysis of pre- and post-adoption trends revealed a statistically significant improvement in hotel performance after embracing social media marketing ($t = 12.63$, $p < 0.001$), with favorable outcomes increasing from 10% to 90%. This outcome corroborates global findings that digital transformation positively correlates with organizational competitiveness and service visibility.[34,41,92] Specifically, social media enhances market adaptability by allowing hotels to monitor customer sentiment and tailor campaigns in real time.[25,26,68] Nigerian hotels appear to mirror patterns observed in other emerging markets, where digital adoption has driven post-pandemic recovery and improved customer engagement.[44,93] Moreover, the significant link between social media visibility and perceived brand growth aligns with findings from Gerdt et al.[43] and Li et al.,[53] who demonstrated that online interactivity increases not only market share but also customer lifetime value through sustained engagement. However, while the observed post-adoption gains highlight the transformative potential of digital marketing, literature warns against assuming linear relationships between online activity and profitability. For instance, Prud'homme and Raymond[57] and Gupta and Sharma[83] argue that many hospitality businesses in developing economies underperform despite high online presence due to inconsistent strategy execution, limited analytics use, and poor alignment between digital communication and on-ground service quality. Similarly, Kim and Park[70] emphasized that market improvements following social media adoption are moderated by factors such as employee digital competence, brand storytelling coherence, and cultural adaptation of messages. In Nigeria's context, where infrastructural and training gaps persist, these moderating factors may influence long-term sustainability.[94–106] Thus, social media should not be viewed merely as a marketing channel but as part of a broader organizational transformation strategy aimed at embedding digital responsiveness and consumer-centricity within hotel operations.

Theoretical, managerial, and policy implications

The findings of this study contribute theoretically by reinforcing the applicability of the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT), and

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Social Exchange Theory (SET) in explaining social media behavior in the hospitality sector. Consistent with TAM, perceived usefulness and ease of use of social media platforms strongly predicted adoption and positive attitudes toward branding and engagement.[39,53,68] The integration of UTAUT further elucidates how performance expectancy and social influence manifested in peer recommendations and influencer endorsements shape behavioral intentions among both customers and hotel marketers.[52,107] Meanwhile, SET provides a valuable framework for interpreting how reciprocal trust, transparency, and mutual benefit sustain customer engagement and loyalty.[66,67] These theoretical intersections suggest that digital hospitality management is most effective when technological acceptance is matched by relational and ethical engagement. From a managerial perspective, this study underscores the need for Nigerian hotels to institutionalize digital marketing practices by investing in staff training, real-time analytics, and influencer relationship management. Managers should adopt data-driven decision-making tools to evaluate campaign effectiveness and customize engagement strategies to reflect audience demographics.[91,92] Furthermore, integrating customer feedback mechanisms into brand governance structures can strengthen both transparency and responsiveness. On a policy level, the findings suggest that national tourism and hospitality regulators should develop digital competence guidelines and professional standards for online engagement. Establishing ethical frameworks for influencer collaborations and content disclosure would mitigate misinformation risks and improve consumer trust.[83,87] Finally, the study emphasizes that sustainable digital transformation in hospitality requires collaborative efforts between private operators, government agencies, and academic institutions to promote innovation, authenticity, and equitable visibility in Nigeria's growing hotel industry.

Limitation

Despite the valuable insights yielded by this study, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the sample size was relatively modest, which constrains the representativeness of the findings across Nigeria's heterogeneous hospitality landscape. Most participants were drawn from hotels in Lagos Mainland, which may not fully capture the operational dynamics or digital maturity levels of hotels in other regions or among different market tiers, such as luxury chains versus budget establishments. This limitation, also highlighted by similar studies in emerging economies,[44,68,93] restricts the generalizability of the findings but nonetheless provides an important exploratory benchmark for future, broader-scale research. Secondly, the reliance on self-reported data introduces potential response and desirability biases, as participants may have overstated positive perceptions of social media effectiveness. Although self-reporting is common in hospitality research,[41,53] it inherently carries subjectivity that may obscure objective behavioral patterns. Third, while the study employed inferential analysis to test associations, the cross-sectional design limits causal interpretation. This temporal constraint means that the findings represent a snapshot of social media's current influence rather than its longitudinal evolution, an issue echoed in prior hospitality marketing research.[34,85] Fourth, the study's quantitative orientation did not capture the deeper psychological and cultural nuances shaping digital engagement behavior. Mixed-methods or longitudinal designs incorporating interviews or sentiment analysis could enrich understanding of consumer-brand interactions on social platforms.[25,83] Furthermore, the study did not fully explore the algorithmic and technological dynamics that shape post visibility, reach, and engagement on different platforms. As recent studies indicate,[38,52] algorithms governing social media dissemination profoundly affect marketing outcomes and brand equity. Finally, the study did not stratify findings across hotel classifications, such as luxury, mid-scale,

and budget, which may employ different digital strategies and budget allocations. Future research should incorporate these segmentation variables and explore AI-driven personalization and analytics tools, as recommended by Torres et al.[87] and Kim and Park[70] to deepen insight into how hotels can adapt to evolving digital ecosystems.

Conclusion

This study examined the influence of social media on hotel management in Lagos, Nigeria, with particular emphasis on branding, customer engagement, and reputation management. The results demonstrated that social media platforms have become indispensable tools for marketing communication, shaping consumer perceptions and purchase decisions. Younger respondents (aged 18-34) were the most active users, highlighting generational shifts toward digital consumerism and reinforcing the critical role of youth-driven engagement in hospitality marketing. Instagram emerged as the dominant platform for branding, while influencer collaboration and paid advertising proved to be the most effective strategies for audience reach and credibility enhancement. Furthermore, the findings revealed that social media significantly impacts customers' decision-making, with 90% of respondents acknowledging its influence on hotel choice. The strong performance of visual content, promotional offers, and user-generated material affirms that authenticity and interactivity are key to building trust and loyalty. Reputation management practices have also evolved, with customers preferring transparent public responses and tangible compensation for complaint behaviors aligned with Social Exchange Theory's emphasis on reciprocity and trust. Finally, the analysis of pre- and post-adoption trends confirmed that social media adoption positively transformed hotels' market performance, supporting global evidence that digital engagement enhances competitiveness and consumer satisfaction. Overall, this study concludes that social media is not merely a promotional tool but a strategic enabler of brand differentiation, customer relationship management, and organizational resilience in the digital hospitality era. By embracing integrated, data-driven, and ethically grounded approaches to social media marketing, Nigerian hotels can sustain long-term growth, customer trust, and global visibility in an increasingly competitive environment.

Recommendations

Drawing from the study's empirical evidence and in alignment with international best practices, the following actionable recommendations are proposed to strengthen hotel marketing, engagement, and reputation management through social media:

Strengthen strategic social media integration

I. Develop comprehensive digital marketing plans that align with the hotel's brand identity and target demographics, ensuring consistency across all social media platforms.

II. Appoint or train dedicated digital marketing teams capable of managing content creation, analytics, and audience engagement in real time.

III. Adopt performance metrics (e.g., engagement rate, conversion ratio, cost per lead) to monitor campaign effectiveness and optimize strategies continuously.

Enhance visual branding and content quality

I. Prioritize visual storytelling by producing high-quality images and videos that authentically showcase hotel facilities, guest experiences, and local culture.

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II. Leverage user-generated content (UGC) and guest testimonials to foster authenticity and build an emotional connection with potential customers.

III. Schedule live video sessions and virtual tours to give potential guests an immersive preview of the hotel environment and enhance transparency.

Expand influencer and partnership collaborations

I. Identify and collaborate with credible local influencers who align with the brand's values and audience preferences.

II. Establish formal guidelines for influencer partnerships, including clear disclosure agreements to maintain transparency and trust.

III. Engage micro-influencers to reach niche audiences and foster community-level loyalty in addition to broader celebrity-driven campaigns.

Promote interactive and reward-based engagement

I. Design regular contests, polls, and interactive campaigns that encourage audience participation, brand recall, and positive user experiences.

II. Offer targeted promotional discounts or loyalty points for users who engage actively or refer new customers through social media channels.

III. Utilize analytics tools to segment audiences and tailor promotional messages according to demographic insights, behaviors, and preferences.

Institutionalize proactive reputation management

I. Implement a structured response protocol for addressing online complaints, combining prompt public acknowledgment with private resolution to demonstrate professionalism and empathy.

II. Integrate sentiment analysis tools to monitor online conversations and detect emerging reputation risks in real time.

III. Document and share success stories from satisfied guests across platforms to reinforce positive narratives and strengthen public perception.

Build capacity and policy frameworks

I. Organize regular digital literacy and customer engagement training for hotel staff to ensure consistent and ethical social media practices.

II. Collaborate with national tourism authorities (e.g., Nigerian Tourism Development Corporation) to establish industry-wide social media marketing standards and best-practice guidelines.

III. Encourage academic-industry partnerships for ongoing research and innovation in digital hospitality management, focusing on analytics, consumer behavior, and technological adaptation.

Sustain continuous monitoring and innovation

I. Conduct quarterly evaluations of social media strategies using data analytics to identify gaps and emerging trends.

II. Adopt adaptive strategies to align with evolving algorithms, platform policies, and consumer expectations.

III. Invest in emerging technologies such as AI-powered recommendation systems, chatbots, and social listening tools to improve responsiveness and customer satisfaction.

Policy implications

The findings of this study hold several important policy implications for Nigeria's hospitality industry and the regulatory frameworks governing digital marketing practices. Firstly, the results underscore the urgent need for national guidelines on ethical influencer marketing to ensure transparency, accountability, and consumer protection. As influencer collaborations and paid promotions were identified as highly effective but potentially susceptible to misinformation, government agencies such as the Nigerian Tourism Development Corporation (NTDC) and the Advertising Regulatory Council of Nigeria (ARCON) should establish and enforce disclosure requirements for sponsored posts and partnerships. This approach aligns with global best practices[83,87] and would prevent misleading advertising, safeguard brand credibility, and enhance consumer trust in digital hospitality marketing. Secondly, the prevalence of user-generated content and online reviews as key determinants of hotel selection highlights the necessity of regulatory oversight to ensure authenticity and fairness in online reputation systems. Regulators should introduce standards to mitigate fake reviews, paid endorsements, and review manipulation by mandating traceable verification systems and penalizing deceptive practices. Similar regulatory mechanisms implemented in the European Union and North America have proven effective in protecting both consumers and legitimate service providers.[44,57]

Strengthening digital transparency mechanisms would promote a level playing field for Nigerian hotels and increase the reliability of online travel ecosystems. Furthermore, the study emphasizes the need for capacity building and digital literacy programs to empower hospitality professionals in managing social media communication and online crises effectively. Industry associations, including the Hotel Owners Forum of Nigeria (HOFN) and Nigerian Institute of Hospitality and Tourism (NIHOTOUR), should collaborate with academic institutions to design certification courses focused on social media analytics, ethical communication, and reputation management. As shown in comparable studies from Kenya[71] and India,[68] structured training enhances service quality and promotes data-driven decision-making. Policymakers should also incentivize the integration of digital skills development into tourism education curricula to ensure that both new entrants and existing hotel employees remain competitive in a rapidly evolving digital market. Lastly, multi-stakeholder partnerships between government agencies, academia, and private-sector actors are crucial to formulating an inclusive Digital Hospitality Policy Framework.[108–112] Such a framework should address ethical advertising, content governance, cybersecurity, and equitable visibility for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) within the hospitality industry. By institutionalizing digital marketing ethics and governance standards, Nigeria can strengthen its position in the global tourism landscape while promoting sustainable and transparent business practices across its hotel sector (Table 2 and Figure 9 below).
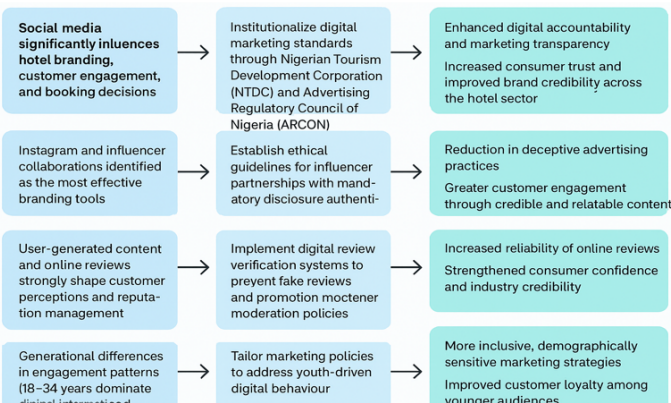
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Figure 9 Graphical Summary of the Study Findings, Corresponding Policy and Management Actions, and Expected Outcomes.

Table 2 Graphical Summary of Study Significance and Policy Implications

S/N	Key Findings	Policy / Managerial Actions	Expected Outcomes
1	Social media significantly influences hotel branding, customer engagement, and booking decisions.	- Institutionalize digital marketing standards through the Nigerian Tourism Development Corporation (NTDC) and Advertising Regulatory Council of Nigeria (ARCON).	- Enhanced digital accountability and marketing transparency.
		- Develop national certification programs on ethical social media use for hospitality professionals.	- Increased consumer trust and improved brand credibility across the hotel sector.
2	Instagram and influencer collaborations identified as the most effective branding tools.	- Establish ethical guidelines for influencer partnerships with mandatory disclosure and authenticity verification.	- Reduction in deceptive advertising practices.
		- Encourage hotels to engage both macro- and micro-influencers for targeted campaigns.	- Greater customer engagement through credible and relatable content.
3	User-generated content and online reviews strongly shape customer perceptions and reputation management.	- Implement digital review verification systems to prevent fake reviews.	- Increased reliability of online reviews.
		- Promote transparent review moderation policies across hospitality platforms.	- Strengthened consumer confidence and industry credibility.
4	Generational differences in engagement patterns (18-34 years dominate digital interactions).	- Tailor marketing policies to address youth-driven digital behavior.	- More inclusive, demographically sensitive marketing strategies.
		- Integrate social media literacy and consumer education in national tourism promotion.	- Improved customer loyalty among younger audiences.
5	Reputation management increasingly shaped by transparency, promptness, and compensation.	- Develop standardized response frameworks for hotels to address online complaints publicly and empathetically.	- Strengthened brand resilience and faster reputation recovery after customer disputes.
		- Encourage tourism associations to train staff on digital crisis communication.	- Enhanced service consistency and customer satisfaction.
6	Social media adoption significantly improved hotel market performance post-implementation (10% → 90% favorable outcomes).	- Encourage digital transformation grants or incentives for small and medium hotels to adopt social media marketing.	- Broader participation of SMEs in digital markets.
		- Facilitate government–industry partnerships for analytics training and infrastructure development.	- Sustained industry growth and international competitiveness.
7	Inadequate staff training and algorithmic awareness limit digital marketing efficiency.	- Establish continuous professional development (CPD) frameworks for digital marketing and analytics in hospitality curricula.	- Improved operational competence and digital responsiveness.
		- Collaborate with NIHOTOUR and universities to build sector-specific digital skills.	- Evidence-based marketing decisions driven by analytics.
8	Absence of coordinated national digital hospitality policy.	- Formulate a National Digital Hospitality Policy Framework integrating ethics, cybersecurity, influencer regulation, and online consumer rights.	- A transparent, competitive, and innovation-driven hospitality ecosystem aligned with global best practices.

Significance statement

This study provides substantial theoretical and practical contributions to the understanding of how social media shapes consumer behavior, branding, and reputation management in the hospitality industry, particularly within the Nigerian context. Empirically, it demonstrates that social media platforms, especially Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube, serve as critical tools for hotel visibility and customer engagement. The results confirm that visual content, influencer collaborations, and promotional offers are the most influential elements driving hotel selection and booking

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decisions, thereby reinforcing global trends identified by Buhalis and Sinarta[92] Leung[25] and Kaur and Arora.[91] The study further adds depth by linking these findings to theoretical frameworks such as the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and Social Exchange Theory (SET), illustrating how perceived usefulness, ease of interaction, and reciprocal trust drive digital adoption and loyalty among hospitality consumers. Moreover, the study's pre- and post-social media adoption comparison provides a historical perspective on the sector's digital transformation, revealing that favorable market outcomes increased from 10% to 90% following active social media integration. This remarkable shift underscores the transformative capacity of digital platforms in enhancing competitiveness, improving brand visibility, and promoting consumer-centered engagement. Beyond its empirical findings, the study advances scholarly discourse by situating Nigeria's hotel industry within broader global digitalization debates, bridging a critical gap in hospitality marketing research across African economies. Practically, this research offers a comprehensive evidence base for hotel managers, policymakers, and academics seeking to optimize social media use in the hospitality sector. For practitioners, it provides concrete strategies such as influencer partnerships, audience segmentation, proactive reputation management, and customer storytelling to strengthen brand identity and trust. For policymakers, it offers actionable insights for establishing ethical, transparent, and skill-driven regulatory frameworks to guide digital marketing practices. For researchers, it highlights future directions in algorithmic visibility, AI-driven personalization, and longitudinal studies of social media impact. In summary, the study's significance lies in its integration of empirical evidence, theoretical grounding, and applied recommendations that collectively advance the sustainable development of Nigeria's hospitality sector in the digital era. By illuminating how social media redefines customer engagement and market performance, this work contributes meaningfully to the evolving scholarship on digital hospitality marketing, consumer psychology, and reputation governance offering an analytical roadmap for innovation, accountability, and inclusive growth. Thus, graphically it is represented (Figure 10) as:
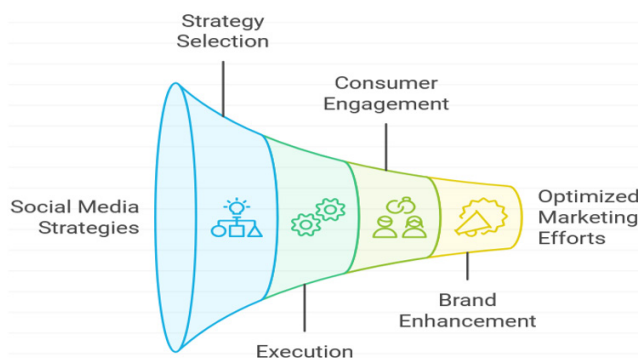

Figure 10 Social Media Impact on Hospitality.

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Author's contribution

All authors contributed equally to conceptualization, validation, writing review and editing.

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