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Abstract

This study examines the impact of digital marketing on hospitality SMEs post Covid-19 in Ireland. Digital marketing and the use of social media is constantly evolving and has seen huge developments since the start of the pandemic and has contributed to small businesses like cafes, pubs and restaurants in their survival following harsh restrictions and lockdowns. Irish cafes, pubs and restaurants suffered greatly during this time when they were ordered to close to their customers. This research questions explores the positive impact that digital marketing has had on these businesses as they have recovered and started welcoming customers back to the new normal. Previous research has detailed a positive outlook on the use of social media in small businesses, although it is identified that small businesses can struggle with the new digital world. Some businesses may lack the skills and expertise to adopt digital tools successfully and compete with the overcrowded market. In response to this, the research focuses on the importance of attracting customers through their social media pages, as this can bring in far more than using traditional methods that will only reach a local audience. This has been proven to be effective in firm performance and at a relatively low cost. This research also expands on the existing research involved with new technologies emerging on the market. Previous research is limited as technology such as artificial intelligence and augmented reality are unexplored and a new idea for Irish hospitality firms. This analysis is important in today's world for firms to be aware of.

This research was qualitative in nature and surveys were issued to those employed in small businesses in the hospitality sector. The survey gave further insight on the opinions and beliefs of workers and how they have adopted to digital marketing in the industry. Patterns were identified throughout the responses to the survey questions and the literature review and a thematic analysis approach was used to discuss the findings and results. It was confirmed that the impact of digital marketing on hospitality SMEs post Covid is in fact extremely positive. The findings were discussed under three main themes, the evolution of digital marketing, the advantages of digital marketing for SMEs post covid and new technology used both now and in the future. It was clear that the advantages of digital marketing clearly outweigh the disadvantages. The concept of new technology such as AR and AI used in hospitality was explored with respondents welcoming this new phenomenon in future Irish SMEs.

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Introduction

This research question presents the impact of digital marketing on the hospitality industry in relation to SMEs post Covid. Both Chaffney (2019) and Kariru (2022) define digital marketing as ‘the application of digital media, data and technology integrated with traditional communications to achieve marketing objectives.’ It focuses on managing different forms of online presence such as websites, mobile apps and social media platforms through digital devices such as laptops, smartphones and tablets. These offer attractive displays and rapid communication speeds. Many firms strive for a customer-centric approach using personas and personalisation techniques to satisfy their needs. There have been huge developments in digital media and marketing technologies which helps companies come up with new ways to communicate with their customers. Consumers behaviour and the way companies’ market to consumers has changed significantly, particularly following the pandemic. Over 3 billion people in the world use online services regularly to find products, services and entertainment. Chaffney (2019) Kariru (2022) states that digital marketing can complement the four Ps marketing strategies: product, price, place, and promotion. For the hospitality world, product can be promoted and sold online by showing displays on websites, pricing and purchasing can be carried out through online card payments, place of distribution can be achieved through communication by email or online reservation systems and promotion can be solely carried out through social media and the internet. Today, it is important to think about understanding audience interactions to support marketing goals.

The tourism business, which includes bars, hotels, and restaurants, has been severely damaged by COVID-19. Smyth (2021) states that the Committee was informed that the tourism industry was affected first, hardest, and will take the longest to recover economically. According to Fáilte Ireland, the pre-COVID tourist industry supported 260,000 positions of work, or 1 in 9 positions, and contributed over €8 billion to the Irish economy each year. Hit hardest was traditional Irish pubs that did not offer food services had been shut down for more than a year since March 15, 2020 due to ongoing COVID-19 public health measures. The Irish Tourism Industry Confederation (ITIC) stated that, even in a ‘best case’ scenario, international tourism will not return to 2019 levels until 2025.

Throughout this paper the shift from traditional marketing to digital marketing will be discussed followed by the advantages and disadvantages of the use of digital marketing among hospitality SMEs, this will be analysed against its effectiveness in firm performance in these establishments. A look back to the sector during harsh lockdown restrictions in Ireland is detailed followed by how the industry is looking now post Covid. In addition, new and existing technologies and how they are being developed will be evaluated. In order to answer this research question, a structured online survey is used for data collection. The study will look at how several cafes, restaurants and pubs in Ireland have operated throughout the pandemic with current digital technology. The argument this research creates is the risk of businesses being slow to adapt to rapid changes resulting in being taken under by local competition. For new SMEs coming onto a new market following the pandemic there is an element of fear as they start out with limited resources. When they are getting started, their main focus is how to get their first customers in the door. Small businesses can think they lack the resources to compete online. Many sources agree that because of this, the majority of business owners choose to start slowly and stay with one or two traditional means of advertising, hoping that their business will change as time goes on. Although word-of-mouth and customer recommendations can drive traffic, customers will have trouble locating your business unless you are based where there is footfall because the market is congested. Ultimately the potential customers that companies can find online is much larger than they would ever be able to attract locally, delaying this is not an effective approach. (digital marketing institute, N/A)

Literature review

Evolution of digital marketing

Traditional marketing evolved around tangible items such as business cards, print ads and radio and TV ads. Due to high costs, many companies could not afford to advertise. Traditional content did not last long after being published or aired. Juran (2021) argues that with the rise of the internet, websites became an essential tool for business to provide text-based information on their products and services. Magazines switch to digital content, television to video ads and radio to streaming ads. Digital marketing has evolved from the marketing of specific products and services to the use of digital channels for processes that are assisted by the use of digital technologies. Unlike traditional marketing being accessible to a limited audience, digital marketing can reach everyone of all age groups. Social media has grown from limited

technology only available to experts in the field to an important tool in everyday life. Juran (2021) also mentions with the launch of Facebook in 2004, social media was introduced to the public. As businesses and consumers began to figure out how social media works, advertising academics began to investigate if this could be used in advertising business products.

Advantages & disadvantages of digital marketing in hospitality SMEs

Modern firms are embracing digital marketing as it helps in the ever-changing marketing trends for better competitiveness. Kariru (2022) states that the internet offers fast and cost-effective communication without having to worry about barriers such as the individual's location. For some firms it can be challenging to build rapport with customers who are not based in the same location. Another advantage being there is complete privacy and is available 24 hours per day from anywhere in the world. While this offers convenience, some may think that privacy can be compromised online. Digital marketing is completely interactive. This facilitates direct communication between hospitality stakeholders for example businesses and customers. According to Kariru (2022) it can be a source of competitive advantage for hospitality firms which can improve tourism performance in a particular country. This is achieved by targeting a wide range of local and international tourists. An argument to this statement may be the failure to understand both the marketplace and needs and wants of customers. There are many customer differences, and they may not want to buy suggested products every single time. Digital marketing can be used to educate and encourage people to consume the wide range of hospitality products. Hospitality experiences can be delivered to consumers seamlessly through social media and blogging which adds to its convenience. Firms can use social media tools like Instagram and Facebook to educate customers on their products and encourage customers to share photos, videos and experiences related to the company. In argument to this it may be too time consuming for some companies to be consistent with posting content on social media. Recruitment platforms such as LinkedIn can attract prospective employees and facilitate communication between candidates and employers. Using these can be costly for smaller businesses as they are working with limited income while still fresh on the market. Content marketing tools such as virals and branded videos bring entertainment to users and encourage interaction. Lastly, quizzes and competitions can create fun environments with the added benefit of rewarding customers for participating. Small businesses may fall down in this area due to not having the skills and resources early on to compete within the sector.

Covid-19: sector background

According to [Almansour](#) (2022) travel and leisure were abruptly discontinued, which caused the hospitality business to suffer the most, especially the start-ups in the food and beverage industry. In 2020, the pandemic cost restaurants over 600 billion dollars worldwide. While online food shopping increased in response to travel restrictions, even businesses that quickly adopted the delivery-based business model to get around social distance restrictions still struggled to turn a profit due to a variety of factors, such as supply chain failures. Due to the pandemic, the industry has shrunk significantly. Following the start of the pandemic, there were insufficient customers to keep the company operating, which resulted in temporary or permanent closures. As diners took off their masks to consume their food, people stopped going to eating establishments because they were perceived as risky places where viruses could spread.

Bajkó N, Fülöp Z, Pércsi KN (2022) suggest that numerous studies revealed that the majority of SMEs do not even engage in targeted marketing, which, before the coronavirus pandemic, did not have a significant negative impact on the income of the businesses. However, this also altered during the coronavirus pandemic, most notably as a result of the shifts in consumer preferences that showed as a result of the changes in people's daily lives. For SMEs, the degree of enterprise digitization directly affects their capacity to seize chances for additional digital innovation. The less digitally developed a company is, the greater the risks in advancing further functions toward digitization. They believe digitization is crucial because of the additional revenue it generates, which they view as the difference between a company's ability to continue operating and failing. One of the most challenging aspects for start-ups was getting familiar with customers, with no or fewer people on the street, meaning no chance of getting their products and business noticed. As a result, the start-ups had to switch to digital marketing and invest more in this area particularly since people had low trust in start-ups' ability to adhere to the required health and safety standards compared to more popular franchises.

In the case of the Irish hospitality industry, the harshest effects of the Covid-19 restrictions, which were originally introduced in March 2020, have been felt by hospitality firms, many of which had been shuttered for over 22 months. The Pandemic Unemployment Payment and the Wage Subsidy Scheme was introduced for all workers which had lost their jobs as a result of the restrictions. Loughlin (2022) states that by the end of June 2020, the government progressed through to phase 3 of a four-stage reopening plan which allowed restaurants and cafes to open

their doors with social distancing measures in place. For pubs, a rule stating patrons had to purchase a meal of 9 euro or more was introduced to allow pubs serving food to get back to trading again.

Paul (2020) disclosed that around 200 so-called "wet" pubs in Dublin that don't serve food were closed for more than nine months. Dublin's restaurants and gastropubs had been permitted to operate over that same nine-month period in spurts totalling just roughly three months, with the exception of takeout service. Before the summer reopening, the odd distinction between "wet" and "dry" pubs which had never before been made in conversation about the industry was born. Public health officials initially wanted all pubs to remain closed until August despite the fact that restaurants and hotels, which also serve alcohol, had reopened starting at the end of June. They have claimed since the start of the pandemic that drinking induces individuals to let their guard down. By the end of June 2021, pubs and restaurants were allowed to resume indoor dining and drinking after months of tackling outdoor service.

For Irish pubs in January 2022, 50,000 employees from 7,000 establishments were free to resume their regular lifestyles. Vaccine passes, forced table service, contact information, six people per table, constant sitting, a one-metre social distance, no pool or darts, and the use of bar counters were all eliminated overnight. Stedman (2022) shares that vintners and restaurateurs described that they were looking forward to rebuilding their business and welcoming employees back to work. The Restaurants Association of Ireland (RAI) explained that this was an emotional time after the hardship over the last two years.

Post Covid for hospitality SMEs

[Almansour](#) (2022) states that after the pandemic's devastation, many young and first-generation entrepreneurs are still attempting to find their footing in the food and beverage industry, which food start-ups strongly dominate. The industry is also very dispersed. Many of these start-ups are attempting to recover and rebuild themselves as the restrictions caused by the pandemic began to lift. In order to overcome the pandemic's setback, these start-ups will need to be creative and take a fresh strategy because their pre-COVID methods of conducting business may no longer be effective in the post-pandemic period. According to recent studies, the keys to recovery are innovation and digital transformation.

Digital marketing was made necessary by the pandemic, but most food and beverage start-ups found it difficult to adopt it or to use it successfully. The majority of start-ups had very little knowledge of internet marketing, lacking even the most fundamental understanding of the systems to use and their criteria. It was difficult for start-ups to suddenly start adapting digitally during the pandemic due to a lack of technological knowledge and expertise required to plan and run digital marketing campaigns that would entice new customers. In the urgency to grasp the fundamentals of digital marketing, start-up owners and employees were forced to urgently take time away from their businesses. Post pandemic, they were suddenly required to carry out the complete setup, which required a large amount of capital. In the beginning, the majority of startups lacked the funding necessary to conduct digital marketing campaigns at a scale that would make their organizations stand out from the crowd.

As a result of digital disruption, Kumar & Syed (2022) share that digital transformation and skills arose, are continually developing, and have significantly impacted our lives. The hospitality sector has been impacted by this digitalization as well because it now provides a high-quality, frictionless, and seamless travel experience. Health and safety are now the first focus in food operations following COVID-19. The primary feature of customer satisfaction following services and the determining factor for visitors when choosing a brand is now the cleanliness and hygiene of the customers.

Measures to help businesses like the Covid Restrictions Support Scheme (CRSS), Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS), and together with the Fáilte Ireland business supports, were critical in helping small Irish businesses and jobs to survive. There was hope for the sector with the roll out of the vaccination service and improved treatments for covid 19.

New technology existing and emerging

The hospitality and tourism industry is highly competitive and saturated with new technologies. The survival of these businesses comes down to overall financial performance, their ability to adapt to change and how they expand services to meet customer needs. [Almansour](#) (2022) shares that incorporating technology has been the most important COVID success factor in terms of digital technology. Restaurants using rapid response (QR) codes and digital menus are two examples of technology integration. An interface that minimizes human involvement has become popular in many setups, among other things. Additionally, following the pandemic, most food and beverage start-ups have a digital shop in addition to their brick-and-mortar locations. They are now able to receive preorders and orders for delivery to customers' homes or for in-store pickup. To avoid crowding, long lines, and lengthy wait times, customers can book tables in advance on the digital storefronts that have emerged since the pandemic. Kumar & Syed (2022) state that business owners saw digital technology as a motivating element to sustain and implement "contactless" procedures as much as possible to keep up with the new normal scenarios. Regarding the adoption of technology, digital innovation, and sustainability, they reacted rapidly. New business models have arisen that are more "greener" and "cognitively flexible" to integrate and offer competitive solutions. Traditional hospitality SOP (Standards of Procedure) are currently being updated, and new tech-based tools are being added, such as scannable QR codes for payments, meal menus, and invoice bills, to fit into the new normal and gain the trust of guests. Food ordering, reservations, bookings, live chats, chatbots, cloud based IoT software for clubs, coupons, and shopping, are all available through mobile apps.

According to Limna (2022) artificial intelligence (AI) involves two words artificial meaning something made by humans, and intelligence meaning the ability to think for yourself. 'AI is the simulation of human intelligence operations by computers.' AI can be used to perform specific tasks, enabling computers to make effective decisions which result in efficient operations. People can work smarter with AI, bringing positive business outcomes. In contrast, Limna (2022) states that AI can result in humans being replaced by technology, forcing hospitality and tourism businesses to redesign systems and processes. The hospitality industry has adopted computerised processes and AI into their systems for example property and revenue management systems and customer relationship management. AI-powered smart devices and robotics are used to personalise services such as chatbot technologies. Another example being AI in point-of-sale systems can reduce costs and theft in food outlets such as

cafes and restaurants. In addition, automation services can reduce human error and provide prediction into different insights in the future. Future sales opportunities can be optimised as well as long-term strategies to cater for consistent quality. These technologies are beneficial for employee productivity, service quality and customer satisfaction making it crucial in today's world.

According to Alkasasbeh it is anticipated that the COVID-19 outbreak will hasten the adoption of robotics and artificial intelligence in restaurants. More restaurants are probably going to adopt "unmanned" technology and robots to offer a completely contactless service. Robotic concierge assistants, robotic deliveries, robotic face checks, and other contactless services are anticipated to start replacing human communication services in the near future. Robots, for instance, can keep an eye on the cleanliness of high traffic areas, such as the quantity of dirt or trash in elevators and driveways, to notify cleaning staff of places that require care. When customers obtain more contactless services and have less possibilities to access human-based services, it will be useful to understand their thoughts and sentiments. The effective implementation of cleaning and sanitization procedures for restaurant properties by AI-driven robots as well as the creation of robotic-friendly hospitality facilities for AI-driven robots to operate in are other issues that need to be solved in the future.

The delivery of engaging multimedia information and mobile applications that are tailored to different knowledge levels using AR can help hospitality organisations and experts reach a wider audience, as demonstrated by several examples. Simona (2020) states that while enhancing the visitor experience and providing an element of fun along the way, augmented reality (AR) information systems can also assist travellers in accessing important information and facts on their chosen destination. The broad shift in consumer lives over the past ten years has also been a major factor in the adoption of AR within the hospitality sector. With more advanced equipment and techniques, augmented reality in travel and tourism is incredibly helpful for information that facilitates booking, cross-language communication, and better navigation. Augmented reality has grown in popularity over the past few years within the hospitality sector. This is partly since it allows SMEs and other companies in this sector to improve the physical surroundings that they are trying to entice visitors to come, including local attractions and hotels. Simona (2020) addresses that the transition to using AR apps on such phones is not a large one because in today's world clients are already using their smartphones frequently, and they rely on them even more when they are traveling. Through

the use of creative smartphone applications, augmented reality has already improved travel experiences in a positive way.

Research question & objectives

The question focuses on how digital marketing is used and what its impact is on the hospitality sector with particular attention to SME's in the post Covid world. This question is important as digital media and marketing technologies are constantly growing and changing; therefore, the hospitality sector must also evolve in line with this. Billions of people today use the internet not only for celebrations or vacations at various points in the year but daily tasks. The adoption of technology in the business is fundamental to avoid losses and/or competitor advantage. This research will show that by marketing themselves correctly, firms can open a wide range of opportunities to protect their future. In contrast, they may also have the flexibility to test different markets and stop any campaigns that are not working in their favour. The objectives of this research include detailing how digital marketing can affect firm performance in a positive way, in relation to cafes, restaurants and pubs experience post Covid. Furthermore, an exploration and update into the new technologies emerging for new businesses. The style of qualitative research used is to comprehend a study question from a humanistic or idealistic perspective. The qualitative technique is used to comprehend people's attitudes, interactions, behaviours, and beliefs. It produces data that is not numerical. (Pathac, Jena, Kalrac, 2013)

Methodology

Introduction

The main purpose of the research is to analyse how digital marketing has positively affected hospitality SMEs post Covid. The research follows a qualitative approach, and a structured online survey is used for data collection. The qualitative approach is non numerical and aims to gather information and understanding on individuals' opinions, attitudes, and beliefs of those employed in the industry. The objectives of this research include detailing how digital marketing can affect firm performance in a positive way, focusing on the situation post Covid.

The study will look at how several cafes, restaurants and pubs have operated throughout the pandemic with current digital technology. Furthermore, an exploration on the potential of new technologies to be welcomed into the industry post Covid. As identified throughout the literature review, there is an overly positive affect between emerging businesses and new technology. In this study, surveys help to explore these themes.

Many of the readings in this research were qualitative in nature. In Almansour (2022) research, qualitative data for the study was collected by using open-ended essays. Data was collected through an online crowd-surfing platform. Respondents were both owners and employees of start-ups in the food and beverage sector who have adopted digital technologies and digital marketing. “The study examined the challenges faced by start-ups and the actions taken to resolve issues which included the adoption of digital technologies. The research suggests that the area remains unexplored so far,” which concludes that the qualitative research design is a suitable choice. Almansour (2022) idea is related to this study as surveys are another way for workers in this sector to reflect on their experience during a tough time and explain their survival methods. Similar to open-ended essays, discussion boxes were used in the survey to encourage more detailed answers.

Theoretical influences/philosophical assumptions

An assumption associated with this question is that digital marketing can only be successful with larger firms. Now, it is prevalent that customers can search for products, services, or an experience online. This is where the first incline of interest begins. For new start-ups, good content online will not suffice. Users need to be persuaded to act and stay engaged. As a result, it is critical to create unique content to outperform your competitors and stand out from the crowd. Furthermore, many people believe that creating the same content for all social media platforms will help them succeed. However, different social media platforms cater to different demographics. People see your posts while scrolling through their feeds on social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram. As a result, content and posts should be appealing enough to pique the interest of your target audience. (Yashaaglobal, 2022) During the COVID-19 disruption, SME initiatives to transform shifted marginally from technology to social, customer, and organizational changes. SMEs' existing equipment, fundamental digital competencies to use these technologies, and already established digital contact channels with customers could all influence the technology chosen. A lack of funding and expertise

associated with the use of more advanced technological advances may also be factors. The planning, research, analysis, innovation, and execution that go into digital marketing are extensive. Digital marketing is a continuous process that requires constant monitoring, evaluation, and improvement. Investing in various tools, platforms, and channels that can help you reach your target audience and accomplish your goals requires a lot of time and the necessary resources, which many start-up owners do not have in the beginning. It is a planned, long-term undertaking that needs dedication and financial investment rather than being a quick fix for success.

In severe disruptions, the use of digitization may help people and organizations stay linked, enable smart working situations, and provide links to potential consumer privacy violations. Practitioners must closely consider how digitization affects SMEs ways of working, also for their partners. Community building, knowledge sharing, and organizational learning are all problems with social and environmental implications for sustainable development. (Chunguang, Quayson, and Sarkis, 2021) As a result, by staying in touch with your consumers via digital platforms, a devoted following of foodies can be built who become loyal visitors to restaurants, cafes and pubs. Simsek (2023) says that this in turn can generate more positive reviews and recommendations of your business to their peers. Digital ordering and delivery platforms can be used to make the ordering process more appealing for customers. The data used from these platforms can tailor marketing campaigns in line with customers desires. Things like updating the business website regularly, posting new content on social media, and advertising new items on your menu all help to advertise the business strengths. It is important to keep the community involved by displaying new specials online, running contests, and giving rewards to customers.

Research paradigm

This research will fall into the interpretative paradigm. Interpretivism is a philosophical phenomenological approach. Its goal is to make sense of the meanings and subjective motives of specific people in a particular situation, without imposing purely rational analytic categories. (Bonache & Festing, 2020) The research is qualitative in nature, with the survey questions being designed to capture the different opinions and experiences of workers in the industry using digital marketing in the day to day running of their business. These workers are in different establishments, this may cause differences in platforms used and varying opinions on the future of technology. The independent variable in this study would be digital marketing,

while the dependent variable would be social media. With social media being the biggest phenomenon for business marketing, it effects the positive results of those using digital marketing in the hospitality industry.

Research design

The survey will consist of majority closed ended questions. Two questions will allow for respondents to type in a text box to expand on their answer. The first question asks if the respondent uses both traditional and digital marketing or solely digital marketing in their business. It is expected that the majority of respondents use solely digital marketing in their business, especially following the pandemic. It is uncommon to see traditional media such as flyers, billboards and radio ads for pubs, restaurants, and cafes. This is followed by asking if they use social media for marketing purposes and what sites they use. The next questions asks if digital marketing has worked to gain back their customer base post Covid, followed by the effectiveness of social media in attracting and engaging with customers. These questions are particularly important in answering the research question. Respondents are encouraged to write in the text box how digital marketing has worked to gain back their customer base. This could include how they have used social media to interact with both existing and new customers. The following question asks if they believe that their social media presence has worked to attract tourists to the business and/or traffic to social media sites. Especially with tourism on the rise following Covid, people like to research online for places to go that suits their needs. In addition, respondents are asked if social media is an effective communication method with customer to identify their needs/wants. The following question asks specifically what new technology the business now uses. These include a social media presence, online menus, online reservation platforms, online ordering systems and QR code technology. Respondents are asked if these tools benefit the staff and customers and make the day run smoother. A text box is provided to allow for more detail. Respondents may also detail any challenges that they may have faced with new processes. Furthermore, respondents are asked to rank these new technologies they may have adopted post Covid. Finally, respondents are asked if they believe new technologies such as robotics and virtual reality will be welcomed in the industry in the future. This question is of particular interest as there may be mixed opinions on this area. New technology such as AI and AR are not as established in Ireland as opposed to the rest of the world.

Data collection methods

Surveys can be used to ask a series of questions to gather information and draw conclusions. There are several methods for surveying people, ranging from face-to-face, on paper, over the phone or online. Surveys can also be used for market research. This involves learning what your current and prospective customers think about your company, products, or services. Or to assist in the creation of a marketing message that will resonate with your target audience. An interview also entails asking a series of questions to gather information. However, interviews are typically one-on-one verbal conversations. Interviews require far more time than surveys. They do, however have several advantages. They enable one to learn more about specific areas of interest. In contrast to surveys, which are typically static, interviews allow interviewers the opportunity to probe further or get more information from respondents. (SurveyMonkey, 2022)

The method chosen includes an online survey which will be quantitative in nature. The survey will aim to find out how workers in the industry use digital marketing and social media in their business in the post Covid era. It will answer if these technologies are successful in sustaining customers into the future.

The platform Google Forms will be used to carry out the survey. This is completely free and allows both unlimited number of questions on the survey and unlimited number of responses. It also provides a summary of all responses with statistical analysis. Respondents can access the survey by a link sent through email. There is a series of 10 questions and should take 5-10 minutes to complete. A declaration is included at the start of the survey which details that all answers will remain anonymous, and the researcher's contact details for queries.

Sampling

The main sample includes those who are employed in the hospitality industry. These would include owners, managers and employees. The target includes those employed in small businesses such as pubs, restaurants and cafes. This would capture people of all ages and their varying opinions on using digital marketing in their day-to-day work. The survey will be shared through peers and social media platforms such as LinkedIn and WhatsApp messaging groups.

Snowball sampling, also known as chain-referral or network sampling, is a nonprobability sampling technique that can be used when test quantities are scarce. When the research subject

populations are unknown or difficult to approach, snowball sampling can be useful. This research strategy can assist in obtaining a pool of suitable participants for your research. Some advantages of snowball sampling include it is a cost-effective method, because much of the sourcing for snowball sampling comes from sample referrals, locating a data population takes less time. Since you receive referrals from your primary sources, snowball sampling gives you access to difficult-to-reach target groups. These sampling techniques can help you find group traits that you might not have been aware of about the target group. Making links between the population and your study is possible with the help of this information. (Indeed, 2023)

According to Wakelin's study (2023) surveys allow for the gathering of data and characteristics of an area of interest and are suitable for usage when little is known about something. Numerous problems with instrument design have been noted, such as questions that are poorly phrased or confusing, lengthy, or have inappropriate response options. Having an expert panel of reviewers who are knowledgeable about a certain topic area is one way to assess the reliability and validity of an instrument design. Reliability is the consistency of survey responses across time, whereas validity is the degree to which survey measurements provide the data needed to reach the study's objective.

Data analysis method

The results from the survey will be analysed to answer the overall question of what is the impact of digital marketing on hospitality SMEs post Covid. With the extensive advantages of the use of digital technology in cafes, restaurants in pubs seen today paired with the upcoming new technology it can be expected that the overall outcome is positive. Those employed in this field have adopted to this new normal, although with some challenges, successfully.

Thematic analysis will be used to split the ten survey questions into three main themes. These themes will be drawn from the literature review and contain the detailed questions posed to hospitality employees. Thematic analysis is a data analysis procedure that is often seen in qualitative research. (Castleberry, 2018) Without providing the necessary information about how the analysis condensed the data into useable themes and the emerging conclusions, thematic analysis is frequently employed in research studies and later classified as qualitative research. Castleberry (2018) defines the identifying, analysing, and describing patterns within data as the main goal of thematic analysis. It is defined as a descriptive approach that reduces

the data and integrates with other data analysis strategies. An important advantage to this is that a large range of research issues and themes can be addressed with this type of data analysis.

Limitations

Some participants may have started the survey and it returned incomplete, these results cannot be used towards the analysis and findings. This can cause the sample to become smaller, which can cause inaccurate results. Time is limited as the survey can only be circulated for a number of weeks before being closed. Time can limit the number of responses and hinder the accuracy of the analysis and findings section. More time could have allowed the researcher to conduct a mixed methods approach, using both surveys and interviews for maximum results. Furthermore, while surveys can provide more answers to prove the positive impact of digital marketing for hospitality workers, interviews could have provided more room for detailed answers and follow up questions.

Ethics

The National College of Ireland ethical guidelines were followed throughout the duration of the research process. Respondents were clearly informed of ethical considerations before beginning the survey. This was detailed in the blurb at the beginning stating that all individuals' responses and personal details remain anonymous, they can exit the survey at any time and any incomplete surveys will not be used as part of the research. The data collected is always stored with password protection by the researcher. The researcher's email was included should any individual have any queries relating to participating in the survey. The National College of Ireland ethics form was completed and checked prior to beginning the research.

Analysis and findings

Introduction

This section will illustrate the findings and results to answer the research question 'the positive impact of digital marketing on hospitality SMEs post Covid', following the qualitative nature of the survey. The survey questions were based on the following three key themes which run

through the literature review, the evolution of digital marketing, the advantages of digital marketing for SMEs post covid and new technology used both now and in the future. The survey gave further insight on the opinions and beliefs of workers in the industry. The questions answered how they use social media now in the post Covid era and the addition of technology into day to day running of the business. The survey was aimed at people working in the industry. The majority of the surveys completed were sent through social media platforms such as WhatsApp and Instagram.

Evolution of digital marketing

The first question of the survey asked if they use both traditional and digital marketing in their business or solely digital. 56.3% of respondents answered that they only use digital marketing, while 43.8% of respondents answered to both traditional and digital. Secondly, respondents were asked if they use social media for marketing purposes. 81.3% of respondents answered yes and 18.8% answered no. Both first two answers were expected as previous research demonstrated these facts. Thirdly, respondents were asked what social media sites they use in their business. Instagram was recognised as the most popular site as all (100%) of respondents indicated that they use it in their business. The next most popular was both Facebook and TikTok with half (50%) of respondents using these sites. The next most popular was Twitter with 18.8% of respondents, and lastly 12.5% of respondents use other social media sites. It is evident that from the results of the survey that digital marketing has taken over in today's world.

Following on from Juran (2021) research above, it is clear that digital marketing is the real winner in business success today. It is true from these results that social media is now an important tool in everyday life. According to Carmichael (2019) it can be said that there are significant disadvantages to using traditional marketing. Businesses that use it have little or no interaction with their customers, with no social media profile there is no quick way for customers to send in queries or concerns. Traditional marketing is likewise viewed as unreliable by some marketers. A print advertisement that has already been published cannot be changed. Additionally, traditional marketing may cost more. For instance, the price to run a print advertisement ranges from £2,000 to £160,000. Furthermore, since results are difficult to quantify, you never know exactly who you will reach with that expenditure. With the results

of this survey, it is apparent that digital marketing is a key source of income growth. Carmichael (2019) suggests that in fact, social selling influences half of sales. 50% of marketers have stated that they think digital marketing has an advantage over traditional because of the door it offers for engagement and open communication with clients. Businesses may fully control the expansion of their audience and track the effectiveness of each marketing element in real time. Additionally, with inbound marketing, customers find the business themselves rather than trying to chase customers to visit. (Carmichael, 2019)

Advantages of digital marketing for hospitality SMEs post Covid

In the fourth question posed to respondents, they were asked if digital marketing has worked to gain back their customer base post Covid. 64.7% of respondents answered yes and 35.3% of respondents answered no. A number of respondents have provided more detail to this statement. One café worker indicated that with the use of Tiktok and Instagram it shows an idea of items served on the menu. Tiktok videos can be quickly viewed by thousands of people across the country with current virals and trends on the platform. This claims to build an instant connection with consumers seeing their favourite food or coffee order on the menu.

One pub worker responded saying that the majority of people like to see what a place looks like before visiting, and this has shown as they welcomed drinkers following the pandemic. Another pub worker responded with the fact that by posting online this kept their pub in people's minds as a reminder to try it out. Other respondents have noted that social media helps them to reach a wider age profile, inform customers that the establishment has reopened, with information on opening days and times. In addition, there is more engagement through social media use. The next question posed asks do they believe that social media has worked to further attract tourists and/or traffic to their sites post Covid. Nearly all respondents (94.1%) answered yes, with 5.9% answering no. The following question asks if social media is effective as a communication method with customers and/or a way of identifying their needs/wants. Again, almost all respondents (94.1%) answered yes, with 5.9% answering no.

Throughout Kariru (2022) research above it is proven that the internet offers fast and cost-effective communication without having to worry about distance between the business and customers. The coronavirus caused an abrupt acceleration in the digital revolution. Consumer expectations for what businesses could do for them with a more digital experience rapidly increased because of this. The average customer now demands much more from a digital transaction. Companies want personalized experiences throughout the whole consumer journey

now that they have access to their personal data. (Balis, 2021) Developing trustworthy relationships with clients is essential. For instance, advertising establishes a brand promise, which is subsequently fulfilled through the product, service, and customer experience. This research supports the fact that almost all respondents agree with social media being the most effective communication method with customers.

The number of social media users worldwide increased from around 3.4 billion in 2019 to 3.78 billion in 2021, an increase of 11% from 2019 and 2021. Social media evolved into a haven where users could escape the chaos of reality. The number of people using social media increased, and so did interaction on some platforms. Marketers' average interaction rates on Instagram climbed by almost 6% in 2020. The pandemic in particular caused TikTok, a well-known platform for short videos, to see exponential growth. Leslie Green, senior social media strategy manager at HubSpot, says that during the pandemic, a big platform shift occurred in that tastemakers and culture movers were born on TikTok - not Instagram. With its short-form, personal, and genuine video content, TikTok removed the hyper-filtered veil covering social media. With a presence on TikTok anyone can be found, partly due to its For You Page. Because they were able to produce material that spoke sensitively to people's real-life experiences and emotions, many start-ups in the past year have flourished. (Forsey, 2022) In earlier research in the literature review, it is stated that hospitality experiences can be delivered to consumers seamlessly through social media. It is proven here with results from business owners that they have great ease in using tools like Instagram, Facebook and Tiktok to educate customers on their products and encourage customers to share photos, videos and experiences following their visit.

In above research Kumar & Syed (2022) share that the hospitality sector has had to learn new skills in order to provide a high-quality and seamless travel experience. According to Liu (2023) previous research confirms that social media has a significant effect in the perception of a destination and in the travel intentions of tourists. Even though the tourist and hospitality industries are struggling, researchers have shown a strong link between travel decisions and an increase in social media searches during the pandemic. They discovered a rise in the use of social media as a key resource for behaviours involving finding new products, finding information, comparing products, and purchase decisions. As part of their marketing strategy, travel and tourism businesses are increasingly concentrating more than ever on social networks and digital channels to engage directly with their clients. During the COVID-19 pandemic,

consumers spend more time on social media sites, which has increased their influence over how customers make decisions. The findings of Liu (2023) study revealed that restrictions on overseas travel as well as more free time during lockdowns led to a considerable rise in the frequency of searches. Social media is now frequently used for travel related purposes. This research also supports the overwhelming response over 90% of respondents agreeing that digital marketing has been very effective in attracting tourists and traffic to sites post Covid.

In relation to Almansour (2022) research in the above literature review, start-ups needed to be creative and take on fresh strategies to survive following the pandemic. With the analysis of the survey results it is evident that businesses have been successful in building new communication techniques, creating pages on social media platforms and building long lasting relationships with customers. According to recent studies, the keys to recovery are innovation and digital transformation. Pachucki (2022) details the use of social media communication (SMC) has "emerged as a game changer" for travel destinations. The advantages of SMC have been extensively reported, including the development and restoration of destination image, the communication of destination brand personality via social media posts, the spread of knowledge and the promotion of destination goods and services, the development of consumer-brand relationships, and the gathering and analysis of user-generated content. Prior research have examined the success of company-generated and user-generated material and looked more closely at how social media affects customers' information search and travel behavior. (Pachucki, 2022)

Where there are no personal interactions, academics and marketers are constantly seeking for the most effective means of online brand communication to develop trust. Customers and marketers alike find the distinctive qualities of online social media networks, such as friendliness, engagement, and personalisation, essential for communicating brand information and using customer data to create high-quality brand partnerships. Marmat (2021) states that it is true that businesses have distinctive qualities that enable them to operate as the consumer's companion; as a result, if the quality of interrelationships is maintained, brands have the capacity to develop strong bonds to maintain relationships that last. According to a survey, providing material alone won't be enough to get customers' attention if brand websites don't include options to engage with them. Due to its interactive elements that let users engage and interact, Facebook and Instagram pages were deemed to be more appealing and attractive for communication. (Marmat, 2021)

New technology

The next set of questions asks about both existing and new technologies adopted by workplaces post Covid. The first question related to this theme asks what tools have been introduced and if these tools benefit the staff and customers to help their working day run smoother. 70.6% of respondents now use social media in their business. 64.7% of respondents have online menus available, 35.3% of respondents facilitate online reservations, 29.4% of respondents have an online ordering system in place and 35.3% use QR code technology. 88.2% of respondents agree that these technologies benefit the business and contribute positively to the day-to-day running's. These questions are evident in proving [Almansour](#) (2022) earlier research, which shares that incorporating technology has been the most important COVID success factor for restaurants. (QR) codes and digital menus are two popular examples of technology integration.

A respondent noted that having all information accessible via social media helps with customers expectations before visiting and also if their dietary requirements are catered for. This makes the ease in gaining this information quickly and a more seamless experience while visiting. It is also noted that the use of ipads in cafes and restaurants makes things more efficient with transferring the information to kitchen staff automatically. Furthermore, there is no need for customers to call in order to book a table, this is made possible with online reservations where there is instant confirmation of dates and times without the need of staff's time and energy. This is noted in [Almansour](#) (2022) previous research, to avoid lengthy wait times, online table booking has been a huge advantage that has emerged since the pandemic.

The following questions asks how effective a number of digital technologies are in increasing customer traffic and satisfaction. The use of social media sites, business websites, reservation platforms and review platforms were rated 1-5 with one being the least effective and five being the most effective. Over half of respondents (52.9%) rated social media sites as extremely effective. In addition, over half of respondents (58.8%) rated review platforms such as TripAdvisor and Google reviews as extremely effective. 41.2% of respondents rated reservation platforms as extremely effective and finally 35.3% of respondents rated business websites as extremely effective. In the last question posed to hospitality SMEs, they are asked on their belief of new technologies such as robotics and virtual reality being welcomed into the industry post Covid. 64.7% of respondents agreed with this statement and 35.3% of respondents did not.

One of the trends noticed throughout this theme is the movement from a business website to a social media page. While some businesses still use websites, they are becoming less essential in providing information to customers. This is seen above where social media sites are ranked more effective than business websites in today's world. Another trend noticed is the reaction to new technology being welcomed in the industry post Covid. While this area is not fully established in Ireland yet, there is a positive result that technology such as robotics and virtual reality may be useful for Irish businesses in the future. Robotics used for deliveries and information systems powered by augmented reality can potentially be the most useful in this industry.

Discussion and conclusion

In earlier research, Bajkó N, Fülöp Z, Pércsi KN (2022) the majority of SMEs did not even engage in targeted marketing, which, before the impact of covid, did not have a negative impact on the businesses. As a result, the start-ups had to switch to digital marketing since people had low trust in start-ups' ability to adhere to the required health and safety standards compared to more extensive, established franchises. Furthermore, Almansour (2022) previously stated that most food and beverage start-ups found it difficult to adopt to digital marketing. The majority of start-ups had very little knowledge of internet marketing. It was difficult during the pandemic due to a lack of technological knowledge required to plan and carry out marketing campaigns that would draw in customers.

However, during the pandemic, businesses soon started to reap the benefits of using social media sites like Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp to remain in touch with customers and maintain relationships. Rojas (2023) suggests that through these contacts, businesses were able to quickly adjust to changing client needs by altering their internal procedures or sales channels. Numerous empirical research has supported the positive effect of social media use on businesses' ability to innovate. This is proven that the use of social networking sites affects organizations' innovation performance favourably through analysis of an international sample of SMEs. It has been discovered that the adoption of digital tools like social media had an encouraging effect on corporate innovation.

In accordance with this study, it focused on a much smaller sample of Irish SMEs. This research also proved that social media gave businesses increased innovation and new ideas to get themselves known. Business performance levels were increased with new tools for enhanced productivity. An unexpected outcome identified in the survey was the interest in upcoming technology like artificial intelligence and augmented reality among Irish SMEs. It was not expected that over half of respondents would welcome this idea. With the social aspect of hospitality firms such as cafes, restaurants and pubs, customers enjoy engaging in conversations with staff to communicate their needs. This contributes to ensuring staff can ensure a welcoming atmosphere and positive dining experience. It can be said that robotics and chat bots can eliminate this personal touch. If this research was to be carried out again, it would be helpful to include a mixed methods analysis approach. For the survey question regarding new technology being an unexpected outcome it may be interesting to gain a better understanding of individuals opinions and views by conducting both surveys and interviews.

With the market of those employed in hospitality SMEs being so niche, it was difficult to gather a large amount of survey respondents.

Overall, the research question was answered with a positive response to the impact of digital marketing on hospitality SMEs post Covid. This is seen through the main theme of focus throughout the analysis being the endless number of advantages that digital marketing brings to hospitality SMEs post Covid. The advantages certainly outweigh the disadvantages with the benefits and opportunities that can arise with some simple techniques. These techniques align with how customers now make decisions on where they might spend a big occasion or simply a catch up with family or friends. This is a win for businesses as it is low cost and allows for personalisation. From the survey conducted and the overall research it is essential in drawing in new potential customers and tourists from abroad. It is convenient for customers to access information in any time zone. With adjusting to the new times we live in, businesses are not delaying this digital approach.

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