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The significance of the digitalization and online communication tools used by five-star restaurants in Bulgaria

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ABSTRACT

The changes undergone by the tourism industry in the past four years have dramatically affected its way of doing business and communicating with customers. A trend in this process is the penetration of digital technologies and their use as a communication channel and tool of influence. A new way of interacting with tourists has arisen, accompanied by adaptive and innovative business strategies. Bearing in mind these structural and functional changes, the present study aims to analyse one of their aspects, namely the significance of the usage of various online communication tools in the restaurant sector in Bulgaria. The assumption that the interactivity of restaurant websites helps to increase interest and attract visitors, thereby stimulating development, is investigated.

The study focuses on five-star restaurant websites and outlines specific insights and challenges related to digital experiences. Through the use of qualitative and quantitative methods, new knowledge is generated for the digitalization of the high-end restaurant sector in Bulgaria and its importance to business success. The results are indicative of the need to rethink the development policies of these restaurants, especially as regards the follow-up and integration of new approaches to operating.

KEYWORDS

tourism, digitalization, restaurant business, online communication tools

1. Introduction

The last 50 years have seen great economic progress, significant welfare improvements and technological advancement worldwide. Revealing these changes, all sectors of social and economic life have been affected by the digitalization process. Its manifestations are indisputably significant and have an increasingly relevant meaning, giving a fundamental character to the change it has caused. The fact is that digital technologies have completely reshaped ways of life, communication, business and social relationships. As a result of the inherent evolutionary development and, to a large extent, the global COVID-19 pandemic, the tourism industry is completely transforming its communications approach to real and potential

consumers. It has moved into digital space and is considering the challenge of being intriguing to quite different consumers. New communities are emerging, especially in the online reality which is becoming more and more fascinating and sets the direction for decision making in everyday life (Gugueva, 2012). In this new reality, atypical forms of communication have emerged, including in the tourism industry. In this different market environment, all the businesses in the industry are faced with the need to transform themselves and their familiar strategies into new and innovative models for interacting with consumers.

In view of these transformation trends, the present study points to an analysis of the penetration of digital technologies into the restaurant business in Bulgaria. The focus is on the current state of online communication tools especially in high-end establishments: five-star restaurants. The choice made is justified in the context of changes and the vulnerability of the tourism industry of Bulgaria where the series of crises in recent years has significantly affected the tourism sector and rearranged the goals of many market players. The process was also affected by the COVID pandemic, as a result of which many of the smaller and 1-, 2- and 3-star establishments closed or remained understaffed. However, new market niches have been created, with new preferences and expectations, in which, evident from the specifics of the Bulgarian situation, digitalization has created challenges for the restaurant business as a whole. Regarding this, based on a precise review of the data available online, it is found that, in fact in Bulgaria on a national level, the greatest information is available for high-category restaurant establishments. By region, mostly in urban areas of course, online information is also available for smaller establishments. This regional "fragmentation" is also the reason why the current study focuses on a total of 59 five-star restaurants, visible on a national level. Their websites have been studied in detail for the presence of different digital tools in order to define the extent of their usage and the number; names, type and location of the restaurants have been extracted from the Bulgarian *National tourist register* (Ministerstvo na Turizma, n.d.). The study, in fact, aims to prove the assumption that websites with a high degree of interactivity can increase interest and attract visitors. Additionally, it presumes that the interactivity of restaurant websites helps to create specific digital experiences that form positive associations in the minds of customers, thereby stimulating development.

Current research is a continuation of previous work (Stankova & Kaleychev, 2023), for the purpose of which the authors, based on published books, reviews and analyses, identify a set of nine tools that digitize information and content intended for tourism users. Kotler et al.'s (2017) publication is used as the main reference introducing the so-called "customer's new path" of digital experience and the following instruments are considered: chatbot, virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR), reservation application, inspiring story video, link for quick access to social networks, customer reviews, online location, virtual guide to the area and online blog. They are all thought of as main contact points on the customers' path to digitalizing their experience with the restaurants. The methodological assurance of the research relies on quantitative and qualitative analysis. With expectations to reveal the picture of digital confidence in the communication tools of high-end restaurants in Bulgaria, data has been extracted from the web. Together with other collected, summarized and analyzed knowledge, and based on expert analysis, they serve as a guideline for unveiling the direction of challenges and opportunities that can be expected within the sector strategic development.

2. Specifics of the digital tools studied

Undoubtedly, in the modern way of doing business, the restaurant industry is strongly influenced by digital technologies. Their inevitable implementation in practice transforms traditional business strategies operating effectively before, looking for opportunities to achieve a new competitive advantage associated with development that is thought of as sustainable. In this transformed reality, digital technologies and tools turn out to be essential components of the modern restaurant business. Logically, an assumption arises that the use of digitalization and related tools, facilitates and personalizes communication with potential customers and, in fact, positively affects the business performance of restaurants.

Following this direction of thought and expectation, the active websites of five-star restaurants in Bulgaria have been established, checked and researched, targeted with respect to the above set of digital tools.

Instruments such as those listed are characterized by electronic, and especially by computerized technologies (Steils & Hanine, 2019), and are actually defined as "programs, websites, applications and other Internet and computerized resources" (WalkMe, 2023, para. 1). It is well known that they "facilitate, enhance and execute digital processes and overall digitalisation efforts" (WalkMe, 2023, para. 1), which is why they are important for businesses that have set themselves up for transformation under the influence of digital trends, such as those in tourism. Examining the variety of opportunities, in many cases the attention of managers is directed towards the so-called "Big Five": digital tools owned by GAFAM (Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon and Microsoft) (WalkMe, 2023, para. 13).

Of course, the choice of a digital toolkit is of key importance and should be made in view of the goals pursued by the business. In the case of restaurants in Bulgaria in particular, one with an effect on both consumers and business was sought, which is why attention is directed to the following list:

1. Chatbot: depicting software or a computer program that simulates conversation using text or voice interaction usually over the Internet (Oxford University Press, n.d.). In most cases, it is an interested customer who seeks quick answers to questions which guide a decision, including on the occasion of consumption of certain goods and services.

   In recent years, mainly as a result of the strong computerization of business activities, business to customers (B2C) or business to business (B2B) interaction occurs frequently using chatbots in simple communication. In tourism, in restaurants chatbots are traditionally used to contribute to the higher efficiency of the sites, as well as to improve the quality of customer service (Stefanowicz, 2024). At the same time, chatbots enable the reduction of personnel costs as well as providing 24/7 service.

   Depending on their degree of complexity, chatbots are capable of holding a conversation of varying degrees of complexity in accordance with some basic characteristics of the needs of the users. While, according to the settings, they can monitor the behaviour and previous purchases of a given user, and on this basis offer answers and new buying suggestions.

   This undeniably interesting digital tool, as observations show, is able to present a menu, make reservations and take orders, answer frequently-asked questions, track order status, provide feedback, etc. In addition to the site of the restaurant, the chatbot can also be integrated into a messaging platform, according to the specifics of the location. And, in addition, it stimulates sales and satisfaction with the services offered, as well as effectively developing organizational policy for communication with potential customers. As many visitors expect restaurants to be reachable 24 hours a day, chatbots can be perceived as a response to their changing needs and growing expectations due to the ability to largely replace live contact.

2. Virtual reality (VR) or augmented reality (AR)

a) Virtual reality: by definition is a type of technology that allows users to perform actions in a digital environment, while generating feelings and sensations largely resembling real physical surroundings. Usually, this artificial environment created by computer technology, induces experience through sensory stimuli (such as views and sounds) provided by a digital device in 3D. As according to Beal (2024, para. 3) "the user feels as if they were in the real world – they experience and manipulate the environment perceived by devices known as headphones or a virtual reality helmet" (Iberdrola, n.d., para. 1). According to Bardi (2024), the most recognizable component of virtual reality is the head-mounted display (HMD), "technology that allows a user to carry out actions in a simulated three-dimensional (3D) digital environment yet feel as if they are immersed in a physical environment" (Beal, 2024, para. 1).

b) Augmented reality could be explained as "an enhanced version of the real world, achieved through the use of computer-generated digital information including visual, sound and other sensory elements" (Hayes, 2024, para. 1). Therefore, it is assumed that the added reality involves superimposing sensory information to improve the user experience. Its practical application is reflected in "image glazing, digital information and/or 3D models, adding real-time directions, inserting notations, changing colours and changing the appearance of the user or his environment through filters on Instagram, Snapchat and other applications" (Houston, 2020, para. 4). As Taco Bell did, for example, using AR in their 2020 campaign, integrating visuals within Instagram that allowed people to include their face directly in the middle of the dishes, becoming one with the taco or just being a taco (Taco Bell [@tacobell], n.d.).

   This type of technology makes it possible to improve the quality of the user experience, inducing an improvement of the quality of service and efficiency for the restaurants. In general, since VR contributes the simulation of different frames of mind and enhances customer experience, while boosting sales through the tactical approach of becoming a trend. However, VR together with AR are also tools to gamify the experience for the customers, as well as to embolden staff performance and loyalty. Virtual reality or augmented reality assist personnel in providing detailed information about the menu, the ingredients of dishes, possible allergens etc. Virtual reality or augmented reality technology can be used as well in training employees in an interactive way.

3. Reservation applications (booking engines): used in the restaurant industry to help streamline operations by allowing the automation of tasks such as online reservations, email and chat responses, customer notifications and reservation reminders. By itself, having a proper booking engine can go a long way in incentivizing consumers to spend more. Through this digital tool on the website, restaurants facilitate customers in organizing their dinner or event in a way matching their individual preferences. On the other hand, it is an important channel especially for customers to book and pay safely for the individual stages of their experience. The app also allows employee offloading: it can replace a real person or

save time taking inquiries via email or phone bookings; thus generating more free time for direct communication with the guests. Therefore using the digital reservation application improves business efficiency for restaurants and provides benefits for customers.

Such a digital booking system allows the collection of large data sets and helps management to be informed in real time about basic business parameters such as financial income and expenses, therefore it is perceived as a reference point for company planning and market positioning. Through the reservation app, restaurants could connect various social platforms, for example, Facebook, allows tourists to book with a similar hyperlink to the restaurant sites. Especially when traveling, it is particularly important for visitors (for a destination) to be informed in real time about dining options, availability and prices, as well as to make a reservation (SiteMinder, 2024).

4. Video of an inspiring story: according to Brenner (2023) using a story to connect the brand with customers, is one of the most popular marketing approaches and which is used in the modern restaurant industry too. Its main advantage is the initiation of an emotional connection with other people through co-experience. This effect serves as a basis for promotion as it retains the attention of real and potential web users. Expert team at TrainingAid.org in the article, *Destination storytelling to effectively promote local stories and engaging travel experiences* (2022), point out that an inspiring story is a

> means of conveying and interpreting experiences in a way that engages those you are sharing the story with. The sharing of experiences is most effectively done through characters – people with unique individual perspectives. And memorable stories have a plot that enriches the experience by illustrating such components as challenges, conflict and change (TrainingAid, 2022, para. 4).

At the same time, using an inspiring story video for a restaurant, creates a key competitive advantage, as it is associated with "stories of the local communities and their cultural traditions, stories told by expert local guides, and stories about the travellers themselves that become part of the travel experience" (TrainingAid, 2022, para. 2).

5. A link for quick access to social networks: as they are key tools for digital marketing and impact on real and potential tourists; traditionally, almost every website consists of a link for quick access to social networks. It could be used for different purposes, although in general it allows users to be informed about the restaurant, as well as encouraging them to share their experiences after a visit. As a result, they build trust based on real reviews and opinions.

Usually, the restaurant sector is presented on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and TikTok. Arun and Antony (2018), ascertain that Facebook is "the most popular among them with 1.55 billion users a month and more than 450 million users a day; 42% of them publish more travel-related content, than on any other topic" (p. 206). Of course, Instagram is no less significant as an impact factor and this impact is primarily on communication between business and consumers. Instagram attracts users by turning them into followers and is mostly used by young people in their 20s, who form a very active group. "You should follow the travel hashtags and create your own to maximize the popularity of your posts" (Tas, n.d., para. 14). Twitter, on the other hand, "numbers almost 320 million users, 32% of whom were born at the beginning of the century, and is another channel for selling with 37% of … users … buying from the brand that follows" (Arun & Antony, 2018, p. 206). However, in Twitter, the users can share information about travel and promotions, as well can initiate short but clear communication.

Social networks transform ways of building preference and loyalty. Tik Tok, for example, promotes the service in a fun way: "For the tourism industry, the era of brochures and billboards is over. The key to business success is the collection of social sharing, positive user reviews and customer satisfaction on social media" (Tas, n.d., para. 18). Therefore, the links for quick access to social networks on the websites of restaurants can be used to create unforgettable digital experiences, transforming and complementing the satisfaction of the customer's stay.

6. Customer reviews: found on various websites or social networks have a significant impact on the perceptions, preferences and actions of consumers.

Dharel (2020) considers customer reviews as "healthy discussions made on various platforms that influence and motivate someone's perception of an organization, brand or event" (p. 12). They also affect so-called "independent reservations" for restaurants, organized and operated entirely online. Traditionally, "Good reviews work as advertisements and encourage other users to buy this service or product. Negative reviews give them a chance to correct" (Schuckert et al., 2015, p. 3).

For the restaurant sector, consumer opinion is of particular importance for business effectiveness. Seemingly from a study cited by Dixon "In the United States, 62% of respondents stated that online customer reviews were very helpful" (Dixon, 2024, para. 2), as "people doubt everything they hear, all of what they read, and most of what they see" (Pinvidic, 2019, para. 6). Therefore, restaurants should be proactive in order to maintain customer satisfaction and encourage the sharing of positive reviews online.

7. Online location: is one of the most important digital tools used as a guide to finding a restaurant.

It is usually an integral part of the functionality of each site. Access to an exact online location can have an extremely positive or negative effect on the way customers will perceive the restaurant, for example. According to *Location tracking: The key to unlocking your audience's needs in marketing* (YOOSE, 2024, para. 1) "it has become an increasingly popular tool. By using location data, businesses can gain valuable insights into their customers' behavior and preferences". Also

Whether it is a map application like Google Maps or a navigation app like Waze, most people have likely used location tracking technology in some form or another. As this technology continues to evolve, businesses are finding new ways to use location data to better understand their customers (YOOSE, 2024, para. 1).

8. Virtual guide for the area: representing simulation of an existing location with the help of sequential videos or still images, as well as often integrating other multimedia elements like music, sound effects, floor plans, etc. (Webb, 2024). And, as Fredericks (2023, para. 5) adds "Viewers can access virtual tourism content using a virtual reality headset for the most immersive experience, but they can also usually view the content on a normal computer or even a mobile device".

While virtual experiences will never be a true replacement for real-life exploration, they have become a part of our daily lives, satisfying our need to travel in the short-term. As humans, we've adapted to a way of seeing the world virtually and I think it's a trend that will continue long term (Winderl, 2020, para. 9).

9. Online blog: defined as "a hybrid form of Internet communication, combining a column, an agenda and a directory, the term, also known as a «web diary», refers also to a frequently updated collection of short articles on various topics with links to additional resources" (Arimetrics, n.d., para. 1).

"Blogs are characterized by hypertextual-based navigation, with an abundance of multimedia content, the active participation of users (who can create profiles, evaluate records or create knowledge) and has a character, generally closer than that of other websites. Blogs publish articles categorized by date and categorize topics using tags" (Arimetrics, n.d., para. 2).

In tourism, when communicating to potential or real customers, the blog as a tool is highly preferred, mainly used in order to provide users with interesting facts, news and useful information, which in most cases are not entirely related to the specific activity. Also, the online blog is functionally suited to users who want to share their own experiences by posting in multimedia format. Thus, online blogs help to disseminate information in the case of restaurants, presenting them, their location and surroundings, and their offers.

Being strongly influenced or even dependent on digital technologies, restaurants nowadays enjoy novelties. Therefore, all the digital tools described here have their role in shaping the future of a business, its effectiveness and communication success with customers, and influencing their satisfaction as well as their activity. Considering the very nature of innovation and the capabilities of digital tools, it seems to be of great importance that restaurants use them actively and purposefully to present their characteristics and competitive advantages.

3. Methodology

For the purposes of this study, a mixed-method approach is used (Verhoeven, 2022) integrating observation, synthesis, expert techniques, web-based processes and comparison. Regarding the identified set of digital tools, data are collected and analysed applying the web mining method (Ivanov, 2016; Singh, 2024). The interview method is also applied and aimed at professionals working in the restaurant sector. The time frame of the research was the beginning of 2024 and was constructed in two stages: first extracting information directly from web documents and services, and web content using the technique of the 'decision tree' to gain insight into digitalization trends in the restaurant sector; and second following a web survey – systematizing a questionnaire and conducting interviews with marketing managers of five-star restaurants regarding the importance and usage of different digital tools in this sector in Bulgaria.

From a constructive point of view, the analysis is aimed at electronic media, namely the websites of the five-star restaurants in Bulgaria. However, in order to identify them, official information on the state of the restaurant sector in Bulgaria had been previously studied through that available on the websites of the Ministry of Tourism and the National Tourism Register (Ministerstvo na Turizma, n.d.).

The information on the websites of 59 existing five-star restaurants was analyzed in relation to the presented nine digital tools. Based on this information, the formal characteristics were compiled according to basic parameters, namely: volume of information, capacity of information, physical size, informativeness, etc. The following tools are used in the restaurants:

– VR/AR – Admiral, Braziers, Salini, Grand Primorets, Ambassador, Anelle;

– digital reservation app – Admiral, Kasa Boyana, Este, Anelle;
– video of inspiring story – Salini;
– social network link – Admiral, Salini, Monty, Kasa Boyana, The Revolutionary, Regency Club, Este, Anelle;
– customer review – Este, The White Lagoon;
– online location – Admiral, Salini, Monty, Kasa Boyana, Este, The White Lagoon;
– online blog – Este.

Figure 1. Number of digital tools available on five-star restaurant websites
Source: authors

4. RESEARCH DESIGN

For the selection of each of the 59 five-star restaurants, the National Tourism Register was referred to. The scope of the study is oriented according to the principle of information sufficiency and the availability of certain digital tools in the website for each of the investigated establishments.

Apparently from the collected data, on the basis of a total of 59 five-star restaurants, only on the websites of twelve of them is the presence of at least one of all nine digital tools detected. Their number is largest on the Este Restaurant's website (situated in the city of Sofia), where five digital tools are present. This restaurant definitely stands out against the backdrop of the high-end sector in the country, focusing its overall marketing policy and brand management on customer preferences and requirements, following current trends in digitalization. The second position is shared by two establishments: Admiral (Sveti Vlas) and Salini (Bourgas), whose websites operate four tools each. Casa Boyana and Anel (Sofia) offer three while Monti (Varna) and Byala Laguna (Kavarna) have no more than two. Thus, referring to the processed information, it can be seen that in most restaurants in Bulgaria, even in the high-end of the sector, no more than one digital mode of communicating with users is found on their sites.

In detail, the observations thus made are presented in Figure 1 and of all 59 restaurants covered by the study, none uses chatbot as a communication device. VR and AR are present on the websites of six and, in fact, is the second most widespread digital tool. A booking engine is available on the websites of four of the studied restaurants while a video of an inspiring story is only found on one.

It is noteworthy that the most preferred tool among the identified nine in the studied restaurants is the link for quick access to social networks which can be found on eight of the websites. Online location has a strong presence too and occurs on the websites of six. However the findings show that the customer review tool occurs only on two of the websites, and the online blog, is found on only one. The virtual guide is not used at all.
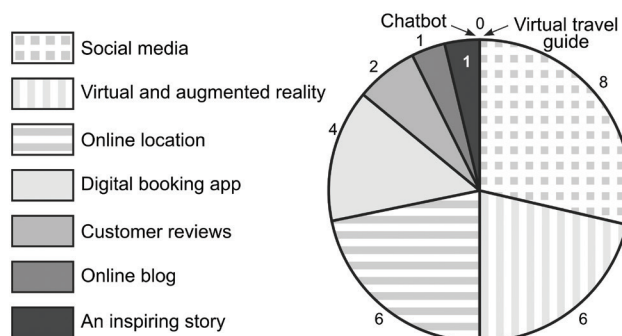
The reviewed five-star restaurants in Bulgaria are distinguished by their location. With this in mind, as well as in order to specify the degree of digitalization by location, the 59 restaurants are territorially identified as presented at Figure 2.
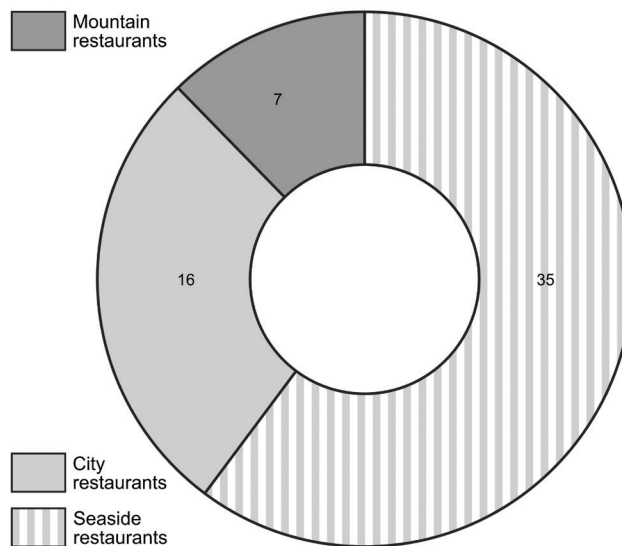

Figure 2. Number of restaurants studied in groups
Source: authors

The differentiation of these groups makes it possible to depict certain trends regarding digitalization in the high-end restaurant sector in Bulgaria, following the specifics of position, specialization and market orientation. Based on their location, the investigated 59 restaurants are divided into three typical areas – the seaside, the mountains (especially Rila and Pirin) and in the biggest urban centres.

The systematization of the information leads to the impression that, in general, the use of digital tools in this type of restaurant is not particularly widespread. Out of all 59, only twelve have opted for digitalization. However, in an attempt to describe the situation with the idea of identifying a trend, the following clarification should be made: out of a total of 16 high-end restaurants located in an urban environment, seven use digital

tools for communication with consumers; out of a total of 35 five-star seaside restaurants, only five have digital tools for communication on their websites; of the seven mountain restaurants, none uses similar digital means of contacting consumers (Figure 3).
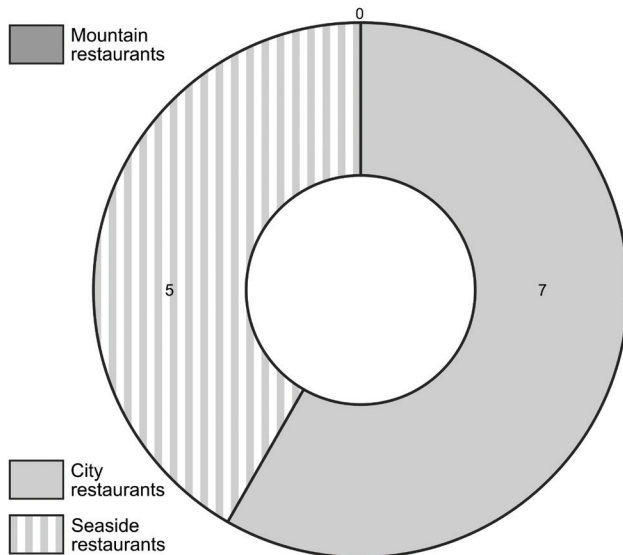

Figure 3. Number of restaurants by group providing digital tools on their websites
Source: authors

Apparently, the collected information reveals that in 92.92% of the high-end restaurants in Bulgaria digitalization does not make a trend and they do not have or use any digital tools. The analysis also shows that at least one digital tool can be found in only 7.08% of the explored websites (Figure 4).
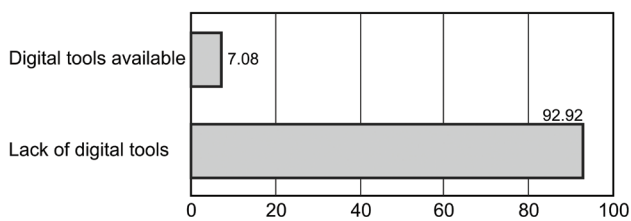

Figure 4. Percentage ratio between available and missing digital tools on the websites of five-star restaurants in Bulgaria
Source: authors

In order to complete the profile of the research, an additional aspect of the attitudes of representatives of five-star restaurants is presented. In the period March–April 2024, an interview was conducted among marketing managers from the sector, within the framework of a short questionnaire previously agreed with them. The leading idea was to present the attitude and expectations of the respondents regarding the usage of digital tools and their influence on the contemporary restaurant sector.

The approach conforms to a set of standard rules bearing in mind that as a type is usually used when it

is necessary to study the opinion of experts with a high level of awareness on a topic or in a separate narrow field of knowledge (Haralampiev & Marchev, 2017). The requirement for the neutrality of the interviewer who does, however, register the answers in a text file, is also respected. All or almost all questions, are "open" (Chengelova, 2016, p. 31), allowing the respondents to answer freely in as much detail as possible. As a result, the structured questionnaire consists of five questions, as follows:

Question 1: Do you think that digital tools on the websites of five-star restaurants can have an impact on the preferences of their potential customers?

Question 2: Do you think it is important for the restaurant's website to provide digital experiences?

Question 3: Do you think that the nine digital tools presented in this study can be defined as sufficient for the optimal and effective presentation of a certain website in the digital space?

Question 4: From the presented nine digital tools on the websites of five-star restaurants, which do you think is the most important for the success of the organization?

Question 5: Is it possible for the digital experiences on the websites of five-star restaurants to be defined as the future of the restaurant industry in Bulgaria?

Unfortunately, in the course of the research, only three interviews were actually conducted. Three marketing managers responded to the questionnaire, and the following answers were given to question 1:

> Yes, for sure, as they change the way you communicate with potential customers, turning it into a new kind of additional experience (Manager 1).

> Of course. The past global pandemic accelerated their entry into the business, building a completely new way of communication and interaction between restaurants and their customers (Manager 2).

> Yes of course, my practice shows that it is digital tools that become a real competitive advantage in crisis conditions (Manager 3).

The following answers were given to question 2:

> It is important, because modern reality has determined the need for new and fascinating experiences that will attract customers to the offered products (Manager 1).

> It is important, because digitalisation determined the emergence of new and unknown experiences, which formed a long-lasting interest in the products offered in the restaurant industry (Manager 2).

> It is important, because during the global pandemic of COVID-19, it was digitalization that allowed the creation of new experiences that would attract and stimulate customers to visit five-star restaurants (Manager 3).

The respondents answered question 3 as follows:

> Yes, I think you have suggested an effective combination of digital tools (Manager 1).

> I think your selection of digital tools shows the current trends in the restaurant business (Manager 2).

> The digital tools you have selected fully match my understanding of the digital experiences that businesses can currently offer (Manager 3).

The following answers were received for question 4:

> Booking engine (Manager 1).

> Virtual and augmented reality (Manager 2).

> Video of an inspiring story (Manager 3).

The following answers were given to the final question, question 5:

> Yes, it is possible, as modern customers are constantly looking for new experiences in the highly competitive restaurant business (Manager 1).

> Yes, it is possible, as more and more foreign tourists visit our country, which motivates restaurants to implement the latest digital technologies. Which, in turn, determines the future of the restaurant industry in Bulgaria (Manager 2).

> Yes, it is possible, as digitalisation could present services and products in a completely new way, which enables customers, regardless of where they are in the world, to form within themselves a motivation to visit a specific restaurant. The effective presentation of the advantages of Bulgarian restaurants will shape their future development (Manager 3).

As can be seen from the above answers, in high-end restaurants in Bulgaria, there is an interest in various digital tools used for informing and communicating with consumers. Of course, the fact that only three managers responded to the request for an interview is disconcerting, especially since they are the ones who could mark the direction of development in the sector. This is also a serious limitation to the research, because on the one hand, technical issues and digitalization are gaining more and more importance, and on the other hand, the sector is clearly not ready to talk about this. Nevertheless, based on the results of the sector study, findings and recommendations can be made, which we present below.

4.1. FINDINGS

At five-star restaurants in Bulgaria, a limited presence and corresponding application of digital tools is registered. The managers of these tourist enterprises understand the importance of digitalisation, but do not orient their marketing policy on the advantages of using digital technologies. The scope of the present study includes nine digital tools, searched for on the websites of high-end restaurants in Bulgaria, but discoverable in only 7% of them. This percentage is extremely low and worrisome, as it raises the question of how successful communication is. At the same time, there is also the feeling that it is possible that in five-star restaurants the personal recommendation of customers is of greater importance – a specific aspect that requires further investigation from the point of view of the sensitivity of the type of customers in question.

With the not so high level of digitalization in the five-star restaurant sector in Bulgaria, the focus point should be on the need to refine communication strategies. The issue facing the restaurant business is largely related to the characteristics of the customers, which differ according to the type of restaurant. On the basis of personal observations, as well as in the course of conversations with marketing managers, it was found that the main customers of city five-star restaurants are local with a medium to high social profile. Bulgarian customers are also present in seaside and mountain restaurants, but the share of foreign guests there is also significant. Unfortunately, no officially presented information in this regard can be found, just as there are no studies on the extent and significance of digitalisation in the restaurant sector in Bulgaria. Some of the available publications (Angelov & Savova, 2023) primarily present general trends without focusing on specifics. At the same time, it is particularly important since the digital tools discussed have a serious potential to influence users by provoking and promoting their interest. Such a dynamic trend should be exploited by restaurants in Bulgaria for all categories, as it is directly related to the economic indicators of the business.

4.2. RECOMMENDATIONS

The COVID-19 pandemic has largely changed the ways in which customers reach the information they need respecting the contemporary restaurant business. Many restaurants in Bulgaria underwent an instant digital transformation to ensure their functioning, starting by adapting menus and home delivery, thus completely changing the way they communicate with customers. A large number have also taken advantage of the convenience of food-delivery platforms, through which they become easily discoverable to consumers and get a ready-made online ordering system and a team to handle the deliveries (Subscribe, 2021). However, it is often observed that their representation in digital space

is insufficient, relying above all on the assistance of intermediaries. In an attempt to illustrate the ongoing processes in Bulgaria, during research on the high-end restaurant sector, problems were identified for which different solutions are needed. In this regard, the following recommendations can be made to the specifics of Bulgaria as a tourist destination and its five-star restaurants:

– to develop and maintain their own interactive websites, paying attention to the set of digital tools that they should integrate so as to ensure effective communications with customers;
– to consider the connection between the effects of using digital tools and branding, in the direction of achieving a key market advantage and a means of positioning in the minds of consumers;
– to consider the stimulating effect for consumers that digital experiences have and develop it through websites so as to provoke interest and desire to consume, but also lasting attachment and loyalty to the brand.

5. Conclusions

Against the background of complex and dynamic processes in the world of economics and politics, the tourism industry is undergoing changes. Some of which are tied to digitalization which stimulates the development of innovation, improves the economic performance of organizations and accomplishes globalization. The significance of the usage of various online communication tools in the restaurant sector in Bulgaria is important, and to be explored in terms of successful market and branding positioning, so these issues are of interest to researchers and practitioners. In the particular case of five-star restaurants, digitalization has not been sufficiently studied, therefore, the present study is an attempt at a research analysis of the available information to outline the picture in the sector. In the result, it confirms the fact that digitalization is a key factor, determining change for the contemporary restaurant sector. Changing ways of life, demands and expectations of consumers for faster, and full, access to information should be a model for the transformation of five-star restaurants. The observed process of digitalisation in Bulgaria is happening rapidly, is ubiquitous and poses challenges, revealing at the same time new business opportunities and unprecedented digital experiences that should set new priorities for Bulgaria's restaurant business. The development of the processes, as well as their research, is forthcoming, however, it can definitively be stated that they will not deviate from international trends.

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