ISCTE ◈ Business School
Instituto Universitário de Lisboa

INSIGHTS ON THE USE AND CONSEQUENCES OF USER-GENERATED CONTENT IN THE CONTEXT OF PORTUGUESE LUXURY HOTELS

Ana Rita Amaral Caetano

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Supervisor:
Prof. Daniela Langaro, PhD Visiting Assistant Professor at ISCTE-IUL

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Abstract

Facebook have captured a special interest from private users and business organizations. In parallel, the concept of user-generated content has appeared as an active marketing tool since Facebook users could spread the word and share opinions on their pages with their 'so-called' Facebook friends. This study aims to identify and understand the strategies and purposes of luxury hotel brand followers on Facebook towards user-generated content. 355 user-generated posts from 50 valid hotel's brand pages have been collected from Facebook and coded manually for each variable. Moreover, posts were treated as a respondent and were coded according several variables such gender, nationality, post type, etc. To get better results, a descriptive analysis was performed. The results showed that pots with images were the most chosen post type to share any type of content and the favorite content types were sharing moments from holidays and writing guest reviews. As to the best day to post content, each gender has its own preferences: for females are the weekends while males favor Wednesdays and Fridays. However, 83,4% of the brand pages did not engage with generated posts and the involvement only occurred with guest reviews and holidays' moments. The results give insight about the strategies adopted by Facebook users to generate content on their profiles about a specific hotel brand and begin to fill the gap on user-generated content utilization by hotel managers.

Resumo

O Facebook tem captado um interesse especial, tanto dos utilizadores particulares como das organizações. Consequentemente, o conceito de conteúdo criado pelos utilizadores apareceu como uma ferramenta de marketing, uma vez que os utilizadores com perfil de Facebook podem partilhar as suas opiniões nos seus próprios perfis com seus "amigos". Este estudo pretende identificar e compreender, as estratégias e intenções, dos seguidores de páginas de marcas hoteleiras de luxo no Facebook, através do conteúdo gerado pelos utilizadores. Extraímos 355 posts criados por utilizadores de 50 páginas de marcas de hotéis de luxo, tendo sido recolhidos no Facebook, e codificados manualmente para cada variável. Assim, foram tratados como uma resposta e codificados por: género, nacionalidade, tipo de post, etc. Para uma melhor compreensão dos resultados, foi realizado uma análise descritiva. Concluiu-se que os posts com imagens são os mais escolhidos para partilhar qualquer tipo de conteúdo, e que, os conteúdos favoritos mostravam momentos em férias, e mostravam críticas feitas por hóspedes. Relativamente aos melhores dias para fazer publicações, cada género tem as suas preferências: as mulheres preferem os fins-de semanas enquanto que os homens as quartas e sextas-feiras. Contudo, 83,4% das páginas analisadas não mostraram qualquer interacção com os utilizadores, e tal só aconteceu em críticas de hóspedes e férias. Os resultados dão uma visão sobre as estratégias adoptadas pelos utilizadores de Facebook para criar conteúdo nos seus perfis sobre uma marca de hotel específica, e começar a preencher a lacuna na utilização desta ferramenta pelos gestores das páginas de marcas hoteleiras.

Palavras-chave: Hospitalidade; Indústria Hoteleira de Luxo; Conteúdo gerado pelos utilizadores; Facebook.

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List of abbreviations and Glossary

B2B – Business-to-Business

B2C – Business-to-Consumer

C2C – Consumer-to-Consumer

GDP – Gross Domestic Product

OECD - Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development

UGC - User-Generated Content

USA - United States of America

SPSS – Statistical Package for Social Science

WWW – World Wide Web

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Introduction

In most of the countries around the world Tourism is an important sector of economic activity, not only because of its direct economic impact, but also for the significant indirect and induced impacts that it carries along (World Travel & Tourism Council, 2017), and the same is true for Portugal. Over the past few years, tourism has stood out in Portuguese Economy as it accounts for job and economic growth. It is even regarded as one of the few sectors in which Portugal stands out from the rest due to its competitive advantages (Turismo de Portugal, 2016). Nevertheless, it is of the utmost importance that both Government and Tourism stakeholders join forces to turn Tourism into an even more profitable economic activity (Turismo de Portugal, 2016).

A recent report published by the World Travel & Tourism Council (2017) highlights some information that illustrates how well tourism is performing in Portugal and when facing those values, the contribution of tourism for GDP, exports, investment and the creation of employment is so evident that, it is clear that tourism is one of the principal sectors of activity of the Portuguese Economy.

Addressing more specifically one Tourism segment, the Luxury tourism is currently a fast growing sector in the Portuguese Economy and also represents a very interesting business area with a huge potential to develop more job opportunities. Portugal is considered the 20th country with the highest number of luxury hotels in the world. The total number of luxury hotels in Portugal is around 160, which represents 2% of the hotel offer (Trivago, 2015).

However, this sector requires specific needs. It becomes extremely important to manage the most appropriate marketing tools in order to develop an efficient service that fulfills the high customers' expectations (Neto, 2014). So, how should luxury brands communicate with their consumers? Luxury implies two important concepts: differentiation and exclusivity (Neto, 2014). Both concepts are not only relevant for this sector but also for consumers, who are now more demanding and better informed than ever. So, every strategy should settle down on the costumer's individuality and brand exclusivity and the trend is to create a bilateral relationship between customer and brand. By using new technologies it is possible to optimize this two-ways communication and create an emotional relationship between them that goes

beyond offering a service (Neto, 2014). And it is here that social media plays a vital role as a marketing tool to develop and support luxury tourism strategy.

Considered as one of the rising trends with significant impact on the tourism industry (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010), the use of social media by travelers has been increasing to search, organize, share their travel experiences and personal thoughts through blogs and microblogs (e.g. Twitter), online communities (e.g. Facebook, TripAdvisor), media sharing, social knowledge sharing sites and other social media tools (Leung et.al, 2013). In this context, the most common practice of tourists is sharing their personal experiences. According to Tung and Ritchie (2011, p.1369), a tourism experience is "an individual's subjective evaluation and undergoing (i.e., affective, cognitive, and behavioral) of events related to his/her tourist activities that begins before (i.e., planning and preparation), during (i.e., at the destination), and after the trip (i.e., recollection)". The act of sharing experiences allows people to relate more than knowledge-related aspects like facts about holiday features ("e.g. prices, weather conditions, beaches and other attractions"). In addition, it permits to express their emotions, thoughts and expectations about a holiday destination through videos, photos, emojis and other linguistic formats (Baym, 2010).

It is common that people make endless posts on their social media profiles, like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat while on vacation, even if it is just to show to their relatives and friends what they are missing out. Actually, in just few years, Facebook have become the world wide's most popular social network with 2.01 billion monthly active users (Zephoria, 2017). This platform has been taking an indispensable part of people's lives and as a consequence is used by the majority of the population (Gensler *et al.*, 2013).

User-generated content has radically changed the way in which luxury hotel brands use social media to influence customers' decision and obtain higher engagement (Levy, 2016). By including it in their marketing strategies, luxury hotel brands are able to upgrade their content engines with guest-generated content (e.g. images, videos) in a freeway while simultaneously creating a deeper relationship with them. One of the main forms of UCG is the online reviews. Nowadays, 79% of travelers who search for a place to stay usually read between 6 and 12 reviews across 4 to 10 properties before making any decision; 70% of customers rely on guest reviews and peer recommendations over professionally written content, and around 90% of the customers trust guest ratings, thus becoming the second most important element, just after price, in booking decisions (Levy, 2016).

Prior studies have shown the advantages that hotel managers get by using social media as a communication channel and the importance of using UGC as a marketing strategy tool.

However, the influence of online user-generated content in the tourism industry remains largely unknown both to tourism researchers and practitioners. To bridge this gap in the tourism sector, an exploratory study will be conducted to identify the strategies used on user-generated posts in the luxury hotel brands in Portugal by using Facebook extracted data.

As a result, the main research question of this dissertation is to provide a clear understanding of what are the UGC strategies used by the luxury hotel brands followers on Facebook.

1.2 Structure of the dissertation

The present dissertation comprises five chapters that describe this research. A summary of each chapter is given below.

Chapter 1: Presents an overview of the topic with reference to the main concepts such as Social Media, User-Generated Content and hotel guest's experiences. It also announces the aim and structure of the study.

Chapter 2: This is the literature review chapter and it is divided into five parts. The first one offers an overview of the Hotel Industry itself, while the second part addresses specific issues of this Industry. In the third part various aspects of the Luxury Hotel Industry in Portugal are addressed and in, the last two parts address Social Media and the impact of user-generated content within the Luxury Hotels, which is considered a hot topic.

Chapter 3: This chapter addresses the methodology presenting the model that has been used and describes, in detail, the data collection process.

Chapter 4: The chapter of the results includes a broad analysis of all data gathered previously from descriptive statistics using the SPPS analysis software.

Chapter 5: The last chapter comprises the major conclusions of this study. It also refers its limitations and presents valuable insights for future research

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Hotel Industry

Nowadays tourism is considered world's most significant activity in the services sector and the one that faces a truly global market competition. The majority of OECD countries have a significant tourism industry and a great majority of the developing countries stated tourism as an essential strategic activity for their future development.

In a context where competition has increased a lot, it should be harder to highlight each destination especially since a distinctive positioning assumes more importance in attracting tourists. However, the concept of differentiation is dynamic: what is distinctive today may have been adopted as destination by one or more competitors' destinations and consequently ceased to be relevant. Therefore, the strategic challenge of the touristic activity in each country is not only to choose different factors that are pertinent for the competition, but also to create market conditions so that this differentiating factor can evolve and adapt to maintain its relevance towards the competitors. Determining a relevant factor of differentiation and creating the right conditions for it to grow and remain relevant over time among competitors, are some of the strategic issues that apply to tourism in general (Turismo de Portugal, 2016).

Regarding the hospitality market, hotel managers admit that they usually use their brand's power to influence positively the customers' overall perception of value related to products and services in order to increase revenues (O'Neill and Mattila, 2010).

Also, in the lodging context, the concept of brand positioning may be "measured" by customer perceptions of facilities, services offered and the price paid for the stay (Aaker and Shansby, 1982). Moreover, the positioning strategy can be determined by the pre-existing segmentation of the market and in the particular case of the hospitality industry, this segmentation mentions the class of the hotel, i.e., its number of stars, as a sign of perceived quality for customers (Oh, 2000), since for each   hotel class there is a certain level of expectation related to the amenities and level of offered services associated. Nevertheless, the above mentioned aspects are merely functional and may not mirror the current brand experience.

Unlike the majority of consumer goods, hotels are considered as a both intangible and tangible element with regard to customers' experiences (Lewis, 1990). Besides the physical

features and amenities associated with the particular class of a hotel, it is important to notice the existence of a service element that includes more factors involved with perceptual positioning than that other product. Having said that, the intangible elements of an hotel experience make it harder for the customer to generate an impression regarding hotel brands in comparison to other products. Because of this, the brand itself works as a connection to the values and features to be expected of a hotel facility (Javalgi *et al.*, 2006). This circumstance is critical since the tangible factors of the lodging industry represent few opportunities to make one organization different from another (O'Neill and Mattila, 2010).

Some people suggest that brand positioning has been established in three levels: creating an image for organizations, differentiating an organization from its competitors and outlining the advantages to potential customers (Lewis, 1981). For decades, differentiation is identified as the primary objective of an effective marketing strategy (Pechmann and Ratneshwar, 1991) and in the hotel industry, differentiation is even more important just because it acts as a competitive advantage (Taylor, 1997). And how can differentiation be achieved in the hotel industry? By means of creating a specific type of service culture, modifying some physical aspects of the hotel to enhance itself from competition, as, for instance, the chocolate cookies offered by DoubleTree Hilton hotel. In fact, this kind of action helps a lot in building memorable experiences for customers and in keeping them in their minds for a future stay. It may also be the case that the association of a hotel brand with one of its competitors is taken into consideration by the customer when he is about to make a purchase decision (Pechmann and Ratneshwar, 1991). This happen when a customer sets a location and the desired price and afterwards, when the corresponding hotel class is determined, the customer searches for a Pestana Palace Hotel but also considers a comparable EPIC SANA Lisboa Hotel for his stay during the decision-making process. This situation can happen due to customers' past experiences where they establish similarities between brands.

2.2 Luxury Hotel Industry

2.2.1 Definition of Luxury

Luxury is not as easy to define as it seems since it may be perceived in different ways depending on culture, location or even the personal background. Nevertheless, as it has been stated before, luxury is ''something that is not essential but provides pleasure and comfort'' or ''something that is desirable but expensive or hard to obtain or do'' (The American

Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, 2016). Regardless of all possible meanings luxury is not seen as a necessity but as a 'treat' that is increasingly harder to define, especially when it comes to the hotel industry (Kiessling et al., 2009).

Moreover, as Wong and Law (2003) remarked , the perception of luxury by Western and Asian tourists is quite different, as, for instance, Caucasian tourists perceive luxury as a symbol of status or prestige, while Hispanic visitors regard it as a trend (Gardyn, 2002).

2.2.2 Characteristics of Luxury Hotels

In late modern societies, the number of people who are usually not considered as "luxury or high-end travelers" is significantly increasing. As Kiessling *et al*. (2009, p. 3) said: "luxury is now less stable and exclusively reserved, but more modern and flexible." Therefore, it means that when it comes to differentiation and innovation, hotels tend to offer their guests the most amazing luxury experience they can possibly have. As a consequence, "luxury is no longer defined by the number of stars a hotel has, but by its tailor-made services to the individual needs of the guest." Features such as the location of the hotel and its facilities (e.g. "room types, sizes and amenities, restaurants and spas") are an example of motivators in the decision-making moment. However, what distinguishes a luxury hotel from another is its exclusive and exquisite service.

Most luxury hotels are connected with tradition and history and this may also have influenced their design. As we well know, the hotel design is not the only feature that acts as a motivator for booking a stay in a luxury hotel. As already mentioned, location is an important attribute for luxury hotels since it influences guests' demand and this is why most of them are strategically located in city centers with easier access.

Another important characteristic is related to the rooms' size. In this kind of property, rooms tend to be bigger in comparison to hotels of lower segments, thus offering more space to provide a comfortable stay to the guests (Kiessling *et al*., 2009, p. 5).

Similarly food and beverage are an "important part of the overall hotel experience," and a vast number of luxury hotels have started to invite well-known chefs to be associated with their highly qualified restaurants. By doing this hotels increase their recognition and credibility among the guests.

As it is regarded as "one of the essential luxury experiences," spa facilities have been catching   more and more attention by potential customers. With stressful and busy lives, guests tend to value a hotel that can offer the opportunity to enjoy a set of treatments or

relaxing therapies with high-qualified staff. In other words, they search for a place where they can rest mind and body.

Last but not the least, an excellent service is what makes a luxury hotel stand out from the crowd. To be well succeeded in the luxury segment, a hotel must be run with innovative ideas in order to create that unique, fancy and memorable experience that best suits one's needs (Kiessling *et al.*, 2009).

Table 1 - Characteristics of a luxury product/service

Design
Location
Facilities
Room types, sizes and amenities,
Food and beverages
Price
Luxury experiences (e.g. spa)
Activities of leisure
Service
Human Resources

Source: Own elaboration

2.2.3 Luxury Consumer Behavior

There are conditioning factors that influence the consumption of a luxury product or service. Each customer has a different way of living and a particular taste conditioning his choices (Allérès, 2000). Moreover, luxury may have a meaning for one particular person and represent a totally different thing for another one.

According to Allérès (2000), luxury products or services gather, at the same time, every rational purchase requirements (such as quality and originality) and the most irrational ones (distinction, passion for products or services of a particular brand and cultural symbols). Luxury products are the closest to a maximal symbolic meaning, with a much smaller relative importance than their real utility (Strehlau, 2004).

Richers (1984) states that there are lots of reasons behind a purchase intention and they cannot be restricted to psychological aspects or social classes , let alone to customers 'basics needs.

Within the tourism sector, the luxury segment is a combination of demand and supply with very peculiar characteristics. Luxury consumers have particular requirements and seek for quality experiences as well as customized and discreet services.

A luxurious trip is defined as a particular and unique experience that arouses unforgettable sensations. Many authors argue that it is no longer acceptable for hotel brands to offer merely products or services; instead they have to provide memorable experiences to differentiate themselves from others. Furthermore, a good experience can involve the consumer emotionally, physically, intellectually and spiritually (Mossberg, 2007).

As a rule, four standards guide luxury products' consumption: - intrinsic quality of the goods/services; - hedonism (the tendency to seek immediate and individual pleasure as the only form of moral sense); show-off and social distinction. There are two further meanings associated with this consumption: pleasure and compensation. It should be emphasized that the use of luxury products and services is also influenced by the social, professional and family environment (D'Angelo, 2004).

Also, there are four categories of luxury products and services that customers buy (Table 2).

Table 2 - Categories of luxury products and services

Food – Restaurants	E.g.: Caviar, champagne, etc
Lodging - Hotels	E.g Spas, wellness rooms, etc.
Clothing	E.g.: expensive jewelry, visons, perfumes, accessorizes, etc.
Leisure	E.g: sport activities, cruzes, travels, etc.

Source: adapted from Berry (1994)

According to Allsopp (2005), the category consumers were particularly willing to pay a higher price for is accommodation in luxury hotels, because they possess big rare decoration objects, works of art and antiques (Swanson, 2004).

Luxury consumers are looking for a full pack of tourist services, from customized service, transportation, indoor and outdoor activities, hospitality services and gastronomy, to cultural programs. Furthermore, apart from the general characteristics, such as being the most knowledgeable, experienced and travelled, luxury customers do not constitute a homogeneous

public, both in terms of the price they are willing to pay as to what concerns of the psychological profile. Indeed, while high-quality services are precondition for various segments of luxury, a promotion may be based on different features, such as exoticism for the more adventurous or exclusiveness for the more selective (Ikkos, 2017). For Tracey and Hinkin (1996), luxury hotel guests expect highly personalized service, as the corresponding amenities are supposed to be the best there is.

For Pinto & Oliveira (2008), luxury clients in Portugal are attracted for leisure purposes and the key factors for their hotel choice are: (1) the facilities, (2) the location, and (3) the multiple support services offered. As a rule, this type of client has a college degree, tends to travel with the family and to stay for a week.

2.4 Social Media

2.4.1 Definition

In our digital era, two words automatically pop up in people's mind: social media and Web 2.0. Combined with technological concepts, they are responsible for bringing significant changes in Business-to-Business (B2B) communication, Business-to-Consumer (B2C) communication and Consumer-to-Consumer (C2C) communication (Kietzman *et al*., 2011), but the evolution and usage of social media turns the definition of this concept hard to define.

With different perspectives, Cohen (2011) summarized some definitions of social media as "an ever-growing and evolving collection of online tools and toys, platforms and applications that enable all of us to interact with and share information", "today's most transparent, engaging and interactive form of public relations once it combines a genuine grit of real time content with the beauty of authentic peer-to-peer communication". And not only it represents "a way to be connected and share content with friends and like-minded people for individuals", but also "a way to tap into what people say about brands, products and/or services, participate in conversations, be open to new ideas and use these insights to make better decisions" for organizations.

2.4.2 Characteristics and Formats

After having defined the concept of Social Media the analysis of its characteristics and formats seems relevant.

Social Media comprehends five key features such as: (1) Participation - it encourages people from all over the world to give their feedback about a particular topic and involves different levels of engagement depending on if people post , comment or just lurk on social media networks; (2) Openness – as the majority of social media services are free and open to participation, it encourages people to vote, to comment and to share information; (3) Conversation - it provides a two-way real time communication; (4) Community- it favors an easy and quick creation of on online communities that share common interests; and (5) Connectedness- it makes use of links to other websites, resources and people (Tesorero, 2013).

With the impressive development of the World Wide Web (WWW), its first stage, Web 1.0, rapidly evolved to Web 2.0, the so called Social Media. This second stage allowed people to interact with websites and to be a user and simultaneously content creator (Baym, 2010; Munar & Jacobsen, 2013). Furthermore, as it has been pointed out by Markos-Kujbus & Gáti (2012), it can adopt various formats, such as:

- **Social Networking Sites:** are illustrated by Internet users' connections. This tool (e.g., Facebook, MySpace, LinkedIn) allows users to create profiles, send invitations to friends, relatives and colleagues to visit or have an active role on their profiles by adding a comment, giving a like or sharing a photo, video or audio. At the same time, users can decide if they want to make their content available to all web users or just to a particular individual;

- **Blogs:** are seen as a particular form of website as they are more a kind of online diary. This tool not only makes it possible for "the blog owners to attach their text graphics, videos and links to web pages" but also allows the "visitors to comment the original posts encouraging a two-way communication." Additionally, "bloggers can post original content or collect other blogs' content to make it their own (by transforming them, translating them or simply copy-pasting them)";

- **Microblogs:** represent a subcategory of blogs. An example of these platforms is Twitter that gives users the opportunity "to send and read short messages" and to be in contact "by following people or organizations they are interested in";

-   **Social News Websites:** enable users to "discover and share" all type of content from any part of the web "by submitting, voting and commenting";

-   **Virtual Worlds:** are represented as a three-dimensional virtual environment that allows real-time interactions of users with their personalized avatars (Bell, 2008);

-   **Collaborative Projects:** represent the websites where people can create and share content and knowledge (e.g., Wikipedia)";

-   **Content Communities:** have the form of a platform that allows "users to create, publish and share" different categories of media content (e.g., YouTube, Flickr, Soundcloud);

-   **Commerce Communities:** are platforms built near to e-commerce sites, and they are seen as a "specialized product or service rating sites" (e.g., Amazon).In these communities, users' opinion actually plays an important role.

2.4.3 Social media benefits for Business

As a significant part of every marketing strategy, Social Media becomes more and more an essential digital method that enables marketers to develop their skills to make the best out of their business. If they skip using it, they are seriously missing out an exceptional marketing opportunity to grow their businesses for, according to the Blue Fountain Media (2016), a Digital US-Agency, Social Media presents ten main benefits for business:

-   **Increases Brand Awareness:** Since Social Media is one of the most popular digital marketing tools on terms of cost-efficiency, it enables marketers to share content and enhance their business' dissemination through the engagement with a broad audience composed by different backgrounds and behaviors;

-   **More Inbound Traffic**: The bigger the number of companies that choose to be active in multiple Social media platforms, the larger their connections to a vast number of consumers from all over the world will grow. However, the companies must be aware of the fact that each person has particular needs, distinguished ways of thinking, unlike backgrounds, and different behaviors and because of that, they have to be always able to adapt every and each single strategy in order to get the best of it;

-   **Improves Search Engine Rankings:** Search engine optimization is fundamental in "achieving higher page rankings and obtaining traffic to business websites." Being

able to be in the top positions on the keywords' ranking will revolutionize the traffic and continue to generate positive results for the company;

- **Higher Conversion Rates:** When a business increases its online exposure, it will automatically get more probabilities for conversion. Social Media Marketing allows every business to offer a positive image "through a humanization factor." When brands play an active role "by sharing content, commenting, and posting statuses on Social Media, it personifies a brand." Additionally, introducing a brand in an environment "where people are sharing, liking, and talking, can only improve the conversion rates on existing traffic."

- **Increases Customer Satisfaction:** Customers are now even more demanding when it comes to interacting with the companies' social media accounts. They appreciate the fact that companies focus in having a "human voice" to give them customized answers rather instead of automated messages. This illustrates the fact that companies are aware of their visitors' needs and aiming to provide them the best experience ever;

- **Improves Brand Loyalty:** Obtaining customer loyalty is one of the primary scopes of every existing firm. As the customer's satisfaction and brand loyalty are concepts that go together, it is absolutely necessary to engage with the customers and keep developing a connection with them. Social Media goes far beyond introducing brand's products and promotional campaigns as it is regarded by customers as a service channel that offers a direct communication line with the firms;

- **Increases Brand Authority:** Although customer satisfaction and brand loyalty play a significant role in turning a business more authoritative, the real key to do that lies on how effectively the communication is made. Having an active interaction with consumers shows that firms care about the customer's satisfaction and are open "to answer any questions that they might have." Moreover, when customers' needs are satisfied they will be more willing "to spread the word about a great product or service," and they probably do that by sharing their own opinions through social media";

- **Cost-efficient:** The creation of a new profile is free in all Social Media platforms. As it represents one of the most cost-efficient tools of marketing strategy, it grants the companies "a greater return on investment and retain a bigger budget for other marketing and business expenses.";

- **Gain Marketplace Insights:** Social Media is all about knowing what the thoughts, needs, interests, and opinions of consumers about a specific brand are. And so it can

be used not only as an additional research tool for the analysis of the user demographics and specific characteristics of their industry, but also to segment content based on a topic and to identify which kind of content will generate a bigger impact;

- **Thought Leadership:** If it is intended to become an expert and leader in one sector of activity the companies must then create and post rich, meaningful and well-written content on Social Media. To achieve this, they must implement a persuasive communication and be directly connected with their audience, by sharing insightful content, that will promote their authority and build their online presence.

2.5 Social Media towards Luxury Hotel Industry

2.5.1 User-Generated Content strategies

We citizens of the world live in an advanced technological society where everyone can become a social media content creator and where the smallest thing can lead to someone's sharing online content in his own social media profile.

So, the first research question of this study is "Understand what the UGC strategies used by luxury hotel brands followers on Facebook are."

User-generated content is still considered to be in its primary phase (Burnmann, 2010). As the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development report (OECD, 2007) stated, the concept of UGC can have different meanings such as: "content that is made publicly available over the Internet", "content that reflects a certain amount of creative effort" and "content created outside of professional routines and practices".

In hospitality and tourism sector, the importance of user-generated content has increased to comprehend a diversity of research problems (Lu & Stepchenkova, 2015) and one of its primary goals is to help reducing the tourists' risk in their decision-making moment (e.g., some holiday tours). In this way UGC also seems to contribute fairly well to the visitors' well-being by providing reliable information (Gretzel & Yoo, 2008).

Nowadays the amount of information collected from online sources such as online reviews, blogs, communities and other unsolicited forms of customer opinions requires a completely different method for research purposes than the traditional marketing procedures. Websites such as TripAdvisor and Facebook, which provide a great variety of user-generated content (e.g. comments and reviews) can have a huge impact in the moment of the brand

creation, giving the organizations the chance to have a well-succeeded communication process for their goods and services, as well as greater awareness of perceived quality, brand associations and brand loyalty (Wang *et al*., 2011; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). Similarly, they also have a positive impact on building up and developing relationships by favoring communication channels between hotels and the consumers, suppliers and other stakeholders as they are all much more accessible and with fewer barriers.

2.5.2 The role of online reviews

In the present digital society, the use of online travel reviews platforms has increased substantially as it became a channel of communication that enables customers to express their trip experiences and as well as to search for information about others travelers' experiences prior to their making a decision (Xiang and Gretzel, 2010; Gretzel and Yoo, 2008). Being a huge source of data, these online platforms are part of the so-called big data (Mayer-Schonberger and Cukier, 2013; George *et al*., 2014).

Online reviews act as a new way for hotel managers to get information about customers' experience and to be aware of negative aspects of the hotel and improve it (Litvin *et al*., 2008).

They combine a range of information about travel planning in the form of ratings, texts, and recommendations and also work as a marketing strategy for tourism organizations (Zhang *et al*., 2009). Most of the times, these reviews are usually freely written by customers with the purpose to inform other users/customers to develop one's self-perception (Yoo and Gretzel, 2008). On the other hand, they represent a 'place' where customers can describe and share their personal opinions about a service or product experience and they influence other people's choice quite often (Netzer *et al*., 2012; Lee & Bradlow, 2011).

Some studies have even analyzed in how far UGC is a trustworthy source to transmit the customers' perceptions of the hotel quality on a more profound level than an overall rating (García-Barriocanal *et al*., 2010; Giannakos *et al*., 2012). There is also another recent study that highlights the fact that online reviews may be used to define a hotel experience and identify associated dimensions that may not be immediately clear (Xiang *et al*., 2015).

2.5.3 The importance of virtual environments

With the appearance and growth of social media in virtual environments, organizations and customers can now profit from new business opportunities that could not have been

possible without them. (Erdem & Cobanoglu, 2010; Kim & Hardin, 2010; O'Connor, 2010). Therefore, social media platforms are responsible for giving the possibility to create and develop new activities and for letting users, potential users and resources to communicate with them in virtual communities (Erdem & Cobanoglu, 2010; Kim & Hardin, 2010; O'Connor, 2010; Xiang *et al.*, 2008). Additionally, Qu & Lee (2011) affirm that having an active and regular participation in online tourism communities has a positive influence on the sense of belonging, which possibly leads to an increase in knowledge sharing. In virtual communities, it is usual to share common frames of reference related to social norms, interests, and goals (Williams, 2009). These communities are also known for having a strong spirit of solidarity and belonging among its fellow-people. Despite this, Jacobsen (2000) has mentioned the existence in society of anti-tourists, people who prefer to have a different touristic approach instead of having the so-called typical tourist behavior.

Hotel brands do benefit from virtual communities, as these can give tips to creating new range of services and improve existing products; another inherent advantage is the opportunity to invest in new businesses, to increase the existing supply of goods and services, and last but not the least, to create new potential centered in the fulfillment of the consumers' needs and obtaining differentiation in the marketplace (Fesenmaier, 2007; Wang et al., 2002; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). Moreover, thanks to the deeper knowledge of the consumers and their needs, hotel brands can regulate their costs, by delivering only what the customers want (Kim & Hardin, 2010; O'Connor, 2010; Wang et al., 2002). As a consequence, society in general meets a new whole business model that not only affects the tourism industry, but also pushes other organizations to adapt, design and develop accurate marketing strategies for social media websites (Fesenmaier, 2007; Kim & Hardin, 2010; O'Connor, 2010).

Chapter 3: Methodology

The present chapter aims to describe the methodological approach and type of research used in this study to enlighten the research question of this dissertation, i.e. to provide a clear understanding of what are the UGC strategies adopted by Facebook users of luxury hotels brand pages.

3.1 Methodological approach

After having identified the research question, the most adequate methodology to use was the qualitative approach named netnography - an online research technique – that enabled the analysis of the research problem and obtaining a consistent result.

According to Kozinets (1998, p.1), netnography is " a written account resulting from fieldwork studying the cultures and communities that emerge from on-line, computer mediated, or Internet-based communications, where both the field work and the textual account are methodologically informed by the traditions and techniques of cultural anthropology."

As a qualitative marketing technique, netnography can use all the information available in online platforms, in order to be able to identify and comprehend what the needs and motivations of relevant online consumer groups are (Kozinets, 2002).

Additionally, as Denzin and Lincoln (2000) mentioned, that qualitative research is a "situated activity that locates the observer in the world and consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world. They turn the world into a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos to the self. At this level, qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena regarding the meanings people bring to them" (p.3)."

Moreover, a qualitative approach has several characteristics, such as: "a focus on interpretation rather than quantification; an emphasis on subjectivity rather than objectivity; flexibility in the process of conducting the research; an orientation towards the process rather than the outcome; a concern with context—regarding both behavior and situation as

inextricably linked in forming experience; and finally, an explicit recognition of the impact of the research process on the research situation" (Cassell and Symon, 1994).

3.2 Data collection

Reliable data is at the core of conducting a true and valid research. Usually, two types of data can be analyzed: primary and secondary data. While, primary data are defined as data collected for a particular purpose, more recently secondary data appeared as data previously collected by other researchers for different purposes than those of the study. The latter are also frequently classified according to their source, being either internal or external secondary data.

3.2.1 Secondary data

In this study, external sources such as academic journals on advertising, marketing, management, consumer research, hospitality, tourism management and psychology; books and other topic related articles and dissertations have been used.

3.2.2 Primary data

The first step for the data collection was searching and identifying 5-star hotels in Portugal, which was possible with the information provided by the Luxury Hotel Guide website, from where it was possible to extract an extensive list of 154 5-stars hotels.

Next stage was to divide them by country regions, namely: North, Center, South, and Islands (Madeira and Azores) and then to check which of them had a public Facebook brand page. Following to this, it was necessary to validate all Facebook brand pages that had the post section available/visible for the public in general. This means that anyone who decided to search for one of the hotel's brand pages previously identified as valid could see all content-generated and shared posts by other users in their own Facebook profiles and in this way understand how user-generated content could work for the tourism sector.

In order to have a consistent sample with current data, 355 posts (n=355) made by Facebook users for a six-month period, from January 1, 2017, to July 31, 2017 have been collected. All of them were obtained respecting this time frame. From the 154 hotels initially identified, the criteria applied for selecting the set of brand pages consisted of: (1) hotel brands located in Portugal, (2) Facebook brand page created by the companies and (3) user-generated posts section visible in brand pages.

By applying the above mentioned criteria, we could see that 56 (36%) hotels had no Facebook page, did not allow user-generated content to be visible to the public in general nor presented any post made by Facebook users. As a result, the exclusion of all those pages, restricted the initial population to only 98 (63%) pages valid for further analysis. In other words, the data extraction was done at random, based on the size of the sample. Therefore, all data are extracted from the following 50 brand pages:

- **North:** Pestana Vintage Porto, Aqua Village Health Resort & Spa, Stroganov Hotel, Montebelo Vista Alegre Hotel, Hotel Quinta das Lágrimas, Montebelo Aguieira Lake Resort& SPA, Porto Palace Congress Hotel & Spa, Hotel Infante Sagres, HP Ipanema Park, Pestana Palácio do Freixo, Hotel Casa da Calçada Relais & Chateaux;

- **Centre**: Sheraton Lisboa Hotel & Spa, The Albatroz Hotel, Grande Real Villa Itália, VilaGalé Paço de Arcos, Pestana Palace Lisboa, Tivoli Palácio Seteais, Altis Belém Hotel & Spa, Altis Grande Hotel, Corinthia Hotel Lisbon, Hotel Real Palácio;

- **South**: M'AR de Ar Aqueduto, The Lake Resort, NAU Hotels & Resorts (Lago Montargil & Villas), Grande Real Santa Eulália Resort Hotel & Spa, Tivoli Palácio Marina, Pine Cliffs, a Luxury Collection Resort, Cascade Wellness & Lifestyle Resort, Tivoli Carvoeiro, Dona Filipa Hotel, Anantara Vilamoura Algarve Resort, Salgados Dunas Beach, Tróia Design Hotel, Convento do Espinheiro, Bela Vista Hotel, Restaurant & Spa, NAU São Rafael Atlântico, Pestana Pousada de Tavira, Monte Santo Resort, Sensimar Lagos, Pestana Vila-Sol Vilamoura;

- **Islands (Madeira and Azores)**: Belmond Reid's Palace, Enotel Lido Hotel, Pestana Casino Park, Pedras do Mar Resort & Spa, Quinta das Vistas Palace Gardens Hotel, Pestana Carlton Madeira, Meliá Madeira Mare Resort & Spa, Quinta da Casa Branca and Quintinha de São João.

Note that, in the hotel brand pages mentioned above, all brand-generated posts have been excluded. So the number of posts collected from each brand page is different.

Concerning the variables in this study, the choice was supported by adequate literature review on relevant topics, such as: social media, online engagement, interaction, Facebook, interaction and user-generated content (Vries *et al.*, 2012; Cvijikj & Michahelle, 2013; Kite *et. a.l*, 2016; Stueber & Wurth, 2017). However, during the data collection process, it was considered relevant to introduce new variables that the author has found interesting but were not mentioned in literature, as gender, nationality and text characteristics. Further information

about each variable is possible to find on the following topic 3.3 Operationalization of the variables.

In order to prove the accuracy and veracity of the data and guarantee independence from Facebook policies that could generate changes, a print-screen of every post of the sample was made.

Then, an Excel table was created to store the data extracted from Facebook as a relational database for further descriptive analysis using SPSS Statistics, analytic software that provides statistical analysis. This has made the data collection much easier, since each post was treated as a response (1 post = 1 response) and was analyzed according to each and every variable. It should be noted that this table included non-critical information for the study, namely: the hotel's name, the number of likes in the hotel's brand page, the number of user's reviews of the brand page, the user's rating (from 1 to 5 stars), the page link, the name of the person who updated the post and the date of collection of the post and therefore there was no need of extracting this information to SPSS.

Eventually, when the database was complete, it was necessary to pre-select and identify which variables were critical to answer the central research question of the study.

In this case, the extracted variables were: (1) gender, (2) nationality, (3) post type, (4) content type, (5) text characteristics, (6) brand page engagement through liking or replying to user-generated posts, (7) posting day and (8) posting time. All the variables were manually coded into similar group information in order to simplify the descriptive analysis in SPSS.

3.3 Operationalization of the variables

In the present study, the categorization of the variables was supported by the appropriate literature, and in some cases, it was suggested by the author. Corresponding information can be found on Table 3.

Table 3 - Categorization of the variables

Author	Dimension	Item
Proposed by the author	1. Demographics	Gender; Nationality.
Freeman *et al. (2014)*	2. Post type	Photos (or images); Videos; Text only; Location and Link.
Cvijikj & Michaheles (2013)	3. Content type	Ask for Informations; Guest review (after the stay); Holidays; Business trip; Occasional visit (spa experience, event, wedding, birthday party, etc.); Share a photo of the stay (e.g. hotel's view, hotel's facilities, meals, etc.)
Proposed by the author	4. Text characteristics	Words; Emojis; Hastags; Emojis and Hastags; Words and Emojis; Words and Hastags; Words, Emojis and Hastags
Kite *et al.* (2016)	5. Brand page engagement with user-generated posts	Through liking or replying to user-generated posts
Golder *et al.* (2007)	6. Posting day	Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday and Sunday
Golder *et al.* (2007)	7. Posting time	7am - 9:59am 10am - 12:59pm 1pm - 2:59pm 3pm - 5:59pm 6pm - 8:59pm 9pm - 11:59pm 12am - 2:59am 3am - 6:59am

Source: own elaboration

3.3.1 – Variables description

Post type: For a better approach of the existing post types, it was determined to code them into four categories: 1=image, 2=video, 3=text only, 4=location and 5=link (Freeman *et al*., 2014).

Content type: To assigning this variable it was necessary to create seven post categories grouped by similar content (Cvijikj & Michaheles, 2013), such as:

a. Ask for information: includes all the posts made by hotel's guests who ask for any information, e.g.,

"Good morning, I would like to know if you have an outdoor swimming pool. Thank you" (see Annex I – Figure 1).

b. Guest reviews: includes all posts made by hotel's guests who write a review after their stay at the hotel, e.g.,

"(…) my perfect day in Porto involved the gorgeous Hotel Infante Sagres where I could write at night alone in the elegant lobby bar. By the second night, the white-coated waiter knew my drink order, and he knew how to make it right" (see Annex I – Figure 2).

c. Holidays: includes all posts made by hotel's guests who shared any content that mentioned the word 'holidays,' e.g.,

"Day 2 of the Holidays was chilling, karting and Gym/Spa#Family #Holidays #Vilamoura #Summer" (see Annex I – Figure 3).

d. Business trip: includes all posts made by hotel's guests who had a work conference, e.g.,

"Work Trip" (see Annex I – Figure 4)

"On behalf of my group work I want to thank for your professionalism and attention. Thank you for the projector. We would definitely come back and recommend your property." (see Annex I – Figure 5)

e. Occasional visit: includes all posts made by hotel's guests about wedding events, Christening events, birthday parties, spa experience for one day, sunset parties, e.g.,

"Just want to say a huge thank you to all the staff team at the Tivoli for making our wedding day 23.06.2017 so amazing!! You were truly fantastic & we'll never forget are wedding day. A massive thank you Manuela & David you did us proud" (see Annex I – Figure 6).

    f. Share an image of the stay: includes all posts made by hotel's guests who shared images about hotel's facilities, such as room, swimming-pool, meals, restaurant area, and spa), e.g.,
"Room's view. Amazing!!" (see Annex I – Figure 7).

    g. Share the location with friends: includes all posts made by hotel's guests who shared their location to inform their Facebook friends, e.g.,

"Hotel is in a pretty central location to get out and explore today!" (see Annex I – Figure 8)

Brand page engagement with user-generated posts: this variable attempts to establish if the brand page administrators interact through liking, replying or not with user-generated posts (Kite *et al*., 2016). It was coded as 1=like, 2=comment, 3=both, and 4=none.

Posting day: all posts were coded by posting weekday in the following way: 1=Monday, 2=Tuesday, 3=Wednesday, 4=Thursday, 5=Friday, 6=Saturday, 7=Sunday. In this way, we could identify which were the best days to share any post type according to user's preferences (Golder *et al.,* 2007).

Posting time**:** the collected posts were divided into nine categories: (1) 7am - 9:59am, (2) 10am - 12:59pm, (3) 1pm - 2:59pm, (4) 3pm - 5:59pm, (5) 6pm - 8:59pm, (6) 9pm - 11:59pm, (7) 12am - 2:59am, (8) 3am - 6:59am and (9) none (Golder *et al.*, 2007). It is important to note that 158 posts did not have the hour of its publication because the post was firstly posted on Instagram and then on Facebook. As they stood for 44,5% of the sample, it was decided not to exclude them. Otherwise, the sample would not have been sufficiently extensive to provide significant results.

Gender: this is considered one of the primary variables of this study because it serves as the basis to understand the strategies behind every user-generated post on Facebook.

Furthermore, this variable could be correlated with almost all other variables of this study. It was coded on SPSS as 0=Male and 1=Female.

Nationality: after collection of all data, it was remarked that the sample was composed of various nationalities. Since this study focuses on Portuguese Luxury hotels, the variable was coded by 0=Non Portuguese and 1=Portuguese.

Text characteristics: upon analysis of the text included in each post, it was noticed that some of them were composed not only of words but also emojis and hashtags. An Emoji "is a graphic symbol, ideogram, that represents not only facial expressions, but also concepts and ideas, such as celebration, weather, vehicles and buildings, food and drink, animals and plants, or emotions, feelings, and activities" (Kraji Novak *et al.*, 2015). The hashtag is "like keywords which can be used to organize messages on a social network. Then, this facilitates the searching and grouping of messages with given hashtags. Hashtags are preceded by the sign (#) and can be a word or a short phrase", for example: #Marketer or #SocialMedia (Samawi, 2013) and are used to express emotions, identify places or brand events, make recommendations or to connect with like-minded individuals.

Chapter 4 – Results

4.1 Descriptive statistics

Early research produced returned 154 available brand pages, which were reduced to a final list of 98 valid brand pages after elimination of those who did not allow user-generated content to be observed by the public in general, or did not show any post from Facebook users.

355 user-generated posts from 50 valid hotel's brand pages have been collected, between January 1, 2017, and July 31, 2017. All Facebook pages were administrated by a brand located in Portugal, more than half (63%) of them permitted user-generated posts whereas only 16,6% were engaged with fans, which reflects the lack of interactivity between brand page administrators and visitor's posts. More detailed results are given below.

Gender: The gathered data reveals the prevalence of the female gender, meaning that the majority of respondents are women (56,01%), as shown in the chart (Grahp 1). This means that women are more willing than men to generate content on their personal Facebook profiles to share information about their experiences in a particular hotel.

Graph 1 - Gender of the respondents (%)
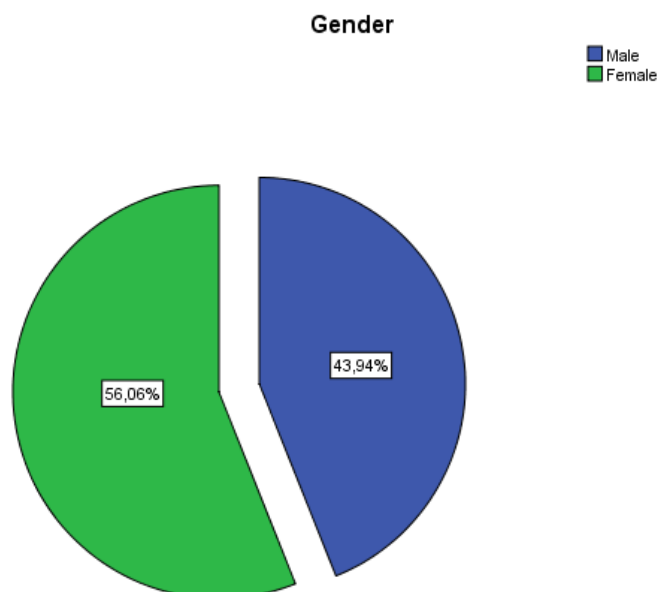
Gender * Post type: As mentioned in section 3.3 Operationalization of the variables, five different posts' types have been identified according to their form image, video, text, location and link.

It is clear that both genders prefer to generate image posts but despite this similar top preference regarding the post's type they are quite different on other aspects. In fact, males tend to share their location with their friends rather than writing text posts. On the contrary, women prefer to generate content in the format of text (46 posts) to sharing their location. Regarding video and link posts, males tend to be fonder of this format than females but both of these formats are clearly the less chosen by both genders (see Table 4).

Table 4 - Gender * Post type Cross tabulation

Score

		Post type					Total
		Link	Image	Video	Text only	Location	
Gender	Male	1	92	5	25	33	156
	Female	0	124	3	46	26	199
Total		1	216	8	71	59	355

Gender * Posting day: Regarding the weekday for updates on Facebook, each gender has its own preferences. Women favor the weekend (Saturdays and Sundays) while male tend to prefer Wednesdays and Fridays. However, if we look to the total number of posts without separating per gender, we realize that there are 4 weekdays in which more posts are created, namely: Fridays, Saturdays, Sundays and Mondays. This information seems to be in accordance with Ellering's (2017) study, where it is stated that people tend to be happier on Friday, Saturday and Sunday and because of that, people are more likely to generate posts during the weekend or in days that are closer to the weekend. Obviously this conclusion is influenced by females' preferences due to since they are this sample's prevailing gender. As to the less preferred day to create a post, it seems to be Wednesday for women and Thursday for men (see Table 5).

Table 5 - Gender * Posting day Cross tabulation

		Posting day							Total
		Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday	
Gender	Male	24	18	28	16	28	20	22	156
	Female	32	25	15	32	23	37	35	199
Total		56	43	43	48	51	57	57	355

Nationality: In terms of the nationality of each respondent, the majority of them (56,1%) were not Portuguese. Actually many different nationalities were identified, for example: British, Brazilian, Belgian, French, German, Danish, Finnish, Italian, Spanish, Dutch, etc. On account of this and in order to simplify the results, the sample was divided into two categories: Portuguese and Non-Portuguese respondents. The fact that 56,1% of the posts have been generated by Non-Portuguese may be due to the fact that currently Portugal is one of the most wanted tourist destinations (see Graph 2).

Graph 2- Nationality of respondents
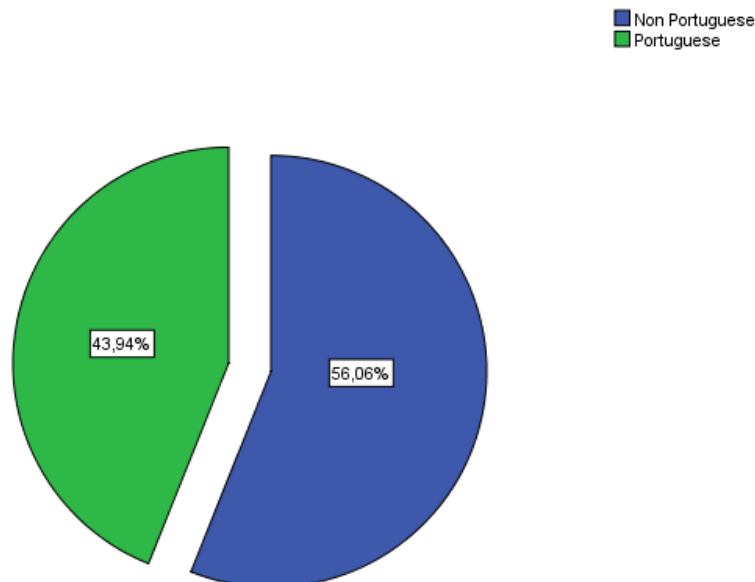
Post type: As mentioned before, five different formats of posts were identified: image, video, text, location and link. The majority of respondents (60,8%) tend to share image posts and so text posts come as a second choice. So, there is no doubt whatsoever that image are the top preference for posts' types. Consequently, video and link posts are the less chosen posts' types (see Table 6).

Table 6 - Number of posts by post type

		Frequency	Percentage	Valid Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Válid	Link	1	,3	,3	,3
	Image	216	60,8	60,8	61,1
	Video	8	2,3	2,3	63,4
	Text only	71	20,0	20,0	83,4
	Location	59	16,6	16,6	100,0
	Total	355	100,0	100,0	

Content type: Concerning the content of the posts, it is possible to infer that the primary motives for updates in home pages is the wish to share holiday's moments and to write positive and negative guest reviews, which occur as a rule after the stay at a hotel. Following these two top preference motives, we find motives such as sharing the location of the hotel and occasional visits (see Graph 3).

Graph 3- Number of posts by content type
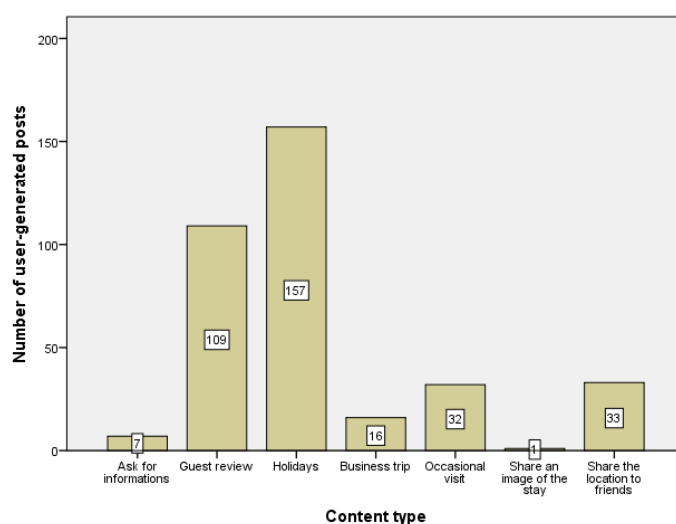
Post type * Content type: The most used post type is image, and this applies to every content type studied. Images are definitely the users' favorite way to share updates and to interact in Facebook. As second on the row of preferences appear the posts composed only with text and location posts. However there is a significant difference between them because text posts tend to be more used for guest reviews than to share holidays' moments, while both image and location posts are mainly used for the latter purpose. This difference may be a consequence of the reason inherent to the post itself, since while writing a review, people use text to enhance criticism (positively, negatively or neutral) towards the hotel. On the contrary, when people want to share a holidays' moment, they tend to take a photo and upload it immediately on Facebook (e.g., the landscape view, the swimming-pools, etc.) (see Table 7).

Table 7 – Post type * Content type Cross Tabulation

		Content type							
		Ask for informations	Guest review	Holidays	Business trip	Occasional visit	Share an image of the stay	Share the location to friends	Total
Post type		0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1
	Image	1	67	106	11	30	1	0	216
	Video	0	3	2	3	0	0	0	8
	Text only	6	35	27	1	2	0	0	71
	Location	0	4	21	1	0	0	33	59
Total		7	109	157	16	32	1	33	355

Gender*content type: By means of cross-checking gender and content type variables, it is possible to infer which is the favorite content type that each gender uses on their posts.

While generating a post, the favorite content type for both genders is to share a moment of their holidays experience at the hotel. A second common preference consists of writing guest reviews (50 males, 59 females). So, it is only on the other less chosen content types that preferences according to gender seem to diverge, as men prefer to share their location with friends while women share more often a moment of an occasional visit they've made to the hotel (e.g., go to the spa, have lunch at the restaurant's hotel, have an after work drink at the hotel's bar, etc.) (see Table 8).

Table 8 - Gender * Content type Cross tabulation

		Content type							
		Ask for informations	Guest review	Holidays	Business trip	Occasional visit	Share an image of the stay	Share the location to friends	Total
Gender	Male	5	50	64	4	12	1	20	156
	Female	2	59	93	12	20	0	13	199
Total		7	109	157	16	32	1	33	355

Brand page engagement with user-generated posts: This variable measures the interaction of brand pages with their visitor's posts. Once analyzing the collected data, we notice that the highest percentage, 83,4%, is the absence of interaction with the guests, or in other words, 83,4% of the users' posts didn't get either a like, or a reply from the brand page itself (see Graph 4).

Graph 4- Brand page engagement with user-generated posts
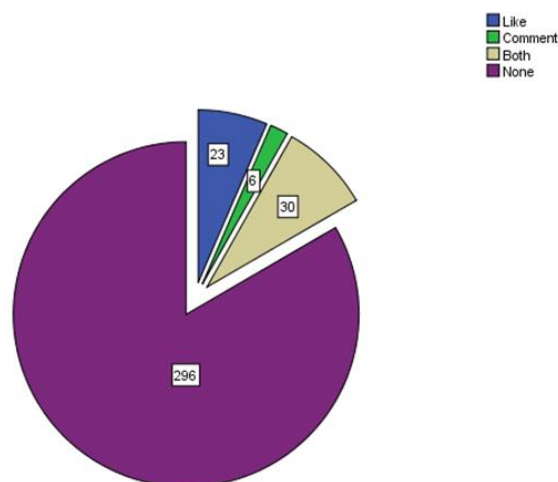
Brand page engagement with user-generated posts * Content type: The majority of the analyzed brand pages have not shown any type of engagement with user-generated posts, either by liking or simply replying to the posts. However, they tend to engage with user-generated posts that contain reviews on the hotel's service. In other words, they interact preferably by liking and replying to guest's reviews. Furthermore, brand pages seem to relate with posts that share holiday's moments of their guests, this amounting 13% of the cases (Table 9).

Table 9 - Brand page engagement with user generated posts * Content type Cross tabulation

		Content type							
		Ask for informations	Guest review	Holidays	Business trip	Occasional visit	Share an image of the stay	Share the location to friends	Total
Brand page engagement with user-generated posts	Like	0	12	8	1	2	0	0	23
	Comment	2	1	3	0	0	0	0	6
	Both	0	16	9	0	5	0	0	30
	None	5	80	137	15	25	1	33	296
Total		7	109	157	16	32	1	33	355

Posting day: As previously mentioned, Saturdays and Sundays, i. e., during the weekend is the time when the number of user-generated posts is higher. However, Monday and Fridays also achieve similar figures. This shows that the number of user-generated posts seems to increase in those days that are closer to the weekend, reaching their peak during the weekend (see Table 10). All in all, these results confirm the pattern studied by Ellering (2017).

Table 10 – Weekday of the post

		Frequency	Percentage	Valid Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Valid	Monday	56	15,8	15,8	15,8
	Tuesday	43	12,1	12,1	27,9
	Wednesday	43	12,1	12,1	40,0
	Thursday	48	13,5	13,5	53,5
	Friday	51	14,4	14,4	67,9
	Saturday	57	16,1	16,1	83,9
	Sunday	57	16,1	16,1	100,0
	Total	355	100,0	100,0	

Posting time: It was previously stated that 158 (44,5%) of the samples have not mentioned the posting time, due to de fact of having been at first posted on Instagram and only later on Facebook. However, it was decided not to exclude them as it would cause an abrupt decrease in the number of posts that compose the sample. If we take the posts that do mention the posting time, most of them were posted between 3 pm and 5:59 pm (11,5%), and between 6pm-8:59 pm (11,3%), which means that the favorite time of the day to update a post is the afternoon (see Table 11).

Table 11 – Post time

		Frequency	Percentage	Valid Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Valid	No hour	158	44,5	44,5	44,5
	7am - 9:59am	22	6,2	6,2	50,7
	10am - 12:59pm	32	9,0	9,0	59,7
	1pm - 2:59pm	31	8,7	8,7	68,5
	3pm - 5:59pm	41	11,5	11,5	80,0
	6pm - 8:59pm	40	11,3	11,3	91,3
	9pm - 11:59pm	25	7,0	7,0	98,3
	12am - 2:59am	6	1,7	1,7	100,0
	Total	355	100,0	100,0	

Posting time * Gender: If we cross-check the gender variable with the posting time variable, it is possible to study the period in which each gender tends to update more posts. When analyzing the results, we can conclude that both genders have similar preferences. Firstly, because their favorite time to generate posts is the afternoon, with a tiny difference, that women tend to prefer all afternoon period while men prefer the early afternoon hours. Secondly, regarding their less favorite time to generate posts, which are the nightly hours by obvious reasons (see Table 12).

Table 12 – Preferential posting time by gender

		Posting time								Total
		0	7am - 9:59am	10am - 12:59pm	1pm - 2:59pm	3pm - 5:59pm	6pm - 8:59pm	9pm - 11:59pm	12am - 2:59am	
Gender	Male	74	10	11	15	17	13	15	1	156
	Female	84	12	21	16	24	27	10	5	199
Total		158	22	32	31	41	40	25	6	355

Posting time* posting day: Excluding the posts with no time reference, one notices a pattern when we analyze just the posting time variable, showing that the majority of the posts were created in afternoon time periods and that circumstance tends to be maintained along the week, which is a conclusion obtained when we cross-check posting time and posting day variables. Although it can be stated that the referred pattern is valid throughout the week there are a few exceptions to be referred to. For instance: Mondays, the second user preference to generate posts is the period from 7am to 9:59 am, whereas on Wednesdays, there are slightly more posts created from 10pm to 12:59 pm, and Thursdays, the second period with more generated posts is from 9 pm to 11:59 pm. On Sundays, the period from 10am to 12:59pm has the same number of posts as the period between 3 pm and 5:59 pm. Although these deviations are important they are not relevant enough to force us to disregard the observed pattern, because along seven weekdays it is very likely that people don't generate posts exactly in the same time periods (see Table 13).

Table 13 - Posting time * Posting day Cross tabulation

		Posting day							Total
		Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday	
Posting time	0	23	22	21	24	22	31	15	158
	7am - 9:59am	7	1	4	3	2	4	1	22
	10am - 12:59pm	4	3	4	3	4	4	10	32
	1pm - 2:59pm	5	1	4	2	2	9	8	31
	3pm - 5:59pm	3	5	3	9	8	3	10	41
	6pm - 8:59pm	8	8	2	2	9	3	8	40
	9pm - 11:59pm	5	1	3	5	3	3	5	25
	12am - 2:59am	1	2	2	0	1	0	0	6
Total		56	43	43	48	51	57	57	355

Text characteristics: With the analysis of text characteristics' variable, in which we have considered every posts showing some kind of text, we can notice which kind of text clients use more often to express their emotions. Results clearly show that the users' preference is words (43,9%), followed by the words and emojis (30,1%). If we also take into account 4.8% of posts composed by words and hashtags, and other 4,5% of posts consisting of words, emojis and hashtags, we come to a percentage 83,3 posts that use words as a means of communication. These results make us arrive to the conclusion that words are clearly the main form that users choose to interact with brand pages, as they use text as a mode of expression (see Table 14).

Table 14 - Different text characteristics used in posts

		Frequency	Percentage	Valid percentage	Cumulative percentage
Valid	Words	156	43,9	43,9	43,9
	Hashtags	1	,3	,3	44,2
	Words and emojis	107	30,1	30,1	74,4
	Words and hashtags	17	4,8	4,8	79,2
	Emojis and hashtags	2	,6	,6	79,7
	Words, emojis and hashtags	16	4,5	4,5	84,2
	None	56	15,8	15,8	100,0
	Total	355	100,0	100,0	

Post type*Text characteristics: Cross-checking post type and text characteristics' variables, it is possible to highlight two major conclusions: the first one being that 71 posts only contain

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text and the second, that within 216 posts that are in the format of images, 188 also contain text as a mode of expression. The same pattern can be observed (although in a smaller scale) in the 8 video posts. In fact in these 8 posts only two do not have any kind of text. Similarly, in location posts, 33 out of 59 posts have some sort of text. Observing the gathered data, 299 out of 355 posts use text to communicate with brand pages and while doing this, they also tend to use more often words to express themselves (297 out of 299). To sum up, users definitely prefer to use text as means of communication and so words are their favorite way of expression. This means that, in the moment of posting any type of content, users tend to add a description to it in form of words (see Table 15).

Table 15 - Post type * Text characteristics Cross tabulation

| | | Text characteristics | | | | | | | |
		Words	Hastags	Words and emojis	Words and hastags	Emojis and hastags	Words, emojis and hastags	None	Total
Post type		1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
	Image	80	0	75	16	2	15	28	216
	Video	2	1	2	1	0	0	2	8
	Text only	53	0	17	0	0	1	0	71
	Location	20	0	13	0	0	0	26	59
Total		156	1	107	17	2	16	56	355

Chapter 5 – Conclusions, Limitations and Future Research

5.1 Major conclusions

Nowadays Facebook is seen with a lot of interest, both from private users and business organizations. Consequently to this interest, the user-generated content has become an active marketing tool, due to the possibility of Facebook users share their opinions and feedback about a brand with their "friends" in this social network.

The objective of the present study was to analyze what are the UGC strategies used by the luxury hotels brand followers on Facebook. In order to achieve that goal, 355 user-generated posts were extracted from 50 valid hotel's Facebook brand pages, between January 1, 2017, and July 31, 2017. After their collection, this data was manually coded according the following variables: gender; nationality; post type; post content type; brand page engagement through liking or replying to user-generated, text characteristics, posting day (Monday to Sunday) and posting time (in hours).

This research has clearly identified some differences between genders when it comes to be an active Facebook user who shares content about a specific hotel brand. With 2.01 billion Facebook users in the world (Zephoria, 2017), it is a known fact that the percentage of female internet users is higher than male ones (Greenwood *et. al*., 2016).

The insights from this research offer the Managers of Portuguese Luxury hotel brands some guidance on how they may improve their engagement with their visitors' posts.

The gathered data showed that image posts were the favorite post type of both genders, accounting for 39% of the total sample. This suggests that people are more likely to take a photo and upload it directly on Facebook because they probably see it as an interesting and appealing way of sharing the moment with their friends. In second appear location and text posts. Quite differently, links and video posts were the less adopted post type, accounting for approximately 3% of the sample. This lack of involvement with link posts may be explained by the fact that Facebook users are reluctant to click on external websites and find it a tedious way of sharing content (Freeman *et al*., 2015). Additionally, the main favorite content types for both genders are sharing moments from holidays and writing reviews to talk about their experience, with a great majority of them being positive, whereas the request of information and sharing images of the stay were the less used kind of posts.

As to the best day to post content, each gender has its own preferences: for females are the weekends while males favor Wednesdays and Fridays. Concerning the best hours to post, the afternoon seems to be the most chosen period of time for updates.

While analyzing the brand pages interaction with visitors' posts, the results showed that in 83,4% of the cases there was no involvement either not through likes or comments by hotel brand pages. The involvement only occurred, if at all, with guest reviews and shares of holidays' moments. This shows that Portuguese hotel managers need to invest a great deal in the hotel's Facebook page by developing a social media strategy and allocating staff to accomplish the task.

Another important aspect to bear in mind is that UGC in social media platforms like Facebook can work out really well for hotel brand pages, because it may facilitate word-of-mouth and spread an advertising message to many potential consumers without spending money or resources. Moreover, it is proved that word-of-mouth recommendations from friends and family are the most reliable (Nielsen, 2013).

In a word, this study will help Portuguese luxury hotel managers understand the importance of user-generated posts to the tourism sector. By letting user-generated posts be visible on their brand pages and by connecting with them through liking, replying or both, they will be setting the best way to gain a reputation among customers and reinforce brand loyalty, for nowadays, more than ever, this kind of interaction is highly appreciated.

5.2 Limitations of the study and Future Research

This study is subject to some limitations which may provide interesting data for future research. It was determined to use 50 out of 98 hotels' brand pages previously identified as valid for data extraction. The amount of data was sufficient to empirically provide consistent results on the strategies used by Facebook users. However, one variable in this research could pose some problems, i.e. posting time, since the majority of the collected posts did not show it.

As previously referred, the data was extracted from the brand pages of Facebook social network and it probably would be interesting to replicate this investigation for other social networks, such as Instagram - a social network based on photos, or TripAdvisor - an online platform based on online reviews, as a means to verify if there is some kind of identity or similarity in the corresponding results.

The text words written by user-generated post could also be another interesting aspect to study, as the existence of positive, negative and neutral adjectives in posts would permit a global rating of the hotel's experience. This could be achieved through the analysis of the prevalence of user-generated posts to figure out if people tend to share more positive, negative or neutral posts with their friends based on the adjectives used to describe their experience at the hotel and thus identify what kind of post they prefer to express their emotions, i.e., text posts, images, links or videos (Bickart & Schindler, 2001; Eisend, 2006; Schlosser, 2005).

Other studies (Baltas, 2003; Robinson *et al*., 2007) suggest measuring the message's length, by means of counting the number of words written in the posts to realize if they aggregate more positive, negative or neutral words about a specific hotel's attribute (e.g., the pool, the view, rooms, restaurant, lobby, amenities, staff, service, etc).

Also the impact of TripAdvisor online reviews on hotel brands could be interesting to evaluate, in particular how they influence other people during the decision-making process.

Or to identify direct and indirect hotel brand associations made by user-generated posts and adapt the categories used by TripAdvisor's users to evaluate their experience, for example: hotel's location, hotel's cleaning service, global service quality, sleep quality (i.e. presence or absence of noise), room (e.g., size, decoration, view), price and so on (TripAdvisor, 2017).

As an overall conclusion, one may state that this study responds to the call for research on social media as to how social media becomes a vehicle of spreading the word about a brand and the engagement between brand pages administrators and user-generated posts. Future research may develop the initial findings of the motivations that lead hotel guests to generate content on their Facebook homepages and share information with their friends.

Chapter 6 – Bibliography

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Appendix

Appendix I – Print-screens of the posts

Figure 1 - Ask for information post example

Jose Perez ▶ Porto Palacio Congress Hotel & Spa
3/7 às 8:49 · 🌐

Buenos días, me gustaría saber si tienen piscina exterior, gracias.

Bom dia, gostaria de saber se têm piscina exterior, obrigado.

⚙ · Ocultar Original · Classifica esta tradução

1 comentário

👍 Gosto   💬 Comentar   ➤ Partilhar   Ordem cronológica ▾

Porto Palacio Congress Hotel & Spa Buenos dias José y muchas gracias por su interés. El hotel no tiene piscina exterior pero en la planta -2 hay dos espacios de wellness & fitness con un total de 3 piscinas interiores y condiciones de utilizacion muy especiales para huespedes del hotel. un saludo!
Ver Tradução
Gosto · Responder · 4/7 às 10:49

Figure 2 - Guest review post example

Louis Aguilar
29/6 às 21:54 · 🌐

Julia Matz Nará Dos Santos Courtney Henriette, my perfect day in Porto involved the gorgeous Hotel Infante Sagres where I could write at night alone in the elegant lobby bar. by the second night, the white-coated waiter knew my drink order, and he knew how to make it right.
Ver Tradução

The Perfect Day in Porto
Prepare yourself for eternal love.
EXPLOREPARTSUNKNOWN.COM

👍🙂 8   2 comentários

Figure 3 - Holidays post example
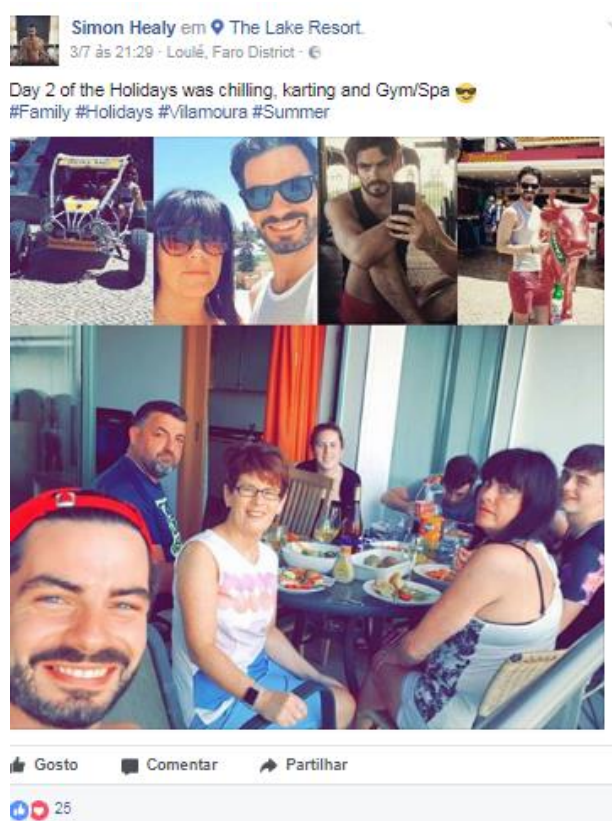
Figure 4 - Business trip post example
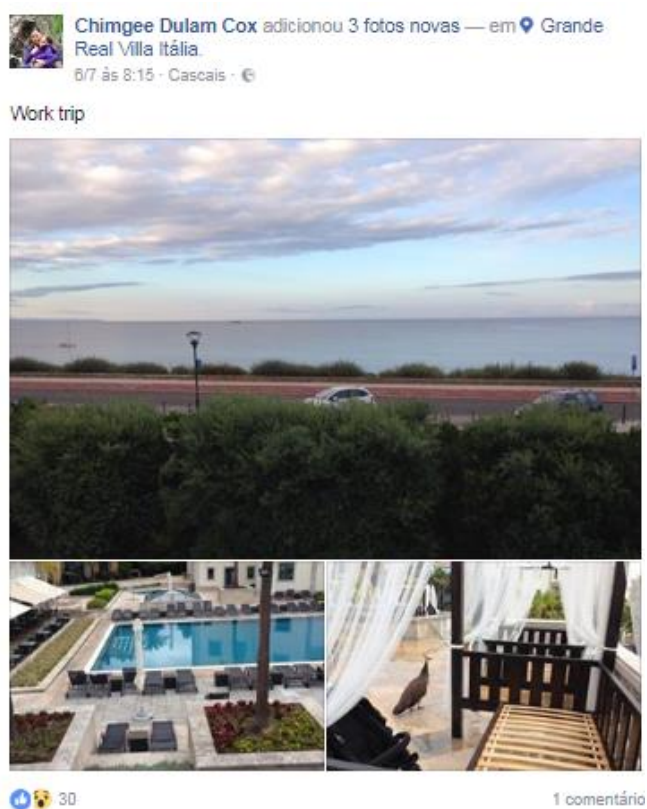
Figure 5 - Business trip post example

Luis Vinha ▶ Tróia Design Hotel
27/6 às 1:05 · 🌐

Em nome do meu grupo quero agradecer o profissionalismo e o carinho. Obrigado pelo projetor. Iremos voltar e sempre recomendar a sua casa 👆

Figure 6 - Occasional visit post example

Julie Barlow Renshaw ▶ Tivoli Carvoeiro
3/7 às 20:33 · Altrincham, England, United Kingdom · 🌐

Just want to say a huge thankyou to all the staff team at the Tivoli for making our wedding day 23.06.2017 so amazing!! You were truly fantastic & we'll never forget are wedding day . 🙇 👶. A massive thankyou Manuela & David you did us proud.

Figure 7 - Share an image of the stay post example

Meire Morais ▶ Pestana Vintage Porto
17/3 · 🌐

Vista do quarto. .maravilhosa! !!

Figure 8 - Share the location with friends post example

Jane Hopson visitou ♥ Hotel Real Palácio com Nancy Tucker e 3 outras pessoas.
8/7 ·

Hotel is in a pretty central location to get out and explore today!

Hotel Real Palácio
Hotel · Lisboa
6817 pessoas visitaram este local

Guardar

👍 Gosto   💬 Comentar   ➤ Partilhar

👍 6