

## Social Media: A Tourism Crisis Management Tool? Insights From The Lebanese Hospitality Sector

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### Abstract

*Social Media has become a polyvalent tool for any business. From marketing to customer relationship management, business intelligence, branding, product development, market scanning, benchmarking, recruitment ..., Social Media proves to be a strategic management tool. Even in crisis management, researches has shown its effectiveness at all stages of a crisis. Tourism crisis seems to be a particular issue because of its nature, its level and the diversity of stakeholders involved in the tourism industry. Hotels are one of these stakeholders. They are severely affected by a tourism crisis. Still, their involvement in managing a tourism crisis, that strikes the country, is limited. Or, hotels are among the pioneer users of Social Media. Could this push them to be active in tourism crisis management? This article relies on a survey conducted with Four and Five stars hotels located in Beirut, the capital of Lebanon – a country that is witnessing recurrent tourism crises. It aims at investigating the extent to which these hotels are using Social Media to participate in managing tourism crisis.*

**Keywords:** *Social Media, Social Media Analytics, crisis management, Hotels, Beirut*

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**JEL Classification:** Z310

### 1. Introduction

Lebanon is a small-surfaced country located on the eastern shores of the Mediterranean Sea. Its economy is primarily based on the tertiary sector, mainly transit commerce and tourism. The country witnessed and is still witnessing ups and downs in its political stability, which seriously threatens its tourism industry. In addition, external geopolitical issues like the Arab Spring and the Syrian war integrated Lebanon in a series of tourism crises, which resulted in a decrease of tourist arrivals dropping to 1.517.927 in 2015 after being 2.167.989 in 2010 (Lebanese Ministry of Tourism). The hospitality sector was particularly sensitive to these crises as it entails huge operational investments.

Recurrent tourism crises are affecting severely these businesses especially in the absence of a national tourism crisis management plan. To face these crises, Lebanese hotels are taking separate remedial actions; most of them are related to cutting down operational costs. These actions do not seem to embrace Social Media, which has been proven to be a strategic crisis management tool (Hughes et al, 2008; Vieweg et al., 2008; Sigala, 2011). This article relies on a survey made on a sample of Four and Five stars' Beirut-based hotels to examine the uses of Social Media in these hotels and to explore their perceptions of it as a tourism crisis management tool.

## **2. Social Media: A polyvalent tool for a Business**

It's obvious that the web 2.0 opened up a new era in many fields, particularly in marketing. Its format of interactions enabled the establishment of active relationships between Businesses and Consumers, paving the way to the implementation of an interesting marketing assumption, Relationship Marketing (RM) . In opposition to the traditional transactional marketing that calls for "pushing" the product to the consumer through "Marketing Mix " based strategies (Harker & Egan, 2006), relationship marketing calls for interaction, dialogue and exchange between organizations and individuals. Indeed, the communication platforms and tools featuring the web 2.0 gave online users the possibility to intervene by generating, sharing and exchanging information. This supported online marketing where dissemination of information become easier and wider across online networks and channels, especially Social Media ones.

Created originally for social interaction and networking, Social Media become an opportunity for marketers not only to connect with consumers but also to engage deeply with them. This engagement stipulates that marketing actions should be directed more to socialization (Paliwal, 2015). This can be achieved through maintaining ongoing meaningful dialogue between organizations and consumers, and by developing discussions on organizational issues relevant to consumers. Accordingly, Social Media is giving companies the chance to build trust with customers. It personalizes the company, comforting subsequently the communication with customers.

Social Media's advantages for companies are now recognized by almost all researches and scholars. These advantages derive from the two way street communication they enable, which make them seen by customers as earned media, a reliable, transparent and trustworthy media as opposed to paid media (Corcoran, 2009; Yu, 2013). An in depth look into these advantages shows that they can be categorized under three successive dimensions: attention, observation and expression. Being attentive to what's going-on on Social Media, enables the company to capture data. Observing this data carefully make it readable and hence exploitable in an efficient way. Or, these are the fundamentals of Business Intelligence (BI), a technology-based process that helps businesses make pertinent decisions. Indeed, developing SMBI (Social Media / Business Intelligence) strategies becomes a must for businesses to succeed today (CIO Whitepapers, 2012).

Based on, Social Media is not only a marketing tool for Businesses, but also a management, planning and developmental one. Its real time and interactive data allow the company to identify and seize opportunities in a changing business environment. What could these opportunities be for the hospitality industry?

## **3. Social Media: A dashboard for the Hospitality sector**

Alike other businesses, the hospitality sector recognized the importance of Social Media and integrated it in its operations. This integration seems to cover both internal and external operations as shown by the below literature overview.

Actually, theoretical approaches of Social Media in the hospitality sector focused on two perspectives: consumers and suppliers (Leung et al., 2013). The consumers' frame highlights the importance of user-generated content (UGC) on Social Media in the motivation of tourists before the trip, their choices during the trip and their sharing of experience after the trip. As for the suppliers' perspective, Carson and Sharma (2001) assigned five functions to Social Media in the hospitality sector: promotion, product distribution, communication, management and research.

Professional approaches suggested however five applications of Social Media in the hospitality sector: information dissemination, ongoing customer engagement, just-in-time marketing, extending concierge service and service recovery (Begnawi & Pal, 2014). The first three applications are listed under "marketing" while the two others under "service".

The crossing of the theoretical industry's perspective with the professional one reveals the two ultimate objectives sought from the use of Social Media in the hospitality sector, i.e. marketing and management. These being the main keys of a dashboard in the service sector.

### **3.1 Social Media: A marketing key**

Social Media is a new form of word of mouth (WOM), an electronic word of mouth (eWOM) that is considered trustworthy by tourists. Actually, the product sought by tourists is quite simply an experience; therefore, a reliable source of information is needed to tell them what it will look like. Social Media platforms that are based on user generator content (UGC) and social networking sites (SNSs) are efficient in promoting a hotel. In fact, the reviews, comments, stories and photos posted by users contribute to the creation of a perceived image about a hotel.

Marketers have recognized the importance of these platforms in building the image of a Hotel. They develop blogs, discussion forums, tweets, Facebook, etc. to get information that enables to bridge the gap between the desired and perceived image of a hotel. Social Media platforms offer valuable information for marketers interested in “developing a brand voice and instilling trust with customers” (Leung et al., 2013). This can be achieved by presenting information about the hotel on Social Media applications in a variety of ways (photos, videos, jokes, online gaming, ...), promoting products and responding to requests. This specific form of interactive e-marketing, capable of influencing both consumers and organizations’ behaviors, is today a masterpiece of marketing known by Social Media marketing (SMM).

Social Media marketing (SMM) is marketing using Social Media platforms such as online communities, social networks, blog marketing and more (Neti, 2011). As these platforms are freely accessible through web 2.0, Social Media becomes a cost-effective marketing form easy to adopt by almost all businesses, particularly Hotels. While Social Media marketing is largely accepted in the academic community, some researchers posited that it is a new component in the promotional mix matrix, a hybrid component (Mangold & Faulds, 2009) that combines features from personal selling, public relations, sales promotion and advertising. Some others refers to the four C’s of Marketing Mix – a reshape of the four P’s – to fit Social Media into the C of communication. Fill (2006) defined marketing communication’s mix as “a set of tools that can be used in various combinations and different degrees of intensity in order to communicate with the target audience”. Still, the resulting message needs a medium to be conveyed. This is what media accomplishes in general, Social Media as well. Hence, Social Media is a channel to exchange messages.

Whether an eWOM, a promotional element, a communication vector or a distribution channel, Social Media has inaugurated a new era of marketing especially for the service sector; a marketing that is interactive, consumer driven and highly accessible to the public.

### **3.2 Social Media: a management strategy**

Running a hotel involves management of relations at - and between - two levels: internal (employees) and external (mainly customers).

At the workforce level, Social Media can improve communication across the different hotel department and generate a sense of friendship and solidarity between the staff. It can also help HR managers reach potential candidates and learn about them, more beyond what they wrote in their resume or cover letter. It can as well help in monitoring the hotel’s “employer brand” or the reputation of the Hotel as a preferred / non-preferred place of employment.

In parallel, customer relationship in the hospitality sector can be defined as a process of ongoing communication between a Hotel and its Customers. The management of this relationship, known as customer relationship management (CRM), aims at increasing customer satisfaction and consequently ensuring customer loyalty. To satisfy customers, an important strategy is to offer them personalized services. This needs continuous information about the customer’s profile, needs, desires, preferences, expectations, etc. Actually, Social Media provides this kind of valuable information necessary for hotels to gain a competitive edge and to offer qualified services.

Social Media not only facilitates customer relations but also defines them. Indeed, customers are given a sense of governance over how the products that serve them are created (CIO Whitepapers, 2012). This redesign of communication between a hotel and its guests has positive influences on customers’ engagement. It calls customers’ minds, senses and emotions to involve them as partners in the product creation process.

Moreover, Social Media enables hotels to deal directly with guests without any third party. Knowledge about these guests enables higher quality of service and better insights and decision-making (Russo, 2011). A mutual beneficial relationship is established through Social Media, allowing Hotels to cut down costs,

release successful products and reach greater audience, while ensuring guests a customized service, a social style of communication and an active role in the management process.

Beside these aspects, Social Media helps the hospitality sector identify the core values that draw clients and customers to business (Roberts, 2012). The strategic information displayed on Social Media can effectively be used for the development of a number of business strategies, ranging from enhancement of visitor satisfaction, to observation of competitors behaviors, to monitoring of the Hotel's image and reputation, to driving sales, etc.

Through the useful data it generates, Social Media is a dashboard, able to shape a hotel's marketing, product creation, brand image, CRM and business' processes. The question that raises here in relation with the current Lebanese hospitality context relates to the extent to which this holistic function of Social Media covers the management of tourism crises?

#### **4. Social Media: Towards a participatory management of tourism crises**

According to Pauchant and Mitroff (1992), a crisis is a disruption that affects a system and threatens its basic assumptions. Due to the nature of its service, - an experience-, the tourism system is highly sensitive to crises. Actually, tourists seek pleasurable experiences; any perceived risk would make them shift their destination to a safer one. This will affect negatively all the tourism industry at the disrupted destination, particularly the hospitality sector.

Crises management in the tourism and hospitality sector has been an issue of concern for many researchers (Faulkner, 2001; Blake & Sinclair, 2003; Ritchie, 2004). Most approaches focused on the ways to deal with these periods of uncertainty; the most classical action-oriented model is the 4R, proposed originally by the Pacific Asia Tourism Association (PATA) in 2003 and applied later to tourism crises. This model suggests a management of tourism crisis through four consecutive phases: Reduction, Readiness, Response and Recovery. The first two phases relate to the pre-crisis period where the tourism organization is supposed to scan constantly its business environment and to be prepared for any potential crisis. The "Response" phase matches that of the crisis period, and consists of all actions taken to mitigate the impact of the crisis, while the "Recovery" one corresponds to the post crisis period, a crucial moment for a tourism organization to restore normal operation. In each phase, real time information is the utmost key of success. What's better than ICT platforms in providing this kind of information?

In this vein, early researches focused on the role of Internet as a mass communication medium (Neil, 2000; Taylor & Perry, 2005). Actually, having a communication strategy is fundamental for any crisis management protocol because it allows the tourism organization to provide consistent messages to all stakeholders and consequently to build credibility and show a control over the situation. Internet can support crisis communication by providing different ways to disseminate information to a large public in a cost-effective manner. These ways could be grouped into two categories: interactive and passive communication platforms. The latter refers to one-side display of information (websites, emails, e-audio and/or visual media, etc.) and the former to bilateral exchange of information which Social Media is an illustration. Or, exchange of information stipulates both the collection and dissemination of information; in other terms involves both the tourists (demand-side) and the hotels (supply side) in managing a hospitality crisis for example.

As a result, "crisis informatics" (Hagar, 2006) emerged as a new area of study that examines the interconnectedness of people, organizations, information and technology during crises. This posited crisis management as a system where "information and action are disseminated within and between official and Social Media channels and stakeholders" (Sigala, 2011). Hence, the Social Media's user (the tourist in our case) participates in managing a crisis. In the special case of hospitality, this participation covers all phases of crisis management, from the earliest stage to the restoration of a hotel's position and tourists' trust and loyalty.

Indeed, User Generated Content (USG) on Social Media provides hoteliers an opportunity to scan their business environment and detect signals for potential crisis. This would increase their readiness towards a crisis. During the crisis, USG helps hoteliers monitor the tourists' discourse and understand their concerns, which result in better decisions and in effective responses. After the crisis, tourists' comments and feedbacks give hoteliers major insights for eventual (re)positioning strategies. But the mass information flow displayed on Social Media is hard to read and analyze specially in the crisis situation. This task is assumed by "Social Media Analytics" (SMA), which are "technology tools to implement social listening and measurements

programs using data from Social Media sites for reporting, dashboarding, visualization, search, event-driven alerting, and text mining” (Jain, 2012).

SMA is concerned with “developing and evaluating informatics tools and frameworks to collect, monitor, analyze, summarize, and visualize Social Media data to facilitate conversations and interactions to extract useful patterns and intelligence” (Fan & Gordon, 2014). The process can be done either by a company itself or through a third party vendor. Many SMA programs are now available to help organizations harvest information and turn it into actionable data for decision-making and forecasting (He et al., 2009; 2013), e.g. Twitcident, WeKnowIt, TEDAS (Twitter-based Event Detection and Analysis System), Crisees, SocialSensor, etc. These Software are equipped with advanced analytics techniques such as sentiment and semantic analysis and help consequently decision-makers invest the big data provided by Social Media.

Based on, Social Media is useful in tourism crisis management. It allows a participatory management of the crisis where each stakeholder plays a role. Yet, the huge amount of data generated on Social Media outlets during crisis is problematic. Therefore, an effective exploitation of Social Media in crisis time necessitates the use of Social Media Analytics (SMA). Let’s see now how Lebanese hotels invest Social Media in dealing with the tourism crisis that is hitting the country since the beginning of the Syrian war in 2011.

## **5. Enquiring Lebanese Hotels about Social Media**

Lebanon is an “ideal” field for crises-related researches. Actually, this Mediterranean country has been politically destabilized since 1975 due to geopolitical ambitions of its neighbors. Civil wars, Israeli attacks, Syrian custody, assassinations and armed political parties weakened this country that uses to rely on the tertiary sector, specially tourism, to perform economically.

Bordered by Syria from the North and the East, Lebanon is severely influenced by the Syrian war. Aside from a number of Syrian refugees exceeding the Lebanese population, Lebanon is witnessing an internal political conflict between its political parties. This disempowered the government and resulted in a series of security incidents, which has been exaggeratedly highlighted by the international media. The travel advisories from many North American, European, and recently Arab countries, have further complicated the decayed situation of tourism. In this context, it is interesting to see how Lebanese hoteliers are coping with this national crisis and what kind of strategies they are using to mitigate its impacts on their businesses. Also, it is useful to examine if they mobilize Social Media during this crisis and how efficient they think Social Media is during crises?

To answer these questions, we focused on Beirut-Based hotels. Actually, Beirut - the Lebanese capital - is the preferred location for hotels from all types and levels. Many factors triggered this vocation. First, the centralized administrative system followed in Lebanon resulted in a concentration of all business activities in the capital. Also, the strategic location of Beirut at the middle of the coastal front, made it a linking point between the north and the south, enhancing further its touristic attractiveness. Consequently, infra and super structures were developed to cope with its plural role. Indeed, 137 hotels out of 200 are operating in Beirut and its surrounding areas, ranging from individually and family owned to multinational companies’ network of chains hotels.

Sixteen from these officially certified hotels are five stars hotels and twenty-one are four (Ministry of Tourism, 2016). Together, they constitute our survey’s sample, i.e. a cluster sample. The rationale beyond choosing five and four stars’ hotels is that these hotels are supposed to be involved in Internet and Communication Technologies (ICT). The one-stage cluster sampling is opted because it allows the inclusion of all units of the two clusters in the sample.

The survey consisted mainly of interviews with general managers and a questionnaire structured around twelve mixed questions (close and open-ended questions), addressed to persons in-charged of Social Media in the surveyed hotels. The survey is basically explorative. Social Media and crisis management are the two dependent variables that the questionnaire aims at measuring their interdependence from one side, and at identifying the variables that influence them from the other.

This was facilitated by the use of SPSS version 22.0.

This methodological process enabled the collection of relevant data that was analyzed in light of the theoretical framework discussed above as well as of information drawn from websites and Social Media outlets used by our sample of hotels.

## 6. Analyzing Beirut-based hotels' attitudes towards Social Media

Our survey came up with thirty filled questionnaire out of 37. Seven hotels refused to participate.

### 6.1 Linear analysis

The linear analysis of the results allows to draw the following profile for participants:

40% are five stars hotels and 60% are four stars. 80% are chain hotels distributed as follows: 50% international chain, 10% regional and 20% national. All hotels (chains and individuals) are active on Social Media, particularly on platforms related primary to blog, comments and forums (31%), bookmarking (23.8%) and to social networks (19%).

**Table 1.** Types of Social Media platforms used by our sample of hotels

What type of Social Media does the hotel use?	Frequencies (%)
Social Networks	19.0%
Bookmarking sites	23.8%
Social News	4.8%
Media Sharing	7.1%
Microblogging	14.3%
Blog, comments and forums	31.0%
Others, please specify	00.0%
Total	100.0%

60% of participating hotels consider Social Media a part of the marketing department, while 30% has an independent Social Media department. The main usage of Social Media in our hotels is for marketing purposes (47.5%) followed by customer relationship management (32.2%).

Another important characteristic of our sample is that 76.7% of hotels declared being engaged in Social Media Analytics (SMA). 43.3% of them have a SMA software, 33.4 % refers to an outsourcing company to manage the big data generated from their Social Media outlets and 23.3% analyze it individually (by appointing an employee to do so).

On other track, all participating hotels agree that Lebanon is witnessing a tourism crisis and they are trying to face its impacts by making promotional campaigns (42.6%), searching for new markets (29.5%) and by communicating on Social Media (19.7%).

**Table 2.** Types of actions taken by the hotels to face the crisis

What type of actions the hotel is taking to face the impact of the crisis?	Frequencies (%)
Promotional campaigns	42.6%
Product reformulation	8.2%
Search for new markets	29.5%
Social Media Communication	19.7%
Others, please specify	00.0%
Total	100.0%

While 42.7% of hotels considers Social Media a tool to manage tourism crisis, only 19.2% declares having a SMA software for crisis informatics. Still, the most important finding is that 70% of hotels don't consider themselves involved in managing a tourism crisis at the national level.

## 6.2 Correlation analysis

A cross tabulation is made respectively between the "Hotel classification" and the variables related to the "department responsible of Social Media" in the hotel, "use of Social Media Analytics (SMA)" and "perception of Social Media as tourism crisis management tool". The Pearson Chi Square test was significant in the three actions, meaning that there is an association between the hotel classification (four or five stars) and the importance given to Social Media in the hotel operation.

Also, another significant association is noted between the "Hotel type (chain or individual)" and the "use of Social Media Analytics (SMA)". This means that chains hotels are most likely to use Social Media Analytics than individual ones. A correlation is found as well between the "hotel's engagement in Social Media Analytics" and "the way it manages big data generated from Social Media". This indicates that our hotels are aware of SMA and link it to the management of big data generated from Social Media.

**Table 3.** Cross tabulation (How does the hotel manage the big data generated from Social Media? \* Is your hotel engaged in Social Media Analytics?)

	How does the hotel manage the big data generated from Social Media?			Total	
	Special analytical software	Outsourcing	Individual analysis		
Is your hotel engaged in Social Media Analytics?	yes	12	9	2	23
	no	1	1	5	7
Total		13	10	7	30

**Chi-Square Tests**

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	11.823	2	.003
Likelihood Ratio	10.668	2	.005
Linear-by-Linear Association	8.382	1	.004
N of Valid Cases	30		

It is important to note that the strongest correlation refers to the association that exists between the variables “having a SMA specific for crises” and “role of hotels in managing a tourism crisis at the national level”. This indicates that hotels who consider themselves involved in managing tourism crises, have a SMA software specific to crises and vice versa. Yet, the designated SMA specific to crises is the same as the SMA one. This indicates that they don’t distinguish between SMA and SMA specific to crisis and suggests that they are not aware of their existence.

## **7. Understanding Beirut-based hotels’ perception of Social Media**

A systemic analysis of results obtained from both the primary and secondary data helps in understanding how four and five stars’ Lebanese hotels located at Beirut perceive the role of Social Media in crises time. Four axes could be identified:

### **7.1 Crisis level: A determinant of hotels’ involvement**

Surveyed hotels consider that a tourism crisis hits a country. It is a national crisis and should therefore be managed by the government. It surely affects hotels, which restricted competencies – especially in Lebanon – don’t allow them to interfere efficiently. Being a commercial sector, hotels react to national tourism crises mainly by promotional campaigns, search for new markets and product reformulation. Or, these are the normal functions assigned to Social Media by these hotels; this leads to conclude that Social Media is not seen by Beirut-based Hotels as a tool to handle to face national tourism crisis.

However, if the crisis hits the hotel itself, it becomes another issue. Hoteliers don’t count on the national tourism institutions to help in encountering an individual crisis, rather they use all tools that could potentially contribute in maintaining the hotel’s reputation, image and position. Here, Social Media is used as a crisis communication means.

This vision don’t seem to change with hotel type and / or classification. Even hotels belonging to international chains share this vision of crisis level, which decides their degree of response. Social Media is seen as a part of the crisis communication kit only when the hotel is itself subject to crisis.

### **7.2 Social Media: An element of the marketing matrix**

More than half of surveyed hotels (60%) assigns the Social Media responsibility to their marketing department. Only 30% have a Social Media department. The others relate it either to customer service department (10%) or to sales department (10%). This means that Social Media is mostly regarded as a marketing tool, an assumption which has been confirmed by the usage of Social Media in our hotels. Indeed, marketing and customer relationship management appears to be the most frequent selected responses, while the other options (Business Intelligence, Strategic management and recruitment) are almost disregarded. Similar disinterest is observed when posing Social Media as a crisis management tool, 63.3% of hotels disagree.

Although four and five stars Beirut-based hotels are active on different Social Media platforms (Social Network, Bookmarking sites, Social news, Media sharing, Microblogging, Blog comments and forums), the majority confines Social Media to the sphere of marketing. This suggests that they focus on its communicative and relational dimensions and overlook its informative scope. This may be explained by the point that they consider Social Media data inappropriate, biased and subjective. Actually, Social Media is a virtual forum where anybody can say anything, no controlling authority is there to validate what's being argued. This devaluates the circulated information which happens to be short-dated and volatile. Our hotels don't seem interested in this type of information to build their strategies upon.

Social Media is seen by our hotels as a hybrid promotional mix element. This is why they strive to be present on different types of Social Media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, You Tube, LinkedIn, Google+, Pinterest, etc.). Each platform enables them to promote themselves in a different way and to both push their products to the customers and drag customers to their products. This latter is what Social Media added to their promotional activities. Gaming, prizes, competitions, quizzes, and many others playing items are used to promote their products and services, and to gain customer loyalty. Social Media opened up to our hotels tracks for introducing their new products, boosting their existing ones and rewarding their loyal customers. The Four Seasons hotel for example displayed on its Facebook page a photo showing the traffic jam around the hotel and invited people stuck in it to call the hotel in 20 minutes to get a free access to its spa center. This "flash" promotion would keep the eye of customers on the hotel's Social Media pages to seize such opportunities. It also comforts customers who feel that the hotel is close to them and cares about them. At the same time, it enables the hotel to promote its products, strengthen its position and gain customers.

### **7.3 Social Media Analytics: A privilege for chain hotels**

76.7% from our surveyed hotels declare being engaged in Social Media Analytics. 43.3% have access to a SMA system, 33.4% of them refers to an outsourcing company to manage the data generated from their Social Media outlets and 23.3% make a manual analysis. This means that the majority of our hotels are aware about the importance of analyzing Social Media data.

"REVINATE" is designated by our hotels using SMA as the software that helps them analyze Social Media data. Mainly international and regional chain hotels use this informatics system that helps hotels know what is being said about them. It "aggregates feedback from multiple sites and analyzes it, offering signals that hotel managers can use to address problems or play up strengths" (revinate.com, 2016). Still, it requires subscription fees that may be beyond the capacity of individual Lebanese hotels. Our hotels use "REVINATE" mainly for benchmarking and for monitoring their brand image. It helps them identify market trends, monitor competitors' activities and evaluate their performance.

"Social4ce" is named by our hotels calling an outsourcing company to analyze their Social Media data. This company presents itself as a "boutique consulting firm focused on digital business and Social Media" (social4ce.com, 2016). Mainly small national chain hotels use this service. Yet, they recognize that it remains a specific and ad hoc Social Media analysis way that doesn't allow to see properly the broad picture in a dynamic hospitality sector.

As for individual analysis of Social Media, it is found in individual hotels where someone is appointed to monitor comments, reviews, feedbacks, etc. on the hotel's Social Media platforms and to report it to the marketing manager. These hoteliers recognize that Social Media Analytics software could enhance their management decisions, but cannot get access to it mainly for financial reasons.

Based on, we conclude that the importance of Social Media Analytics is recognized by almost all surveyed hotels, but it is merely used by chain hotels. The others either refers to a consulting firm, or analyze it "manually". In these two modes, outputs are mostly marketing-oriented.

### **7.4 Social Media Analytics for crisis management: a grey area for Lebanese hotels**

While all surveyed hotels agree that Lebanon is witnessing a tourism crisis, only 36.7% consider Social Media a tourism crisis management tool. This indicates that Lebanese hotels are still unconscious about the efficient role of Social Media in managing tourism crisis that they consider a national issue, thus no role for them - as independent private entity - to contribute it its management.

As for having or using a specific SMA software for crisis, it is not surprising to find out that those who do not believe in the role of Social Media in crisis time, do not have a SMA crisis informatics' system. On the other side, those who declared having it (36.7%), designate "REVINATE" as their SMA crisis management software. This means that they do not differentiate between Social Media Analytics and Social Media Analytics specific for crisis management. Many assumptions can be raised here: first, being disintegrated from managing the Lebanese tourism recurrent crises, they consider such analytics a governmental issue; therefore no need to extra cost for subscribing to these systems. Second, if a crisis hits specifically the hotel or the hospitality sector, "REVINATE" would be able to predict it, monitor it and provide important insights to manage it. Third, their narrowed vision of Social Media as a communication and promotional channel and its integration to the marketing department blur its other aspects of usage. Forth, international and regional chain hotels relies on their headquarters contingency plans when it comes to crisis management.

In addition, the nature of the Lebanese tourism crisis which is basically political, makes hotels incapable to intervene efficiently in its management. Actually, when a country advises its residents not to go to certain destinations or prohibits them from going there (as it is the case lately of Arab Gulf countries' attitude towards Lebanon), no one can alleviate the negative impacts of such political decisions, except the government. In turn, the centralized Lebanese administrative system add more constraints to the intervention of private businesses / hotels in national crisis management.

## **8. Conclusion**

The valuable role of Social Media in crisis management is not subject to any doubt. Tourism crises are not exception. Theoretically, Social Media are interactive interfaces that allow exchange of information. This feature makes it a communication medium, but also a source of useful data that could help in business management, and hence in crisis management. In this respect, Lebanese hoteliers have their word to say. They approach tourism crises by levels: international, regional, national, local and individual. While they are poorly integrated in management of national tourism crises, they are completely involved in managing a crisis that hits their hotels. Here, social media can be an effective communication tool during and post crisis, less a strategic decision-making one. This is because Social Media is mostly seen as a marketing element and thus assigned marketing missions (promotion, customer relationship, advertising, ...). On the other side, this is because the access to a Social Media Analytics' software (or the development of a private one) is the privilege of financially capable hotels. Indeed, Social Media Analytics activate the role of Social Media in crisis management. It makes data readable, and eventually actionable.

Practicing Social Media Crisis Analytics is not yet common in Lebanon.

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## **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> The term “relationship marketing” (RM) was first coined by Berry (1983), who used it to describe marketing efforts that aims at “*attracting, maintaining and [...] enhancing customer relationships*” (p. 25). Over the years, the term was interchangeably used with “network marketing” and “interaction marketing” to convey the same meaning (Brodie et al, 1997).

<sup>2</sup> Marketing Mix elements, also known as the “4Ps”: product, price, place, and promotion is a framework to formulate marketing offers / strategies.

<sup>3</sup> Enabling guests to seek service from any location.

<sup>4</sup> Addressing negative reviews in a timely manner.

<sup>5</sup> Proposed by Koichi Shimizu in t 1973, the four C’s classification is a customer-oriented reformulation of four Ps. It includes **Commodity** (replacing Products), **Cost** (replacing Price), **Channel** (replacing Place) and **Communication** (replacing Promotion).

<sup>6</sup> According to Mrs. Sarine Ammar, Head of Hotels’ Department at the Lebanese Ministry of Tourism.

<sup>7</sup> Based on Phi and Cramer’s V tests. The obtained value is .408 which denotes a strong relation between the two variables.