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Reserach Article

EXAMINATION OF DIGITAL MARKETING PERFORMANCES OF THERMAL HOTELS: THE CASE OF TÜRKİYE

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Abstract

The most used methods in the marketing of touristic products in recent years are online applications such as websites and social media applications. Businesses reach both current and potential customers more rapidly and easily through their digital media applications. In this study, the websites and social media applications of thermal hotel businesses with tourism operation certificate operating in Türkiye were examined by content analysis model. Within the scope of the study, the websites and social media applications of 84 tourism business certified thermal hotels were investigated. In the study, 10 themes and 69 sub-themes for thermal hotels were determined and their performances were evaluated. Findings show that the highest performance of the thermal hotel establishments with tourism operation certificates is the Service Provided Features (67.85%) and the lowest service is the Sales Promotion Tools (20.84%). The overall performance of thermal hotel establishments with tourism operation certificate was evaluated as moderate with 46.33%. Findings for sub-themes of the study have been shown as tables respectively.

Keywords: Tourism, Thermal Hotels, Social Media, Digitalization, Marketing

Introduction

Developments in information and communication technologies have created significant changes in the lives of individuals. These technological developments, especially in the tourism sector, have created changes in the structures of businesses and have also affected the behavior of tourists (Egger, Lei, & Wassler, 2020). This rapid development in information and communication technologies has led the tourism sector to become global. And businesses have revised their marketing strategies due to these developments. They have initiated the implementation of digital marketing strategies and have started to integrate their systems accordingly. Although these emerging changes pose threats to businesses, they have also brought many opportunities. In addition, it has also caused transformations in hotel marketing paradigmas. Digitalization in the world arena has an impact on both the growth of businesses and the increase in market share. Hotels use digital tools such as mobile applications, websites, and social media to reach new customers, develop new services, increase revenue, enhance operational efficiency and consequently. However, these actions are still not used sufficiently by businesses (Sharma, Sharma, and Chaudhary, 2020).

The effects of events such as technological developments, pandemic and quick changes around the globe reveal the needs of societies and industries to cope with such uncertainties and changes. Volatile, dynamic, , and time-sensitive sectors such as tourism must react fast and effectively to emerging threats and challenges to continue their operations. Digitalization and technology are important due to the fact that they help countries, sectors, and businesses to come through important challenges. For this reason, digitalization has increased drastically in many industries over the years. In addition, digital technologies were used by changing business models to create more efficient and profitable processes and to create opportunities that generate more value. Perhaps most importantly, there have been changes in the transition to digitalization, the way hotels analyze information, interact with their customers and conduct delivery processes (Hadjielias et al., 2022).

The purpose of this study to examine the mobile applications and websites and of thermal hotel businesses certified by the Ministry of Tourism operating in Türkiye in terms of digital marketing. The performance evaluation of social media applications and the websites of hotel businesses would be made and their strengths and weaknesses will be explored be this study. It is aimed that with the results to be revealed, hotels would realize their deficiencies and have opportunities to improve themselves in this direction.

Conceptual Framework

The internet, one of the most effective means of accessing information, is an important part of today's life. With the rapid developments in technology, it has become very easy to reach a fast internet connection. As a result of these developments, the internet has started to take place in many areas of our lives, from education to entertainment, shopping, and communication. Websites are among the applications that people use most on the internet. There is a large number of internet-based software developed, including smartphone applications; however, users mostly prefer to access websites via web browsers (Delen and Abdüsselam, 2015). Developments in information technologies have led to a change in the understanding of management in the tourism sector. The use of technology in hotel businesses has become a critical strategy in increasing both competition and the performance of the business. Therefore, hotel businesses should follow technological developments to gain an advantage over their competitors and to maintain the existence of the business, and these developments should be adapted to businesses quickly. Hotel businesses have started to adapt to this environment, especially with the use of the internet, and risks that may arise in the future are minimized in this way (Bayram and Yaylı, 2009).

Hotel businesses move their target markets abroad and try to gain customers from all over the world. Customers get information about the hotel businesses that they will visit on vacation from their websites. Instead of traditional information sources such as brochures and catalogs, customers access the information of the business they will stay on from their websites. They also make the booking process through these websites. Therefore, hotel businesses should create a website that meets the needs of their potential customers (Ateş and Boz, 2015). Hotel businesses that want to reach target audiences in various parts of the world should keep the standards of their online marketing activities high and bring their websites to international levels. Although these standards vary according to the economic, political, and geographical conditions of the hotel businesses, they should be followed at a significant level in terms of marketing activities (Maksüdünov, 2007).

Yeung and Law (2006) examined the websites of hotel businesses in five categories. These categories are language, appearance, graphics, information structure, user interface, and navigation. Zafiropoulos and Vrana (2006), on the other hand, applied six information dimensions which are information facilities, guest contact information, reservation/price information, surrounding area information, management of the website, and company profile. Baloğlu and Pekcan (2006) examined the website designs and internet marketing practices of 139 hotel businesses, and, as evaluation criteria, they designated 45 features under the main headings, which are interaction, orientation, functionality, and site marketing features, and they revealed that 60% of hotel businesses embody their services by using hotel and room pictures. Eryılmaz and Zengin (2014), on the other hand, examined the Facebook pages of boutique hotels and determined that information about the destination, average air temperature values, exchange rates, and applications specific to followers were missing.

Adukaite et al (2014) examined the mobile apps of hotel businesses and found that the most frequently used contents were restaurant menu, information about the hotel's location, and rooms. Chen et al (2015) found in their research that reservation and hotel information services are the most frequently used mobile application content. Li, Wang, and Yu (2015) revealed that hotels do not use their websites effectively in terms of digital marketing and that the only purpose of using websites is to inform. Ercan (2020) examined the hotels' websites in Alanya and determined that the hotel businesses are insufficient in terms of public relations, poor at sales promotion and mobile features. In the same study, information about the services offered at the businesses was also evaluated. According to Yücel and İnan (2020), the title of the hotel and its logo attracts more attention while the extensions such as Home, About Us, Our Rooms, Facilities, Gallery, Restaurants, Meeting Rooms, SPA, Reservation, Contact Us on the web pages do not attract much attention. Özışık, Yapıcı, and Özden (2021) revealed that the web pages of most of the hotel businesses in Samsun are not up-to-date; however, they are compatible with mobile devices and most of the businesses use Facebook and Instagram. Gençer and Ceylan (2022) examined the websites of hotel businesses operating in the province of Kütahya, and it was revealed that the highest performance of the hotel businesses with tourism operation certificates was social media tools, while the lowest service was the features of offering different language options.

Method

The purpose of this study to examine the mobile applications and websites and of thermal hotel businesses certified by the Ministry of Tourism operating in Türkiye in terms of digital marketing. In parallel with this purpose, the content analysis model, one of the qualitative data collection methods was used. The social media accounts and websites of hotel businesses such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter were examined according to the defined themes and sub-themes. The research conducted by Ercan (2020) was used to define the themes and sub-themes. Content analysis was conducted according to 10 themes and 69 sub-themes defined in the mentioned study. The themes are sales promotion tools, contact information, different language options, public relations tools, direct sales and marketing tools, social media tools, online promotion tools, information about the services offered, information about the additional service, and mobile services. Performance evaluations for the websites of hotel businesses were completed according to Table 1.

Table 1: Value Ranges and Performance Levels of Hotels

Value Range (%)	Performance Level
0-19.99	Poor
20.00-39.99	Insufficient
40.00-59.99	Medium
60.00-79.99	Good
80.00-100	Excellent

Source: Ercan, 2020.

According to the Ministry of Culture and Tourism website data, as of 01.08.2022, 91 thermal hotel businesses are licensed with tourism operation certificates (Ministry of Culture and Tourism). It was understood that seven thermal hotel businesses did not have websites and social media applications. For this reason, the study was carried out with 84 hotels in total. The study is limited to the hotels licensed with tourism operation certificates in Türkiye, their social media accounts and their websites. The data used in the study are limited to the ones could be found on social media and web between the 1st of August 2022 and the 25th of September 2022. Since the data used in the study are obtained from public social media applications and websites, there is no need for ethical committee approval.

Results

In this section, the data on the social media accounts and websites of 84 thermal hotels licensed with tourism operation certificates in Türkiye were categorized under themes and sub-themes.

Table 2. Sales Promotion Tools

	Available		Not Available	
	f	%	f	%
Sweepstakes	1	1.19	83	98.81
Competitions	1	1.19	83	98.81
Gifts	6	7.14	78	92.86
Promotions	23	27.38	61	72.62
Campaigns	37	44.05	47	55.95
Discounts	37	44.05	47	55.95
Average		**20.84**		**79.16**

In Table 2, sales promotion tools of thermal hotel businesses are presented. When the websites of thermal hotel businesses are considered, it has been revealed that the most used sales promotion tools are Campaigns (44.05%) and Discounts (44.05%). It has also been realized that businesses rarely give place to sweepstakes and competition activities. And it has been determined that the deficiency rate of promotional tools is 79.16% on average.

Table 3. Communication Tools

	Available		Not Available	
	f	%	f	%
FAQS	6	7.14	78	92.86
Live Assistant	15	17.86	69	82.14
General Call Information	39	46.43	45	53.57
Navigation	58	69.05	26	30.95
Map Location Information	62	73.81	22	26.19
Direct Message Form	64	76.19	20	23.81

Phone/Fax No	74	88.10	10	11.90
E-mail	75	89.29	9	10.71
Hotel Address	75	89.29	9	10.71
Average		**61.91**		**38.09**

The data results for the communication tools of the thermal hotels are given in Table 3. According to the research, it has been understood that the most used communication tools are e-mail and Hotel Address tabs (89.29%). It has also been realized that the least used communication tool is FAQS (Frequently Asked Questions). Considering the average, thermal hotel businesses use internet tabs for communication tools at a rate of 61.91%. The rate of deficiencies, on the other hand, is 38.09%.

Table 4. Offering Different Language Options

	Available		Not Available	
	f	**%**	**f**	**%**
French	3	3.57	81	96.43
Arabic	6	7.14	78	92.86
Russian	16	19.05	68	80.95
German	17	20.24	67	79.76
English	53	63.10	31	36.90
Average		**22.62**		**77.38**

Considering Table 4, it is seen that thermal hotel businesses are insufficient in offering different language options. A total of 5 languages are provided at 84 businesses, while English (63.10%) is the only language offered at most businesses. Only a limited number of hotels have websites in languages other than English. The overall performance rate of businesses in offering different language options is 22.62%.

Table 5. Public Relations Tools

	Available		Not Available	
	f	**%**	**f**	**%**
Professional Organization/Association Membership	3	3.57	81	96.43
Time Share Vacation System	4	4.76	80	95.24
Career	8	9.52	76	90.48
Quality Policy	16	19.05	68	80.95
Awards/Regions	16	19.05	68	80.95
Live Assistant	17	20.24	67	79.76
Mission/Vision	22	26.19	62	73.81
Information About Destination	45	53.57	39	46.43
Information About Business	74	88.10	10	11.90
Average		**27.11**		**72.89**

The results for the public relations tools on the web pages of the thermal hotel businesses are given in Table 5. It has been determined that a significant part of the businesses use the information about the business (88.10%) tab. The second most frequently used tab is information about the destination, with a rate of 53.57%. It has been understood that the poorest information about public relations on the websites of thermal hotel businesses is the Professional Organizations/Associations Membership and Time Share Vacation System. Considering the average in public relations tools, the rate of information provided is 27.11%, while the rate of deficiencies is 72.89%.

Table 6. Direct Sales and Marketing Tools

	Available		Not Available	
	f	**%**	**f**	**%**
Extra Paid Services	36	42.86	48	57.14
Comments on the Hotel	52	61.90	32	38.10
Customer Relations Call Center	53	63.10	31	36.90
Free Services	59	70.24	25	29.76
Room Prices	60	71.43	24	28.57
Online Booking	79	94.04	5	5.96
Average		**67.26**		**32.74**

In Table 6, direct sales and marketing tools of thermal hotel businesses are presented. On their web pages, businesses mostly gave place to online booking (94.04%), room prices (71.43%), and free services (70.24%). Extra paid services (57.14%) are the feature that is not included most frequently by businesses. When the averages are considered, it has been revealed that direct sales and marketing tools are included in the businesses" websites at a rate of 67.26%.

Table 7. Social Media Tools

	Available		Not Available	
	f	**%**	**f**	**%**
YouTube	24	28.57	60	71.43
Twitter	27	32.14	57	67.86
Instagram	63	75.00	21	25.00
Facebook	74	88.10	10	11.90
Average		**55.95**		**44.05**

The social media tools of thermal hotels are given in Table 7. It has been determined that businesses use Facebook (88.10%) and Instagram (75.00%) the most. Twenty-four businesses have YouTube accounts, and twenty-seven businesses have Twitter accounts. When the average is examined, it has been understood that social media tools are used at a rate of 55.95%.

Table 8. Online Promotional Tools

	Available		Not Available	
	f	**%**	**f**	**%**
Virtual Tour	7	8.33	77	91.67
Promotional Videos	31	36.90	53	63.10
Promotional Texts	78	92.86	6	7.14
Photographs of the Business	82	97.62	2	2.38
Average		**58.92**		**41.08**

In Table 8, the online promotion tools of thermal hotels are available. It has been determined that hotels include photographs of the business on their websites at a rate of 97.62%. This is followed by promotional texts with a rate of 92.86%. It has been evaluated that businesses give minimal space to virtual tour and promotional videos. When the averages are considered, it is seen that the businesses include online promotional tools with a rate of 58.92% on their websites.

Table 9. Information about the Service Provided

	Available		Not Available	
	f	**%**	**f**	**%**
In/Out-Hotel Shopping Opportunities and Shops	16	19.05	68	80.95
Disabled Room	40	47.62	44	52.38
Animation and Entertainment Activities	45	53.57	39	46.43
Sports Fields	48	57.14	36	42.86
Fitness Center	50	59.52	34	40.48
Game and Activity Hall	54	64.29	30	35.71
Meeting/Organization	57	67.86	27	32.14
Spa/Wellness/Turkish Bath	67	79.76	17	20.24
Pools and Aquapark	68	80.95	16	19.05
Information about Food and Beverage Service	69	82.14	15	17.86
Services Provided in the Rooms	74	88.10	10	11.90
Photographs of the Services Provided	75	89.29	9	10.71
Room Features	78	92.86	6	7.14
Average		**67.85**		**32.15**

Table 9 contains data on the information about the services in thermal hotels. It has been determined that the businesses mainly include the room features with a rate of 92.86% in the information about the service provided. This is followed by the services provided in the rooms and photographs of the services offered at a rate of 89.29%. The services that businesses mention on their websites the least under this title are shopping opportunities and stores (19.05%), disabled rooms (47.62%), and animation and entertainment activities (53.57%). On the websites of thermal hotel businesses, data regarding the information about the service provided are included at a rate of 67.85%.

Table 10. Information about the Additional Service

	Available		Not Available	
	f	%	f	%
VIP Services	21	25.00	63	75.00
Car Rental	21	25.00	63	75.00
Market	23	27.38	61	72.62
Childcare Services	28	33.33	56	66.67
Health Services	28	33.33	56	66.67
Ironing/Dry Cleaning	42	50.00	42	50.00
Car park	55	65.48	29	34.52
Satellite TV	68	80.95	16	19.05
Wi-Fi	71	84.52	13	15.48
Average		**47.22**		**52.78**

When the information about the additional service of the thermal hotel businesses is examined, it is understood that they mainly give information about wi-fi (84.52%), satellite TV (80.95%), and car park (65.48%) on their websites. VIP services and car rental services are the least mentioned services on the websites. Considering the average, it has been determined that thermal hotel businesses include information about the additional service on their websites at a rate of 47.22%.

Table 11. Mobile Services

	Available		Not Available	
	f	%	f	%
Mobile Application Routing	4	4.76	80	95.24
Mobile Application Promotion	7	8.33	77	91.67
Mobile Communication Tools	45	53.57	39	46.43
Mobile Compatible Website	57	67.86	27	32.14
Average		**33.63**		**66.37**

Table 11 includes features for mobile services on the websites of thermal hotels. According to the table, it has been revealed that 67.86% of businesses use mobile-compatible websites. It is understood that the least seen features on the businesses' websites are mobile application routing and mobile application promotion. Considering the average, it has been determined that mobile services are included with a rate of 33.63% but insufficient with a rate of 66.37%.

Table 12. Overall Performance Evaluation

	Performance Level	Performance Status
Sales Promotion Tools	20.84	Insufficient
Offering Different Language Options	22.66	Insufficient
Public Relations Tools	27.11	Insufficient
Mobile Services	33.63	Insufficient
Information about the Additional Service	47.22	Medium
Social Media Tools	55.95	Medium
Online Promotional Tools	58.92	Medium
Communication Tools	61.91	Good
Direct Sales and Marketing Tools	67.26	Good
Information about the Service Provided	67.85	Good
Overall Performance Average	**46.33**	**Medium**

The data for the overall performance evaluations of thermal hotels are given in Table 12. Considering the businesses' highest overall performance values, the first is information about the service provided (67.85%), the second is direct sales and marketing tools (66.18%), and the third is communication tools (61.91%). The three lowest overall performance values are, on the other hand, sales promotion tools, offering different language options, and public relations tools, with ratios of 20.84%, 22.66%, and 27.11%, respectively. And it has been determined that the overall performance of thermal hotels is at a moderate level, with a rate of 46.33%.

Conclusion and Discussion

In recent years, tourism businesses have been maintaining their sales and marketing activities in digital marketing. Businesses actively use their websites and create business accounts in almost all social media applications. While the frequency of consumers' use of traditional promotional tools such as television and newspapers is low, mobile applications are used more. And tourism businesses have had to adapt themselves

to this change. Due to this change, tourism businesses reach their customers more quickly and efficiently while simultaneously promoting and selling the products and services they want. Especially social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram provide measurable data to businesses for the sales and promotions processes. Consumer opinions, suggestions, and complaints about products and services can be learned quickly in this way. Türkiye has made significant progress in thermal tourism in recent years. The investments made in direct proportion to this progress persist. In line with Türkiye's targets, websites and social media accounts are crucial in reaching the right target audiences for thermal hotel businesses. Creating well-structured and planned websites and social media accounts that meet target audiences' expectations is among the priorities of the mentioned development and progress. This study examined the websites and social media accounts of thermal hotel businesses in Türkiye. The performances of thermal hotel businesses on digital marketing activities were evaluated. According to the Ministry of Tourism data, there are ninety-one thermal hotel businesses in Türkiye. As a result of the research, it was understood that seven businesses did not have websites and social media accounts. Therefore, the study was completed with eighty-four businesses.

It has been determined that thermal hotel businesses are inadequate in sales promotion tools. The overall performance, on the other hand, is 20.84%. While the rate of businesses using campaigns and discounts is 44.05% (thirty-seven businesses), it has been realized that only one business includes activities such as sweepstakes and competitions on its website. These results are the same as the research conducted by Gençer and Ceylan (2022) and Ercan (2020). While thermal tourism businesses prioritize campaigns and discounts, they do not engage in other sales promotion activities such as gifts, promotions, sweepstakes, and competitions. However, promotion activities such as sweepstakes, campaigns, and competitions are of great importance, especially in attracting potential customers to businesses. Consumers show interest in such applications and recommend these businesses to other consumers.

Thermal hotel businesses are seen to be at a sufficient level regarding communication tools. It has been determined that the FAQs (7.14%) and the live assistant (17.86%) are used the least under this heading. It has also been understood that 89.29% of businesses include information such as hotel addresses and e-mail on their websites. These results show similar results to the study of Chen et al. (2015). Another significant result of the research is related to the different language options of businesses. 63.10% (53 establishments) of thermal hotel businesses have an English language option on their websites. Seventeen businesses, on the other hand, offer a German language option. Apart from these two languages, French, Russian, and Arabic language options are also among the languages available on the websites of the businesses. There must be language options on the websites. Foreign tourists should not be ignored in a country that wants to develop, especially in health and thermal tourism. Since the number of tourists coming to T from countries such as Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, Russia, and Ukraine has increased recently, different language options must be available on the websites. Hotel businesses should appeal to their customers with the most spoken languages worldwide, such as English, German, Russian, Arabic, French, and Spanish.

It has been determined that thermal hotel businesses are insufficient in terms of public relations tools. Although seventy-four businesses include information about themselves on their websites, they do not include a significant amount of information about the sub-headings such as career (8 businesses), quality policies (16 businesses), live assistant (17 businesses), and mission/vision (22 businesses). These results are similar to the studies of Adukaite et al. (2014) and Gençer and Ceylan (2022). For customers who visit websites and want to get information, live assistant service should be provided during working hours, even if not 24/7. In this way, it will be possible for customers visiting the website to receive information and persuade directly by the personnel.

According to the results of the research, thermal hotel businesses are considered to be in a sufficient condition regarding direct sales and marketing tools. 94.04% of the businesses (79 businesses) have integrated the online booking system into their websites. It has been determined that there is sufficient information in other sub-themes under this theme. These results reveal similar results to the studies carried out by Özışık, Yapıcı, and Özden (2021). Thermal hotel businesses use these applications that will minimize intermediary agencies and provide direct contact with customers. Businesses offer data such as room prices and free services so that customers can learn about fees. Therefore, they can perform the sales process with the online booking option on the website.

The use of social media by thermal hotel businesses was also examined in the research. It has been understood that businesses use Facebook (74 businesses) and Instagram (63 businesses) applications the most. Integration with social media accounts, apart from websites, is an important marketing strategy for businesses to reach

their target audiences and convey information to potential customers via mobile devices. Reaching customers' mobile devices directly instead of waiting for them to visit the businesses' websites will increase the sales figures. Photographs, promotional texts, and promotional videos are adequately included on the websites of the businesses. The least used application in online promotion tools, on the other hand, is virtual tours.

The theme in which thermal hotel businesses are the best in terms of performance is the information about the service provided. On their websites, businesses allocate sufficient space to the rooms' features, the photographs of the services provided, and the services offered in the rooms. These results reveal the same outcomes as the studies carried out by Baloğlu and Pekcan (2006), Adukaite et al. (2014), Ercan (2020), and Gençer and Ceylan (2022). This shows that businesses promote their essential services at the best level and try to embody their services. In this way, customers obtain detailed information about the service they will receive, and the products and services they purchase are promoted at the best possible level.

When the research results obtained in terms of overall performance are examined, it has been determined that 46.33% of the businesses exhibit a medium level of performance. The three themes in which thermal hotel businesses perform best are information about the service provided (67.85%), direct sales and marketing tools (67.26%), and communication tools (61.91%). The lowest performances of the businesses, on the other hand, were on sales promotion tools (20.84%), offering different language options (22.66%), and public relations tools (27.11%). When the businesses' poor themes are examined, it is seen that they work actively in sales and marketing, but they are insufficient in sales promotion. The reason for this is thought to be sales as the primary target of newly established hotel businesses. In addition, it is understood that businesses that have been serving for many years are insufficient in creating customer loyalty. Moreover, it is a negative situation that companies offering high service quality do not have different language options other than Turkish on their websites. The reason may be that the target audience consists of domestic tourists, and there is no qualified personnel to deal with foreign customers.

In the future, studies should be carried out by academics to examine the performance of the websites of thermal hotel businesses, and it should be revealed to what extent the shortcomings of the businesses are eliminated. In addition, the competencies of the personnel working in these businesses in digital marketing should also be examined. It should be investigated whether the deficiencies are due to personnel or cost-oriented.

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