Applied Project Submission Form

LEARNER NUMBER	51805405
NAME	Thainara Cruz Ribeiro
COURSE	BA in International Business
REPORT TITLE	How Digital Marketing Can Help Hospitality Business Attract More Tourists?
SUPERVISOR NAME	Klaus Walter
WORD COUNT	7.080
DUE DATE	14/12/2025
DATE SUBMITTED	14/12/2025

I certify that:

- This project report is all my own work, and no part of this report has been copied from another source:
  Yes ☒ No ☐
- I understand that this report may be checked by electronic or other means for plagiarism and/or content created by generative AI and may be transferred and stored in a database for the purposes of data-matching/data-analysis to help detect plagiarism and/or content created by generative AI: Yes ☒
  No ☐
- This report has not previously been submitted in part or in full for assessment to any other institution:
  Yes ☒ No ☐
- I consent to the inclusion of my report in the publicly accessible (open access) electronic database maintained by the library:
  Yes ☒ No☐
- I have emailed a back-up copy of this report to locker@independentcollege.ie:
  Yes ☒ No ☐

(Note that if no check boxes are selected, this Project will be regarded as NOT properly submitted, and may be subject to a late submission penalty)

Name: Thainara Cruz Ribeiro

Date: 14/12/2025

For the report to count as a valid submission, the student must provide:

1 electronic copy via Moodle. There is no requirement for a hard copy .

Evidence of the Primary Research MUST be included in the appendix of the report. That includes a copy of questionnaires, interview schedules, or observation diaries. One interview transcript should be included as a full transcript and a summary of all other interviews must be kept as a backup by the student. See template on Moodle for what should be included in all aspects of the report. **All data must be anonymised.**

The text should be double-spaced throughout and single column format (A4) with 2cm for left and right-hand margins and 2.5cm at head and foot. Text should be justified, standard 12 point, footnotes 10 point, and in Calibri. Page numbers should be at the bottom-right. Do not use line and paragraph spacing. Keep formatting to a minimum and avoid underlining.

Harvard Referencing shall apply.

How digital marketing can help hospitality businesses attract more tourists?

Particularly restaurants in Dublin

Compiled by:

Thainara Cruz Ribeiro

This project is submitted in part fulfilment of the Degree of Bachelor of Arts (Hons) in International Business.

Independent College

December 2025

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my sincere appreciation to Dr. Daniel O'Sullivan and Professor Klaus Walter for their support and mentoring, which played a vital role in this project.

I am also deeply thankful to my family, who supported me throughout this process, even being 9,000 km away, to my boyfriend, who encouraged me every day to do my best, and to my friends and colleagues for their patience and motivation during this arduous journey.

Lastly, I would like to express my gratitude to all participants who contributed to this research by sharing their experiences and knowledge, which were essential to the completion of this study.

Abstract

The aim of this research is to examine how digital marketing can support hospitality businesses, specifically independent restaurants in Dublin, to attract more tourists and increase customer engagement.

This project embraces a qualitative approach, using semi-structured interviews with restaurant general managers to explore deeply how digital marketing is applied in practice inside hospitality businesses, identifying the main challenges faced and strategies used.

Considering that we live in a world where technology has become the main tool in everyday life, digital marketing is essential to this sector due to the fact of improving online visibility through social media platforms.

However, in many places digital marketing is not used effectively and the results highlighted that activities used in these restaurants are often informal without guidance, and with limited strategic planning.

Providing a practical insight into the current use of digital marketing inside hospitality businesses, through this research it was possible to closely analyze the greatest difficulties faced by independent restaurants and, through this, offer recommendations for actions that can be taken for small hospitality businesses with the aim of operating appropriately in the competitive market.

Key Words: Digital Marketing, Hospitality Business, Challenges, Strategic Planning and Competitive Market.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements **4**

Abstract **5**

CHAPTER 1 ..... **8**

Introduction **8**

1. Introduction 8

1.1 Background of the study 8

1.2 Research Context 8

1.3 Research Rationale 9

1.4 Research Aim 9

1.5 Research Question 9

1.6 Research Themes and Sub-Questions 9

CHAPTER 2 ..... **11**

Literature Review **11**

2. Literature Review 11

2.1 Digital Marketing Strategies 11

2.2 Applying Digital Marketing to Engage Customers 13

2.3 Marketing Position and Competitive Edge 14

2.4 Challenges in Implementing Digital Marketing in the Hospitality Industry 16

2.5 Measuring the Advantages of Implementing Digital Marketing in the Hospitality Industry 18

CHAPTER 3 ..... **20**

Methodology **20**

3. Introduction 20

3.1 Research Design 20

3.2 Sampling Strategy 21

3.3 Data Collection 21

3.4 Data Analysis 22

3.5 Ethical Considerations 22

CHAPTER 4 ..... **23**

Findings & Discussion **23**

4. Findings and Discussion 23

4.1 Theme 1 – Digital Marketing Strategies 23

4.1.1 Introduction to the Theme 23

4.1.2 Findings from the Interviews 23

4.1.3 Discussion and Triangulation 23

4.2 Theme 2 – Applying Digital Marketing to Engage Customers 24

4.2.1 Introduction to the Theme 24
4.2.2 Findings from the Interviews 24
4.2.3 Discussion and Triangulation 25
4.3 Theme 3 – Marketing Position and Competitive Edge 25
4.3.1 Introduction to the Theme 25
4.3.2 Findings from the Interviews 25
4.3.3 Discussion and Triangulation 26
4.4 Theme 4 – Challenges in Implementing Digital Marketing 27
4.4.1 Introduction to the Theme 27
4.4.2 Findings from the Interviews 27
4.4.3 Discussion and Triangulation 28
4.5 Theme 5 – Measuring the Advantages of Implementing Digital Marketing 28
4.5.1 Introduction to the theme 28
4.5.2 Findings from the Interviews 28
4.5.3 Discussion and Triangulation 29
CHAPTER 5 30
Conclusion 30
5. Conclusion 30
CHAPTER 6 32
Limitations 32
6. Limitations 32
CHAPTER 7 33
Recommendations 33
7. Recommendations 33
APPENDIX 1 35
APPENDIX 2 40
APPENDIX 3 43
APPENDIX 4 44
APPENDIX 5 52
APPENDIX 6 53
REFERENCES 54

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

1. Introduction

1.1 Background of the study

My pathway at Independent College is BA (Hons) International Business. After a month living in Ireland, I started my first job in a traditional Irish pub, and from then, I could realise that this is an area which is little explored on digital platforms. While working there, I observed many tourists visiting the place just by walking down the street and not by discovering it through digital channels like social media or SEO.

After that traditional pub, I started working in other types of pubs and realised the same situation. With my experience in Marketing, I want to understand how digital tools can be used to help tourists get to know more about hospitality in Ireland and help hospitality businesses attract more tourists and boost the number of customers who visit. This research aligns with my marketing experience in Brazil and my current role working in the hospitality sector.

1.2 Research Context

For this research, I will be collecting information from independent restaurants in Dublin, Ireland. This will allow me to understand the issues that affect both the industry and consumers.

The interviews will focus on general managers of restaurants who have direct access to consumers and internal contact with the marketing sector. These interviews provide information as how restaurants use digital marketing and how this influences tourist attraction and customer engagement.

The main goal is to understand how these restaurants can use digital marketing to engage more tourists and regular consumers.

1.3 Research Rationale

I chose this topic because I have been working in the hospitality industry since I arrived in Dublin. With my experience in marketing, I have observed how this sector does not invest in digital marketing properly.

The aim of this research is to examine the impact of digital marketing on customer traffic in the hospitality industry, focusing on restaurants in Dublin to attract more tourists and build customer loyalty. Through the analysis of marketing strategies, this research aims to identify common mistakes within this area, understand the main challenges companies face when implementing digital marketing and the particularities of each place that make them different, so these characteristics can be exploited for better use of digital tools. In addition, this research will provide practical recommendations that can help hospitality businesses, specifically restaurants in Dublin, to use digital marketing to their advantage and achieve better results.

1.4 Research Aim

The aim of this research is to examine how digital marketing can help hospitality businesses attract tourists, focusing on independent restaurants in Dublin.

1.5 Research Question

How can Digital Marketing help hospitality businesses attract more tourists?

1.6 Research Themes and Sub-Questions

Theme 1: Digital marketing strategies

- What is the best digital marketing strategy to use in hospitality business? Specifically in independent restaurants?
- How can customer attraction and engagement be impacted by using digital marketing tools?

Theme 2: Applying Digital Marketing to engage customers

- How does good use of digital marketing tools engage customers with the company?
- What marketing techniques can be used to build customer loyalty?

Theme 3: Marketing position and competitive edge

- How can hospitality companies use digital marketing to gain a competitive advantage?
- What are the digital marketing trends that contribute to a company better positioning in the hospitality industry?

Theme 4: The challenges the hospitality industry, specifically restaurants in Dublin – Ireland suffers from in implementing digital marketing

- What are the main challenges that independent restaurants face when decide to use digital marketing?
- How can the fact that the company needs to set aside a budget for digital marketing affects the quality of use of these tools?

Theme 5: Measuring the advantages of implementing digital marketing in hospitality industry

- What the advantages of investing in digital marketing to attract more customers and more credibility in the hospitality industry?
- How can a company measure how much it needs to invest in digital marketing tools?

CHAPTER 2

Literature Review

2. Literature Review

2.1 Digital Marketing Strategies

Nowadays, digital marketing has become essential for the hospitality industry, where many businesses compete to maintain customer visibility and attract tourists. Although location is a strong factor that influences customer decisions, only physical presence is not enough for the companies to achieve their desired goal. Failure to invest in digital strategies creates the risk of losing potential customers to competitors who do invest in them. Studies from 2024 show that nowadays the fact of invest in digital marketing, through visual content on social media platforms strongly influences restaurant visit intentions.

Leung et al. (2013) show significant effects on conversions rates and highlight the importance of customer reviews and online visibility are for improving company performance. Buhalis and Sinarta (2019) argue that digital marketing enables real-time communication technology and generates a series of transformations in the market, which enhances customer engagement. Social media platforms have played an important role in influencing consumer decision-making processes, especially Instagram, TikTok, and apps like TripAdvisor. In the last year, new industry data (D-EDGE,2024) shows that more than half hospitality companies' revenue now comes from digital channels, highlighting how essential digital marketing has become to the industry.

Search Engine Optimization (SEO), Google Ads, and social media platforms for example, provide to a hospitality business an opportunity to reach customers and measure their online performance. These platforms allow companies to improve their advertising and increase audience awareness. SEO helps businesses reach out to their market organically whereas pay per click advertising ensures solutions, even in urbanized markets, in combination these tools permit businesses to be effective. (Sigala,2018). Furthermore, recent studies from 2024 (Gómez-Suárez et al.) reinforce that short Instagram entertainment content influences intentions to visit places for the first time, highlighting the importance of strategically used visual communication.

To increase engagement and create more meaningful interactions with customers, personalized digital marketing strategies have shown strong potential in the marketplace. Travelers are

increasingly likely to share their experiences with others, both positively and negatively, which means that is extremely important to hospitality businesses make a right decision mainly how to manage and respond to user-generated at same way that encouraging reviews, which can improve visibility and trust. Kannan (2017) points out that digital transformation is complex. Small companies unfit for digital as well as marketing resources have a particularly hard time with it. Recently, Teepapal et al. (2025) found that AI-driven personalisation intensifies consumer responses, even when applied in a simple manner. It is very challenging for many hospitality companies to reconcile their traditional business models with the swiftness of digital engagement inconsistent branding on different platforms. Besides that, rapid technological changes and for small businesses that are already struggling to manage basic digital activities, make the process even more challenging particularly after the introduction of AI-based tool.

In addition to focusing directly on the hospitality sector in general, this literature has information that is entirely relevant to restaurants in Dublin. Restaurants need online visibility and social media presence to attract new customers, particularly tourists who most of the times search for dining experiences even before leaving their city or country. In short, the most effective marketing strategies in the hospitality sector are the effective uses of social media, personalisation and real-time engagement. This theme therefore guides my research questions, to explore what digital tools hospitality businesses in Ireland use and which strategies could be most effective. This is backed by academic literature, which highlights that these approaches greatly enhance customer involvement and attract new customers.

2.2 Applying Digital Marketing to Engage Customers

Customer involvement in the hospitality sector, including restaurants, has evolved beyond passive experience. Unlike traditional marketing, digital marketing allows companies to interact with customers in real time, using a large database and individual customisation.

Komsuoğlu and Çevirgen (2022) found that digital engagement is driven by emotional connection, perceived value, and identity, all of which influence how customers interact with hospitality brands. Personalisation is one of the most important tools when the goal is to boost engagement. According to Torres et al. (2021) when businesses use tools with the guest data to provide tailored services – like sending birthday discounts or good check-in experiences.

In restaurants, similar strategies apply, including birthday plates, promotions and loyalty cards for returning customers. These attitudes demonstrate that the company values customer satisfaction while encouraging loyalty and repeat visits. CRM technology allows companies to analyse customer behavior and offer the right content at the right time and through the right channel.

Mobile technology is another extremely powerful tool for loyalty and engagement. According to a study conducted by Mogaji, Olaleye, and Ukpabi (2022), mobile technology enhances traditional services and brings more up-to-date services to the stay. As a result, the hotel's independent app has a competitive advantage, as it not only offers personalised products, but also constant communication. Restaurants also benefit from mobile tools, such as reservation apps (e.g., Open Table). According to Bastrygina et al.,2024, recent studies show that visual creators significantly shape consumer engagement with hospitality brands.

According to Thynk (2023), digital marketing tools can divide audiences by behavior, demographics or interests which provide more relevant ongoing information. For instance, a restaurant could send out a special discount on 'returning customers' to users who visited its location at any time during the prior year or create packages for family based on their web browsing habits. However, most existing literature focuses on large hotels that have significant resources. Smaller hospitality

businesses in Ireland often cannot invest in a resource to make greater use of digital marketing tools, such as loyalty scheme apps, and instead rely on more basic and assertive strategies. Recent research highlights the challenges that hospitality managers hold regarding AI, seeing both opportunities and risks, which makes the implementation of these tools difficult for smaller organisations.

In conclusion, digital marketing tools are effective for engaging customers and building loyalty. Strategies such as personalized communication, mobile engagement, interactive social media and customer segmentation create meaningful interaction points between business and consumers. For restaurants, online reviews, strategic social media activity directly influences a dining decision and encourages customer recommendations. When customers feel recognized and valued, they are more likely to accept future offers and remain loyal to the business.

2.3 Marketing Position and Competitive Edge

In a competitive sector such as hospitality, the correct use of digital marketing is essential for the development of this industry. Effective corporate positioning depends not only on providing a good service, but also on how a company uses marketing to stand out in the market. Digital platforms allow companies to reach their target audience quickly. In addition, these tools also help companies build brand consciousness, and the correct use of digital platforms allows these companies to connect with their consumers in a different and unique way in real-time. According to recent studies, influence-style content and visual storytelling affect consumers' perceptions and influence significantly their decisions about where to eat or stay (Bastrygina et al.,2024).

Camilieri (2018) points out that hotel brands have the ability, through digital media, to reach current or potential guests directly and shape their perceptions long before they arrive for their stay. Differentiation is one of the main advantages that digital marketing brings to this sector. Hospitality companies that use digital tools effectively - through storytelling, strong branding, social media, and email marketing campaigns, that build a stronger emotional connection with their audience.

Content marketing – particularly experiential content that touches the feelings and memory of people, as Sigala (2018) describes – is especially effective in the hospitality industry. Travel and good experiences are emotionally meaningful, and digital marketing can powerfully reflect these moments.

Chaffey and Smith (2022) note that international travelers searching for online references tend to focus on businesses that appear on the first page of search results. Content that is optimized for search engines and customised to specific locations ensures that a company is found and remembered. This is one of the benefits provided by Google Ads and SEO. Strong web visibility allows a smaller company to compete with larger businesses when their material is targeted and optimized in a meaningful way.

Leung,et. Al. (2013) show that when customers share their experiences online – through photos and reviews– it creates social proof that, in turn, makes other people believe. Another way for a brand to stand out is to invest in and collaborate with influencers or travel bloggers whose values align with the brand can expand digital reach and attract niche segments.

In addition, when hospitality companies invest in data analysis, they become better able to understand market trends, customer preferences and campaign performance. Gretzel, Sigala, Xian and Koo (2015) argue that big data allows companies to offer personalisation at the individual offer level, improves segmentation, and predicts customer behavior. The strategic use of customer data facilitates the creation of targeted and personalised marketing campaigns, supporting loyalty and automatically increase recommendations.

In conclusion, targeted positioning, creative engagement strategies, and meaningful communication strengthen a brand's competitive advantage and add value to business performance. Companies that adopt these trends are more likely to attract new customers, maintain loyalty, and outperform fewer flexible competitors.

2.4 Challenges in Implementing Digital Marketing in the Hospitality Industry

Digital marketing is extremely essential for the hospitality industry, and companies have a lot to gain from it, but the strategic challenges affecting this area are inevitable. Many companies have already adopted digital marketing as an essential tool for improving performance, while small and medium-sized companies continue to face difficulties because they remain attached to traditional marketing and not fully include digital tools into their operations. These limitations can include an inability to use digital tools to their full potential, even when their value is recognised.

Rahimi et al. (2020) point out that many developing hospitality companies cannot improve digital tools due to a lack of knowledge, they are automatically unable to implement strategies. The custom of using only conventional marketing methods and the lack of knowledge of key digital tools are the main obstacles that companies face. Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick (2019) highlighting that many companies consider the opportunity cost of digital marketing. Despite recognising the promising effectiveness of digital channels, these companies do not have sufficient resources to sustain the maintenance and control of these channels.

Low budgets are often the starting point for companies to become discouraged, and from there, a lack of knowledge about investment needs and a lack of interest result in websites with no content, social media accounts with no updates, and automatically poor visibility in SEO. These characteristics reduce competitiveness and damage brand trust in a society that prioritizes digital presence. In addition, the constant evolution of digital marketing tools makes maintaining consistent use increasingly difficult. Sigala (2018) notes that platforms, algorithms and user behavior evolve rapidly. For companies that do not prioritize digital marketing as an important sector, staying up to date is practically impossible. As a result, companies risk poorly executed campaigns or the use of outdated methods in relation to consumer trends.

Another problem is the lack of a concrete digital strategy. Leeflang et al. (2014) identified that a large proportion of hospitality managers consider digital marketing

to be a ‘complement’ or unnecessary for the smooth running of their business. This leads to a lack of knowledge about results, investments in areas that will not generate any profit, and weak brand awareness in a competitive market. According to Zhao et al.,2025, hospitality managers feel fear, when optimism regarding through AI adoption, that makes digital transformation harder for smaller companies.

In addition, customer trust and data security must be considered. Digital marketing is entirely data- driven, but if that data is not collected transparently and ethically, there may be legal exposure and automatically damage to the brand's reputation. Gretzel and Werthner (2012) argue that transparency in communicating data use and compliance with the GDPR are also important, especially in Europe, where consumer data protection laws are totally strict. In summary, digital marketing is strategically beneficial to the hospitality industry, but at same way some companies have the view that is somewhat limited. Low budgets, lack of skills, infrastructure problems, and poor planning often lead to low-quality or ineffective advertising. To achieve better results, hospitality businesses must cultivate digital marketing as a long-term investment supported by training, strategic thinking, and most important - effective resource allocation.

2.5 Measuring the Advantages of Implementing Digital Marketing in the Hospitality Industry

Nowadays, hospitality companies that invest in digital marketing gain some benefits in terms of customer engagement, visibility, and, most importantly, brand trust. These aspects are important in an industry where purchasing decisions are often based on search engine performance, social media exposure and reviews. Digital marketing also creates more areas of contact between brand and customer, which elevates quality of communication and strengthens relationships. Recent studies show that how review, and images credibility influences tourists decisions when choosing restaurants. (Nisar et al.,2024)

According to Tiago and Verissimo (2014) companies that invest in digital strategies benefit from higher levels. These results are possible because campaigns can be personalized to an individual users maximizing responses, while also being continuously optimized in real-time, unlike traditional media, digital platforms provide exact and specific feedback in the form of website traffic, conversion rates and social media engagement — allowing companies to identify whether their strategies are working effectively.

In addition, equipping their businesses with digital tools helps them reach even more local or international customers. Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick (2019) highlight that platforms such as Google Ads and social media allow hospitality companies to target specific segments (e.g., nomads, adventure tourists, and even families who are always discovering new places) using precise techniques. This ensures that marketing budgets are spent more strategically, and that campaigns deliver higher ROI compared to traditional advertising. From 2024, industry insights show that digital targeting tools improve conversion rates in hospitality day-by-day.

One thing is certain: digital marketing strengthens brand credibility and customer trust. According to Leung et al. (2013), brands appear more professional and trustworthy when they maintain a strong and consistent digital presence. User-generated content, like - reviews, photos and customer stories, acts as digital “word-of-mouth” and often has more influence than messages coming directly from the company. Engagement with customers on social media and fast responses to

online reviews add transparency and authenticity, both of which are essencial for customer trust. According to Van Vaerenbergh et al.,2025, online reviews act as a powerful third-party signal which increase business attractiveness inside the technological world.

Determining the ideal amount to invest in digital marketing is essential in this regard. According to Kumar et al. (2016) companies should allocate budgets using cost-per-acquisition (CPA) and ROI as their objective and measure those numbers over a period. This method helps refine how each budget item is allocated, and ensures spending is directed to the most impactful channels. However, small businesses struggle to know where to begin. Leeflang et al. (2014) suggest that companies with limited budgets should start by investing in the basics such as email marketing, organic social media, and, most importantly, SEO for websites. The key is to base all investment decisions on data rather than assumptions.

Additional investment in digital marketing increases visibility, credibility and ongoing customer engagement, and these measurable benefits are essential for hospitality businesses. With a clear action plan and the appropriate tools, even companies that start with small investments can achieve significant returns – if results are measured, analysed and adjusted over.

CHAPTER 3

Methodology

3. Introduction

In this study, the focus is on using a qualitative approach to understand the perspectives and practices behind the front-line operations of the hospitality industry, specifically in independent restaurants.

For this survey, qualitative data were collected through recorded semi-structured interviews with general managers of restaurants in Dublin, who receive feedback from front-line (e.g., receptionists, waitress) and have directly responsibility for monitoring online presence, reviews and between digital marketing strategies and public expectations.

These interviews provide valuable understanding of how digital tools are used in practice, which strategies are used to attract more tourists, and the main challenges they faced in adopting digital marketing. The qualitative method was chosen to examine hospitality companies from the perspective of those who make strategic decisions and manage processes, even before direct customer service.

3.1 Research Design

Adopted a qualitative and exploratory design, this research focuses on which is appropriate that aim to understand perceptions, behaviours and professional experiences in depth. A qualitative approach enables to interpret the meanings behind managers views, which is not common in the day-to-day. Aligning with the interpretivist tradition used in marketing and hospitality research, focusing in understanding how individuals interact with customers.

Considering semi-structured interviews allow managers to explain their challenges, digital marketing practices and strategies in their own words, while maintaining a structured connected to the research themes, have been select as the most appropriate method. Supporting the aim of the study by generating meaningful insights and detailed information that is not possible captured through quantitative methods.

3.2 Sampling Strategy

Through the used a purposive sampling strategy, this research selects participants who were directly involved in managing hospitality businesses. This method was appropriate because the study desired insights from individuals who work totally with totally focus on operational activities and customer interaction, as well as how digital tools are applied inside their businesses.

Five general managers from independent restaurants and hospitality businesses located in Dublin contribute to this sample. The strategy used to select these managers was the location of the restaurants, and because they manage employees, oversee customer feedback, and are responsible for online presence, reviews and manage brand communication, making them suitable sources of information for this study. The fact of the chosen businesses were different restaurant types and locations, allowing understanding of how digital marketing is used across the sector.

Considering the goal of qualitative research is to acquire rich, detailed perspectives instead of generating statistically generalizable results, the small sample size is totally appropriate. Through the professional experience of each participant, it was possible to address the research aim and support the thematic analysis executed at the end of the study.

3.3 Data Collection

The data collection for this study was made through semi-structured interviews. That interviews were recorded with permission, enable the analyse, review and an interpretation of the participants' responses. Each interview followed an established set of guidelines based on the five themes found in literature review, while allowing managers to freely share their experiences and digital marketing practices inside their companies.

This method provided that the information gathered reflected a real practice within the hospitality business and provided insight into what challenges businesses face, which strategies are most effective, and how digital tools are used. The flexibility of the interviews which resembled more of a fluid conversation, allowed participants

to highlight issues through development of the company, that were relevant to contributing to the depth of the data collection.

3.4 Data Analysis

To identify key points and ideas mentioned by participants, all interviews were recorded and later reviewed to support the development of this research. The analyses followed through the five themes established in the literature review, which helped organise the data into categories such as digital strategies, customer engagement, competitive advantage, challenges and measuring digital results.

After each interview, during the revision process, the managers relevant remarks were categorised under the appropriate theme. This allowed to compare similarities and differences between the places and participants, that allowed to understand how the perception and the way of each business apply digital marketing in practice. The analysis also involved comparing the interview findings with the literature review, that identify where the results fit into the research.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

Even before the interview began, all participants were informed about the purpose of the study, and their participation was entirely voluntary. Permission was requested before and during the recording the conversations, and participants were assured that their identities and the name of their restaurants, would remain anonymous. Through of these advises, all data were stored and used only for academic purposes.

Following general ethical principles, the study ensuring confidentiality, transparency, and respect for participants contributions. Participants had the right to give up at any time and was ensured that no harm or pressure was involved during all interview process. Maintaining the ethical integrity and comply with GDPR instructions regarding the managing of the recorded information.

CHAPTER 4

Findings & Discussion

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1 Theme 1 – Digital Marketing Strategies

4.1.1 Introduction to the Theme

The theme Digital marketing strategies is focused on exploring how these strategies are used by independent restaurants to increase visibility and attract more tourists. The research highlighted the importance of social media, online presence and visual content that are essential tools in hospitality businesses. This section is aimed at findings from the interviews while comparing them with the literature review.

4.1.2 Findings from the Interviews

The findings show that all interviewed restaurants actively use social media, mainly Instagram, as their main digital tool. Some participants mentioned using Facebook or TikTok, but with less frequently. Most managers highlighted that their content strategy is based on the creativity that appears in day-to-day rather than formal and specific planning, regularly involving customers through short videos, and entertaining posts.

A couple of restaurants reported that they occasionally invested in paid advertising or influencer collaborations in especially occasions (e.g. St. Patrick's Day, Halloween), however these actions are not part of a planned long-term strategy. Overall, all of them agreed that social media plays an essential role in attracting customers, especially tourists, but digital marketing decisions are usually based more on intuition than on research.

4.1.3 Discussion and Triangulation

These findings are consistent with the literature, which both highlights the importance of social media and the right use throughout digital platforms in influencing tourist decisions. Buhalis and Sinarta (2019) and Xiang and Gretzel (2010) highlighted social media as essential to reach customers to the businesses and increase visibility. In the same way, Leaung et al. (2013) suggest that consistent

and creative online presence, and customer reviews help to attract customers and tourists.

However, in practice it was possible to note that restaurants relieve more on creativity than structured strategies or data analysis generating a reveal gap between theory and practice. These actions support Sigala's (2018) argument that small hospitality businesses often struggle to implement digital marketing on account of limited resources and expertise. This suggests that although digital marketing is recognised as essential, its strategic use remains a challenge for restaurants.

4.2 Theme 2 – Applying Digital Marketing to Engage Customers

4.2.1 Introduction to the Theme

This theme focuses on how digital marketing tools are used to build a stronger relationship and engage customers inside the hospitality sector. The literature highlights that customer engagement has moved through passive consumption due to digital platforms enable constant contact, real-time interaction, and personalisation between customers and organisations.

4.2.2 Findings from the Interviews

The interviews findings demonstrate that engagement happens through quick replies, friendly communication, and sharing customer content. Managers emphasized that responding to comments, private messages and reviews is totally considered crucial to maintaining a favorable relationship with customers. According to several participants, tourists often interact with restaurants online through social media (e.g., Instagram, WhatsApp and Google Reviews), even before visiting personally.

Some managers mentioned using the attention to their favor, through personalisation, such as replying to reviews rapidly citing names, reposting customer content or offering small incentives to returning customers. However, engagement tools like CRM systems or loyalty apps were rarely used. Most of them, argue that poor technical knowledge, budget and limited time prevent more significant investment in digital engagement tools.

4.2.3 Discussion and Triangulation

These results are consistent with the literature, that emphasises the importance of perceived value, emotional connection and satisfaction through the digital customer engagement. Komsuoğlu and Çevirgen (2022) argue that engagement in social media creates emotional connections with customers and strengthens relationships with customer satisfaction. Similarly, Torres et al. (2021) highlight that personalised treatment encourages customer loyalty and repeat visits.

In the other way, while the literature shows the benefits of CRM systems, mobile applications and AI-driven personalisation (Mogaji et al., 2022; Teepapal et al., 2025), the results gathering from interviews show that the majority of independent restaurants implemented affordable cost engagement strategies. This confirms recent findings related to smaller hospitality businesses face challenges to adopting advanced digital tools, even though recognising their potential value. The triangulation emphasizes that both agree engagement and authentic communication create loyalty. In the acquired data, engagement is personal and spontaneous, not part of planned strategy.

4.3 Theme 3 – Marketing Position and Competitive Edge

4.3.1 Introduction to the Theme

This theme examines properly how digital marketing contributes to business positioning and competitive advantage inside the hospitality industry. In a competitive market such as Dublin, independent restaurants should be focused on differentiating themselves not only through the good service, but also through how they communicate their brand and identity online, using digital marketing.

4.3.2 Findings from the Interviews

The interview findings indicate that nowadays digital marketing is essential and important role in how restaurants position themselves inside the market. Managers explained that social media is a way to communicate the restaurant identity, their values, and to clarify for the customers understand why they stand out from their competitors. Through photos and videos that build a storytelling visual, all of them highlight as an effective way to attract tourists.

A couple of participants highlighted that even actively online with low investment is possible to compete with other restaurants that invest large marketing budgets. The restaurants believe digital marketing helps them stand out by showing their food, culture and people (e.g., staff). Another quote which was frequently mentioned was user-generated content, such as repost customer photos and tagged posts that building credibility and trust. Overall, digital marketing was seen as essential characteristic for maintaining business best positioned in the marketing, but most strategies used by them were informal than strategically planned.

4.3.3 Discussion and Triangulation

These findings support the research that emphasize nowadays, digital marketing is a key driver of competitive advantage inside the hospitality sector. According to Camilleri (2018), digital platforms enable brands to highlight themselves even before visit takes place. Sigala (2018) also highlights the importance of focusing on customer experience through experimental content.

Furthermore, Chaffey & Smith (2022) note that planning and brand identity are the key for differentiation from competitors, by search engines and social media which allow even smaller businesses to compete with larger brands. Aligning with Leung et al. (2013), the user -generated content quote, the participants emphasize the role of social proof (e.g., Photos, videos) influencing consumer decisions. However, while the literature highlights the importance of strategic use of data and digital marketing, the interviews shows that many restaurants suffer a lack of resources to apply properly these tools, one more time, reinforcing the gap between theory and practice.

4.4 Theme 4 – Challenges in Implementing Digital Marketing

4.4.1 Introduction to the Theme

With the intention of explores the main challenges faced by independent restaurants, this theme emphasizes what those restaurants suffer when implementing digital marketing strategies. Although digital marketing is recognised as essential tool for improving visibility and performance in the market, the literature shows that small and medium-sized businesses often struggle to embrace these tools effectively while suffering with limited resources, strategic planning and knowledge.

4.4.2 Findings from the Interviews

In all interviews, it was reported that limited budgets, insufficient digital marketing knowledge and lack of time are the main challenges suffered by independent restaurants. Most managers emphasized that the lack of an internal structure, such as department responsible for the company's marketing, influences the lack of attention to some important details, making marketing one of the last priorities in day-to-day operations.

Several participants explained that although they have enough knowledge to understand the importance of social media and online presence, they do not have the financial resources to invest in marketing professionals or agencies. This results to a limited use of paid advertising, little analysis of campaign performance and the most common – irregular posting. Some of them expressed insecurity about the use of new tools, particularly AI-based marketing solutions, through the feeling of not being prepared to use it correctly.

Another challenge identified was the absence of a digital marketing strategy. Many restaurants mentioned are focusing only on immediate results rather than long-term planning, also on trial-and-error approaches. This approach impact totally on digital marketing efforts.

4.4.3 Discussion and Triangulation

These findings reflect perfectly the challenges which were identified in the literature. Rahimi et al. highlights that many hospitality businesses suffer a lack of digital capabilities required to implement strategies, what aligns with managers reports about limited knowledge and skills to evolve digital marketing totally. Also, Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick (2019) argue that budget limitations discourage businesses from an investment in digital marketing, while recognising its benefits.

According to Sigala (2018) digital platforms change very quickly, which makes it difficult to small businesses to maintain consistency. Through the interviews was possible to see how frequently this is, as several managers mentioned concerns about AI and new digital technologies. Leeflang et al., also mentioned that some hospitality managers see digital marketing as only as an additional tool and not one of the most important ones, which is reflected in the frequency and the way digital marketing is used in these restaurants. The triangulation highlights that interviews fully match with the literature – Small hospitality Businesses face time and resources limitations, this prevents them from developing a long-term strategy.

4.5 Theme 5 – Measuring the Advantages of Implementing Digital Marketing

4.5.1 Introduction to the theme

The idea behind this theme is on how independent restaurants measure the advantages of investing and implementing digital marketing in their businesses. The literature review highlights that digital marketing enables hospitality businesses to evaluate properly performance with detailed data, customer feedback and engagement metrics, that is essential to this sector where good visibility strongly influences customer decisions.

4.5.2 Findings from the Interviews

Through the interviews it was possible to understand how restaurants using and recognise the importance of digital marketing in terms of increasing online visibility and customer engagement. During those interviews, managers frequently referred to online reviews, customer feedback, and social media engagement as indicators

of success. Personalised interactions through Instagram and google reviews, were the most mentioned as tools used to understand the side of customers and attract more tourists.

However, a lack of knowledge about tools that make these measures, was showed during the interviews that none of five restaurants measure digital marketing properly. Managers mentioned that basic indicators such as numbers of views, likes, followers or comments are used as base, instead than formal metrics such as conversion rates or return on investment. Also, budget decisions related to digital marketing were often based only on intuition or special occasions. Despite this, all of them agreed that online presence and positive reviews influence totally customer trust and visit decisions.

4.5.3 Discussion and Triangulation

Aligned with the literature, these findings highlights that digital marketing has the power of providing a measurable advantage inside the hospitality sector. Improved brand awareness, and customer return. The authors Tiago & Verissimo (2014) and Kumar et al. (2016) say that measuring results is vital for improving performance mainly through real-time data collection. But many businesses struggle to allocate budgets based on performance metrics. Similarly, Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick et. al. emphasise that digital platforms allow to improve campaigns and the efficiency of the use of marketing budgets.

In the other side, through the interviews was possible to notice that independent restaurants rarely apply advanced tools to measure these techniques. The reliance on basic engagement indicators also can be related to Leeflang et al., who suggest that smaller businesses begin with simple digital tools before adopting advanced measurement practices, which clearly is the last improvement in this case. Through triangulation, both confirm that measuring is essential and most restaurants still rely on intuition instead of analytics.

CHAPTER 5

Conclusion

5. Conclusion

In this study, the focus was entirely to examine how digital marketing can help hospitality businesses, specifically in independent restaurants in Dublin, attract tourists and increase customer loyalty. Through the qualitative approach, it was essential to understand the perspectives and practices behind the front-line operations of the hospitality industry.

For this survey, qualitative data was collected through recorded semi-structured interviews with general managers of restaurants in Dublin. Those managers provided insight into how digital marketing strategies are applied in practice, also the challenges faced by businesses in this industry.

The findings through all development of this survey, highlighted that digital marketing plays a crucial role in the market such as increasing visibility and attracting tourists, based in their experience, especially social media platforms provide these goals. Across all interviews, managers recognised the importance of invest and maintain an online presence to reach customers, attract tourists and communicate the restaurant identity. However, many of them use digital marketing activities informally and based totally on creativity without a structured planning process.

In addition, the findings emphasise that digital marketing totally supports customer engagement through social media interaction, that helps businesses build relationships exclusive while encourage repeat visits. Digital tools were also identified as an essential strategy to maintain the businesses in a competitive advantage, allowing independent restaurants to stand out in relation to their competitors.

Although recognising these benefits, the research identified several challenges that limit effective implementation, such as insufficient digital knowledge, limited

budgets and lack of time. As a result, most restaurants measure digital marketing using only basic indicators instead of structured metrics.

In conclusion, this research demonstrates that – Yes, digital marketing can help hospitality businesses attract tourists. Mainly, through the improvement of customer engagement, increasing online visibility and fortifying brand positioning, even when these aspects are applied through low-cost strategies.

To achieve better results, through the findings a practical insight for independent restaurant managers highlighted how digital marketing is currently used in practice, and understanding these practices and challenges, provides for businesses in the hospitality industry the opportunity to understand how the best way to use digital marketing to enhance a better performance and attract tourists in a competitive market.

CHAPTER 6

Limitations

6. Limitations

Considering that this study adopted a qualitative approach and were totally focused on sample of independent restaurants in Dublin, already generate some limits of findings to wider hospitality industry. The aim, however, was to understand and to gain insight from the knowledge of managers that are in both sides – internal and external.

- Schedule Interviews – The difficulty in scheduling interviews with restaurant managers, was a challenge due to their limited availability to set aside time to answer questions with detailed information.
- Different Levels of Knowledge in Digital Marketing – The research focused on the perspectives of general managers, limited views from other roles, such as front-line staff and customer that possesses a different opinion.
- Language Barriers – Interviewing managers of restaurants of a specific nationality, there was a difficulty in understanding as some questions was not answered clearly and fluently.

Despite these limitations, the study offers relevant insights into how digital marketing is used in practice by independent restaurants in Dublin, and emphasises key challenges faced in the hospitality industry.

CHAPTER 7

Recommendations

7. Recommendations

Based on the findings of this research, to develop recommendations it was necessary to analyse each interview thoroughly and understand the main shortcomings and needs of restaurants in relation to the use of digital marketing. The recommendations are based on improving the use of digital marketing to attract tourists and increase customer engagement.

- **Basic and Structured Digital Marketing Plan** – To guide their online activities, independent restaurants should develop a basic and structured digital marketing plan, even if simple. Strategy and content planning are necessary characteristics to define clear objectives and help businesses move from an informal to a consistent and effective approach.
- **Prioritise Social Media Platforms** – Nowadays, social media platforms influence almost one hundred per cent of customers, mainly tourists, who mostly of the time search for places to visit before travelling to another city. Investing in regular posting, publications that attract customers' attention, and differentiated communication that clarifies the restaurant identity can considerably improve online visibility and consumer interest.
- **Active Interaction** – Encouraging customers to share their experiences is an effective way to build trust and strengthen relationships. Responding to reviews rapidly with natural personalisation emphasises active interaction with customers online, resulting in greater customer engagement.

- **Measurement Tools** – The use of measurement tools is truly necessary to monitor engagement, reviews and to improve understanding of the impact of digital marketing activities on the business. Even simple metrics provide results that are extremely important for the evolution of the company.
- **Investment in Digital Strategies** – Considering the challenges related to digital knowledge, limited time and budget, it is recommended that independent restaurants adopt low-cost digital strategies, such as organic social media, basic SEO and review management, before investing in more advanced and expensive tools.