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Digital Communication and the Crisis Management in Hotel Management: A Perspective in the Euroregion North of Portugal and Galicia (ERNPG)

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Abstract: The current unprecedented globalization of the social economy, with worldwide mobility of people, products and services in an increasingly connected market and society, has promoted the rapid geographic spread of the coronavirus (i.e., crisis management) outbreak, negatively affecting tourists' behavior and their well-being, whether due to restrictions imposed by governments on international travel, or due to tourists' fear of catching the disease. This manuscript aims to understand how digital communication has helped the tourism industry in general and the hotel context in particular to face the negative consequences caused by the new coronavirus pandemic. The development of the research followed a qualitative methodological approach, constituting an exploratory study, based on four semi-structured interviews with managers of hotel establishments, located in the Northern Region of Portugal and Galicia. As main conclusions, it is possible to highlight that digital communication and the use of social networks were fundamental tools for hotel establishments during the pandemic caused by COVID-19, especially during the confinement period, when establishments had to close, many of them completely. There were many changes brought about in the tourism industry in the Euroregion of Northern Portugal and Galicia (ERNPG), with an increase in domestic tourism, a decrease in the external market and a change in tourist profile and behavior, whether due to sanitary and public health issues that induced fear of travel, or by the measures imposed by the government that prevented such trips. According to the strategies implemented by the hotel establishments, the intensification of digital communication use and social networks stands out, since, for a long time, it consisted of the only connecting tool between the hotel and its customers and the initiatives of the Regional Entities and Turismo de Portugal (regional and national DMOs), through numerous training courses in the area of digital marketing and the implementation of hygiene, sustainable and safety measures in hotel establishments. Regarding the future of tourism, it is expected that it will recover in the coming years and approach the historical values of previous years, given the advance in vaccination against the disease and the tourist's desire to travel. In the short term, strategies are expected from hotel establishments that include valuing the destination on digital marketing platforms through attracting qualified human resources and a commitment towards tourism sustainability.

Keywords: digital communication; sustainable concerns; crisis management; ERNPG; cross-border region



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1. Introduction

Cross-border regions represent one of the several tourism destination typologies (and segments) that have been quickly integrated and adapted to the global tourism demand and grabbed the attention of many academic scholars (c.f., [Ahn et al. 2023](#); [Stoffelen and Vanneste 2017](#)). The need to understand and analyze this special form of tourism has been developed due to the change in tourism demand trends, favoring the practice of tourism with a higher nature appeal together with the discovery of cross-border traditions ([Santos et al. 2022](#)). Previous studies (c.f., [Paniagua et al. 2015](#); [Sousa et al. 2023](#); [Zainal-Abidin et al. 2023](#); [Ozer et al. 2022](#)) have shown the importance of digital communication in increasing the awareness of tourist destinations and tourism demand. Digital communication is, progressively, a valuable tool for territorial and sustainable management and for the competitive advantage of tourism destinations (particularly in the pandemic context and in the post-pandemic context of economic recovery) (c.f., [De Filippo et al. 2020](#); [Estanyol 2022](#); [Cambra-Fierro et al. 2022](#); [Liberato et al. 2022](#)).

Although the full comprehension of the factors influencing cross-border tourism consumption behavior (i.e., niche marketing perspective) constitutes an important aspect in a highly competitive industry, previous papers did not explore the role of digital communication and sustainable concerns. The main objective of the study is to understand how digital communication can help hotel management respond to the pandemic context experienced in the tourism industry in the Euroregion of Northern Portugal and Galicia. As such, the objectives of this study are: (i) to understand how hotel managers adapt to the different phases experienced during the COVID-19; (ii) to analyze and identify implemented strategies; (iii) to understand the process of learning and improving hotel management relatively to the use of digital communication. Strategies are expected from hotel establishments that include valuing the destination on digital marketing platforms through attracting qualified human resources and a commitment towards tourism sustainability. Management in crisis contexts is an important topic, with special emphasis in the pandemic and post-pandemic context, due to the (management) implications felt by companies in general, and transversal to various sectors of activity and industry (e.g., tourism, hospitality, services). This manuscript is a guide tool for tourism destinations and territorial managers/stakeholders, considering that it is strongly focused on the digital aspect (communication and marketing) and on sustainability (of territories). Although the pandemic context is uncertain (considering the “post-pandemic” period), the manuscript will present insights into theory (marketing and cross-border tourism) and practice (land management and digital communication).

2. Literature Review

2.1. Cross-Border Region (CBR) and Digital Communication

As guests of a cross-border region (CBR), visitors are, naturally, the centerpiece of the border tourism process ([Wendt et al. 2021](#)). Regardless of their origin, age, or degree of knowledge about regions, cross-border tourists are sensation seekers who look for unique emotions to later remember ([Leick et al. 2021](#)). Although several segments of cross-border tourists (e.g., Way of St. James, rural tourism, health tourism (and thermalism), religious tourism, pilgrimage tourism) have been identified, they all have in common the interest and passion for different countries, which serves as a key motivator to visit a specific (cross-border) region ([Maratovna et al. 2021](#); [Sergeyeva et al. 2022](#); [Kropinova 2021](#)). CBR should be a product in which it is easy to establish enduring emotional relationships.

Therefore, the growth of internet use played a key role in business performance, becoming a common practice in all companies. The importance of the Internet is recognized by all its users, from the consumer to the manager who seeks, in this communication, a way to advertise their products and services, not just in a Business-to-Business and Business-to-Consumer, but also as a source of privileged information for offline consumer decision making ([Buhalis and O'Connor 2005](#)). In an increasingly globalized society, ICT (or information and communications technology (or technologies), is the infrastructure and

components that enable modern computing) together with the Internet have contributed to increasing competitiveness among companies, offering opportunities for differentiation, cost reduction, efficiency and speed of response, which makes these technologies, one of the most important partners business management. Digital marketing has an essential role in communication, sustainable innovation, and support of business strategy, which is fundamental to understanding consumers, especially with regard to their individual preferences and needs. Companies must use this tool to find trends and behavioral factors that stimulate the commercialization of the product sold or the service provided (Rumangkit and Hadi 2023).

According to Paniagua et al. (2015), digital communication known as data communication or data transmission, is the transfer of data or information using digital signals over a point-to-point (P2P) channel. A P2P connection is a mode of communication between two communication endpoints. Communicating digitally is a communication technique in which thoughts, data or information are digitally encoded as discreet signals. These signals are electronically transferred to the recipients.

Thus, digital communication offers marketing professionals opportunities to enhance customer relationships through personalized service, find new partners in the market, increase brand recognition, and, consequently, increase sales (Lacarcel and Huete 2023).

For instance, cross-border regions (e.g., Euro-Region of North Portugal and Galicia (ERNPG)) have a strategic advantage, which gives them unique characteristics of typicity, that facilitates positioning themselves better in the minds of consumers when compared to other businesses or regions (Oliveira 2015; Ladeiras et al. 2014; Liberato et al. 2018). However, it is essential to understand that (in this field) sustainability occupies a central concern in the management of tourist destinations. The context of cross-border (tourism) regions (CBR) and the context of digital marketing are two axes strongly debated in the academic community (with special relevance in the pandemic and post-pandemic context). However, sustainability is a common vector to both axes and (progressively) it is important to understand how CBR destinations can favor sustainable behaviors (using digital tools and digital communication) (Diez-Martin et al. 2019; Vinzenz et al. 2019; Chirodea et al. 2022). Previous studies (c.f., Sousa et al. 2023; Zainal-Abidin et al. 2023) seem to show that the use of digital instruments (e.g., social networks, virtual tourism, email marketing) may contribute positively to the benefit of sustainability (i.e., lower pollution, lower waste, lower use of physical resources) (Kozak and Buhalis 2019).

2.2. Sustainable Orientation

According to (James et al. 2015), one of the pillars of the sustainability triad is 'social sustainability'. It is difficult to grasp, and thus to define, as it encompasses all the interconnected spheres of human life (James et al. 2015). Traditionally, 'social sustainability' complies with the current and future generations in areas such as community development and resilience, cultural competence, (health) equity, human adaptation and rights, labor rights, livability, placemaking, social capital, social equity, social justice, social support, and social responsibility. An uncontrolled shift from physical activity to eLeisure, eTourism, eSport and virtual reality (Howaniec and Lis 2020) may have not only a negative impact on health but may also seriously disrupt social relations. On the other hand, leisure in cross-border regions is an important part of sustainable development. Today, many people migrate to large cities, which are destinations for numerous individual and mass tourists who often combine leisure with business or, for example, thermalism or medical services (Machnik and Lubowiecki-Vikuk 2020). Both groups of tourists are looking for innovative solutions with regard to leisure. These are available in the smart city/'happy city', where the emphasis is placed not only on technological progress but above all on social innovation (Lubowiecki-Vikuk et al. 2021). According to Kolny (2021), in the trend of sustainable consumption during leisure time, voluntary simplicity or minimalism should also be mentioned. It means that the consumer limits material consumption in order to release resources of money and time, as well as to seek satisfaction through the intangible

aspects of life. This situation can be identified with accepting lower incomes and lower levels of consumption (e.g., cross-border regions) in exchange for having more leisure time for rest and the freedom to achieve life goals, the achievement of which does not depend on the amount of money.

3. Materials and Methods

The theoretical framework allowed us to conclude that there are several studies (c.f., [Paniagua et al. 2015](#); [Sousa et al. 2023](#); [Zainal-Abidin et al. 2023](#); [Ozer et al. 2022](#)) carried out with the objective of perceiving the role of social networks and digital communication in hotel management. However, in the face of the recent Pandemic declared by the World Health Organization caused by acute severe respiratory syndrome Coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2), it was possible to verify that information regarding this approach is scarce. In this way, the relevance of this research will be assessed from the perspective of realizing how digital communication helped hotel managers combat the crisis in the tourism industry caused by the new coronavirus. In view of the above, the question in the present study is as follows: “How can digital communication help hotel management to respond to the pandemic context lived in the tourism industry in the Northern Region in Portugal and Galicia?” In the sense of identifying and realizing the impacts of digital communication on management response to the pandemic context we currently live, the following objectives are outlined: (1) to understand how hotel managers adapt to the different phases experienced during COVID-19; (2) to analyze the strategies implemented and identify those that were most successful in the sustainability aspect; (3) to understand how the relative hotel management and improvement process went to the use of digital communication (and, consequently, predisposition to sustainable behaviors). Of the multiple paradigms that exist (e.g., post-positivism, constructivist, critical, transformative), each aims to address a number of practical consequences or answers to practical questions differently in order to assist in conducting research. The constructivist paradigm is developed in the context of the social sciences and emphasizes the subjective experiences of people based essentially on historical and social contexts. This view suggests that we are actively linked in the construction and reconstruction of meanings through our daily interactions and so the philosophers of this paradigm claim that there is no absolute truth, and each individual has a different perception of reality ([Leavy 2017](#)). Qualitative data consist fundamentally of interviews, observations, and review of documents. The interviews provide data to the researcher to create opinions, perceptions, experiences, feelings, and knowledge about participants. Observations allow the researcher to collect field notes, which can represent behaviors, interactions, activities, and processes. Documents can be of various types from text, photos and objects, and provide access to information that cannot be observed or counted. For this research, the method chosen was the interview, most specifically individual semi-structured interviews. The purpose of research interviews is to explore points of view, experiences, beliefs and/or motivations of individuals on specific issues. This method is presented as the most suitable in this research, where little is known about how to manage communication on digital platforms in pandemic contexts, in one of the most affected industries. There are three types of interviews: structured, semi-structured, and unstructured. The present research chose semi-structured interviews. This type of interview consists of planning key questions that help define the areas we want to explore and simultaneously allow the researcher and participant to ramble to meet an idea or response in greater detail. The flexibility of this approach allows both the researcher and participants to address other issues, even if they were not planned. In this case, an analysis will be made of the presence and online behavior of hotel establishments chosen from four and five stars through the benchmarking process, aiming to diagnose and analyze good practices in the social networks of the hotels under study to realize how they led their marketing strategies to reverse the negative tendency imposed by the pandemic. This analysis allows the identification of the digital communication actions made on the most successful social networks and, on the contrary, the ones that failed. The interviews were

carried out with 4 participants (concerning cross-border tourism and hospitality in the north of Portugal and Galicia) (Appendix A). The interview guide was divided into 3 parts, with 3 objectives, along with 13 questions. The first part (first objective): to analyze the implemented strategies and identify those that were more successful and those that were not so successful. The second objective: to understand how organizations have adapted to the different phases experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic. Crisis management is an important topic, with special emphasis in the pandemic and post-pandemic context, due to the (management) implications felt by companies in general, and transversal to various sectors of activity and industry (e.g., tourism, hospitality, services). The last objective: to understand how the process of learning and improving hotel management was in relation to the use of digital communication.

4. Euroregion North of Portugal and Galicia

It is meant by Europe, the area that extends beyond borders, that separates one or more European countries and, which, in addition, verifies certain facts, namely which benefits from a strategic development plan, involving the participation of different agents local and regional, coordinated by a structure with legal personality; Sharing cross-border flows to a greater extent possible and social and cultural equipment leading to socioeconomic positive effects on both sides of the border; and involving intense cooperation between the main urban centers, research poles, crossborder businesses and business associations (Vila et al. 2020). the admission of the Iberian Peninsula to the European Union constituted a milestone in the history of Portugal and Spain.

The Euroregion formed by Galicia (Spain) and the North Region of Portugal constitutes a cross-border space, located in the Northwest of the Iberian Peninsula, occupying an area of 50.8 thousand km² and where around 6.3 million people live. Compared to the other regions of the European Union, it produces and distributes a wealth that represents only 60% of the average Gross Domestic Product per capita of the Union. With 2.8 million working people aged 16 and over (320,000 unemployed individuals), the services sector is the main employer sector, which absorbs 46% of the employed resident population. There is a big difference between the two regions in terms of population density; that of Galicia is just over half of the North Region. It should be noted, as a significant fact, that within the North Region, there is a greater concentration of population in Greater Porto and in the surrounding NUTS III and, in Galicia, in the NUTS A Coruña and Pontevedra, fundamentally in the coastal zone, and in the Rias Bajas and the Golfo Artabro, where the largest cities and main ports are located.

The need to reinforce cultural, social, and economic ties, between Galicia and North Portugal, along with several factors such as the territorial and cultural proximity of these regions led to the creation of the first Iberian Euroregion in 2008. In 1991, the 'Galicia-Norte Working Community' had already been created, which represented the first generation of crossborder cooperation in democracy. Historically, Galicia and northern Portugal have always had strong ties. They constitute two European territories in the context of the European Union that share nearby cultural, historical, and geographical identities. However, they have similar problems and difficulties regarding competitiveness, development, and convergence with national and European levels in areas such as Policy and Administration (Sousa and Simões 2019). European crossborder tourism, as a mechanism of socio-cultural exchange, contributed to the creation of new European multinational identifications and identifications, territorial cohesion and transformation of the meanings and representations of the 'Luso-Galega' border. In this context, tourism emerges as an opportunity for crossborder development, with the possibility of bringing the two countries closer. From the point of view of economic and social agents, there is a clear and manifest willingness to develop the framing structures of crossborder tourism, which is gaining more importance every day (Pereira et al. 2022). With about 3.6 million inhabitants, the northern region concentrates approximately 35% of the population resident in Portugal, ensures close to 39% of national exports, and represents about 29% of the national economy's GDP. This region is composed

of 86 municipalities and 1426 parishes (Pereira et al. 2022). Municipalities are organized in eight Intermunicipal Communities (CIM), which constitute level III of the nomenclature of territorial units for statistical purposes (NUTS), approved by the European Commission and are formed by Minho-Lima, Cávado, Ave, Greater Porto, Tâmega, between Douro and Vouga, Douro and Alto Trás-os-Montes (CCDRN 2021). In recent years, this region has been distinguished by different foreign entities, such as the best European destination, registering a growing increase in visitors. The Northern Region is a culturally diverse region. Of the various destinations it offers, the places classified by UNESCO are highlighted as a Heritage of Humanity, namely the Historic Center of Porto, prehistoric river art sites of the Côa River Valley and Siega Verde, the Historic Center of Guimarães, Alto Douro Vineyard and the Sanctuary of the Bom Jesus do Monte in Braga (Ferreira et al. 2022). Galicia is a Spanish autonomous community formed by the provinces of Corunha, Lugo, Ourense and Pontevedra. These, in turn, are divided into counties, municipalities, parishes, villages and places. Its capital is Santiago de Compostela, located in the province of Corunha, the most populous city in Galicia and generating greater wealth. According to CCDRN 2021, this community is inhabited by about 2.7 million people. The Galicia region has several tourist attractions. Of the various places we can visit, we can point out: Ribeira Sacra, Serra da Capelada, the Way of Saint James and the Cíes Islands (Rodríguez-Vázquez et al. 2023). The Way of St. James is a pilgrimage route to Santiago de Compostela. This path was declared the first European itinerary of cultural interest by the Council of Europe. It is the route with the highest historical tradition, internationally recognized. It starts in RancesCalles (Navarre) and arrives in Santiago de Compostela, after a 750-kilometer route. It is a path that runs throughout Europe until the north of Spain, going through various churches, bridges, cathedrals, and monasteries, among others (Magnou and Araújo-Vila 2022; De Uña-Álvarez and Villarino-Pérez 2022; Rodríguez-Vázquez et al. 2023; Casais and Sousa 2020).

5. Results and Discussion

The present study was released, via electronic contact, with the population in the study, requesting the participation of the four managers of the hotel units. In the first phase, the objectives and purpose of the study were explained to the participants and therefore the scheduling of the interview. Due to the pandemic caused by COVID-19, the interviews were conducted at a distance through the Zoom online platform during September 2021 and January 2022. Interviews that were not possible to perform this way were answered in written form by participants. Being the research followed by the perspective of the confidentiality and anonymity of the interviewees, they will be identified by the designation “P” (participant) and numerically (1 and 4). Compared with the literature, our manuscript presents complementary (theoretical and practical) contributions. Specifically, the context of “crisis management” and digital communication.

The pandemic brought different moments to tourist companies. In the first phase, after the initial shock of the border closure and restriction on people’s mobility, in March 2020, there was a need for companies to adapt and think about reorganizing their market segmentation strategies to face the impact negative caused by the pandemic. The main advantage of the identified digital communication was that hotel establishments could maintain contact with their customers and the public that accompanied them. With the closure of hotels and people forced to stay home due to the measures imposed by the government, this type of communication became the only option that entrepreneurs had to be related to customers, since most People nowadays have online access at any time of day, regardless of where they are. Thus, digital communication became fundamental in the marketing strategy of establishments so that communication, between company and customer would not fully disappear. Digital communication (...) was, before the pandemic, a tool with much potential and which tourism entrepreneurs should be fully used, as suddenly, in the context of the pandemic, became the only one (p. 3). Thus, the first need was to communicate the closure of the hotel establishment and later its reopening

and communication of the security measures implemented by the companies (p. 3). Thanks to the rapid dissemination of information that digital communication allows, especially through websites and social networks, customers were warned that the hotel unit was closed, and much more importantly, they would know when it would reopen (p. 2); also, they were informed of the requirements imposed by the General Directorate of Health, regarding the implemented hygiene and safety programs (p. 4). Given the diversity of offers, people are currently more thoughtful and already choose to see what they really want and what interests them (p. 2). The presence on online digital platforms allows communication between the establishment and its customers to be faster; the establishment is always present online, with updated information for when customers look for it. Contrary to what happened in the past, when customers had to look for travel agencies in search of information, at this moment establishments facilitate customer communication by reducing or eliminating paper use, making all the information necessary and useful for customers in digital format (p. 4). Inside the hotel establishments continued to communicate with employees, always trying to exist greater proximity between them, without stopping connection because overnight, the establishment stopped open 24 h, and we stopped being with the people we were usually with (p. 2).

Since they were forced to close in early March the strategy has always been online. Online digital communication has a greater weight in certain market segments such as business, essentially on online newspapers and social networks (p. 4). There was a great concern for the hotel establishments to maintain their reputation on social networks and make customers feel safe to reserve, despite the uncertainty regarding the evolution of the pandemic and reopening of the establishment. Thus, even when they were closed, they sought to keep contact with their customers weekly or monthly to promote the online establishment with customers, with the objective of getting future reserves and consequently generating profits as they were fully closed for months. In this sense, one of the main strategies Implemented was e-commerce, where they started selling vouchers for customers to enjoy when the establishment opens (p. 1) and running promotion campaigns for those who have never stopped working during the pandemic (p. 2). On the other hand, there was awareness of the tourism entrepreneurs who had to redefine market segmentation. Companies working with intercontinental and distant markets had to rethink the strategy for the national and proximity markets. The domestic market was the one that reacted in tourism demand terms because it was the one that could most respond to the needs of customers since they did not have the border issue (p. 3) and so many establishments were obliged to implement new strategies in online communication to respond to domestic tourism. Another strategy implemented was the communication of the new conditions that hotel establishments were required to adopt, in the new context. The pandemic has brought numerous concerns to customers and several details of operation to hotel establishments, regarding check-in and cancellation conditions, which led establishments to innovate and create online applications that allowed to add all rules, information, conduct and behavior to be adopted at the hotel (p. 4). The strategies implemented by the establishments have varied a lot and all hotels tried to adapt in order to meet either their needs, and their customers. One of the most successful strategies that occurred early in confinement in March was the implementation of e-commerce, i.e., online sales, where tourism entrepreneurs saw in this strategy a good opportunity to start selling vouchers, something they had never done. However, they saw in the confinement period the perfect opportunity and created, for the first time, four types of vouchers. People with the optimism that everything would go back to normal began to buy and it worked very well (p. 1). But this same strategy did not work so well with people who lived in other countries or in distant regions, for the fear of people travelling, due to the high restriction measures applied in the tourism industry. However, the balance of this strategy was positive and represented a total learning given by the pandemic (p. 1). With the use of vouchers, the hotel was able to recover sales. In one of the months they were closed, they sold vouchers for a much lower price than the average sale price, especially when compared to the summer season. They

were sold on Google and Facebook using digital payment systems and managed to sell more vouchers than they had planned when they thought they couldn't sell any because they were closed. These vouchers were valid for one year but had certain conditions imposed by the hotel, namely the months when they could be used. People have been consuming the vouchers over time, many people used them during the summer season, others will still enjoy them, and others will end up missing the opportunity due to passing the deadline (p. 1). The balance of this strategy was very positive and significant for the hotel and represented a total learning given by the pandemic occurring at the ideal moment (p. 1). Firstly, because they were able to achieve performance to keep the hotel operating in the months they were closed and, on the other hand, although they sold low-cost vouchers, those that were not used within the tax time have paid off for the price of the vouchers consumed. Another successful strategy was to offer discounts to professionals considered essential during the pandemic. It was implemented when the establishment opened in 2020 and intends to be used again in the future, in order to motivate people who were, during the pandemic, always working, to go back for leisure time in these establishments at affordable prices (p. 2).

Investing in the "Clean & Safe" training, promoted by Turismo de Portugal, in the field of cleaning and disinfection, gave a competitive advantage to participating establishments, because this certificate made customers look more, and the sharing of this information was only possible through the use of digital communication which allowed to share this information with hotel followers. Since the supply of hotel establishments is additional, the customer's choice is more thoughtful, so it is also possible to lose market advantage when there is no bet on cleaning and disinfection, especially in a full pandemic. The fact that hotel establishments invest in this training results in a positive image in marketing strategy (p. 2). Although this process is already underway in many establishments, the pandemic has accelerated an assertive and quick implementation of hygiene and safety procedures in hotel establishments, to cope with the new reality (p. 4). The Portuguese Tourism Training Academy, bet on digital marketing training programs for tourism entrepreneurs and demand surpassed what was expected. Thousands of training hours were provided consisting of two programs, one designated for sustainability upgrade and the other for digital upgrade. The upgrade trained thousands of human resources, and all tourism professionals and was repeated several times during the pandemic, being still available to continue its main purpose. During the pandemic phase, entrepreneurs realized that they really had to use digital tools to their advantage and many of them realized they didn't know how to use them, and their potential. All tourism professionals realized that they had specific knowledge gaps and had to improve their skills in certain areas (p. 3). Regarding strategies that were not so successful, it is possible to highlight a particular one concerning a paid digital campaign made during the summer, which aimed to raise a few followers. This objective was not achieved, and the establishment's manager considers that it was an investment that could have been saved because they were able to gain more followers by using the right hashtags and making more attractive and creative publications (p. 1). The use of a QR Code, to direct customers to certain online pages with useful information about the hotel establishment through a mobile device, such as a mobile phone or tablet, was implemented so that no surfaces had to be touched, given the nature of the virus. However, this measure was not easy to see for most customers, especially the most senior who are not used to technology and sometimes, do not have internet on the mobile phone (p. 4). One of the strategies most remarkable was when hotels decided to invest in something no one sold before. They sold rooms for teleworking, that is, to people who had to be at home teleworking but were tired of being at home because of children, either because the space was very small or for another reason that justified it. So, some hotels, especially city hotels, prepared the rooms as if they were small offices, where people could go to work and where they even had lunch service. There were many hotels that advertised this service, but there were not many hotels that sold this because people were not willing to leave home to go to a hotel (p. 3). There were hotels with restoration services that

invested in takeaway and delivery services, such as restaurants, but were not as lucky as these, especially in the dining delivery, and this is because it is not the main product of these establishments. They saw this service as an opportunity, but they were not as well prepared as restaurants. Finally, the misuse of digital communication tools leads to managers not being intentional in their online strategies. Digital communication has been proliferating from beginning to end throughout the pandemic (p. 4). Those who already used digital communication and did it well did not use more during the pandemic. The frequency of use must have been maintained, but the type of shared content was different. By the time hotel establishments were closed, many were those who sought to make publications of interest, without commercial content, where they gave people a reason to keep them involved with social networks and brand blogs. Hotels have managed to maintain and most likely gain followers, i.e., customers in general because they invested in useful, interesting and generous content during the pandemic. Managers and marketing representatives engaged with customers by sharing useful information such as revenue and exercise tutorials and did so to give and receive nothing in return but visualizations, customer interest and involvement. After reopening, shared content began to be more commercial to encourage tourism products' reservation and commercialization. However, many establishments began this strategy before opening, but as uncertainty was so great it was very difficult to realize whether the establishment would open and when and what restrictions would be in force. It was very difficult to know who was communicating to whom, and who was the target audience we wanted to reach (p. 3).

Thus, most of those interviewed recognize that digital communication was used with greater predominance in the months they were closed and when they were going to reopen (p. 1), where almost daily publications were made to advertise the establishment (p. 2). For companies that were already used to advertising the establishment regularly on their social networks, the frequency did not change but there was more commercial communication content and more generosity during the confinement period (p. 3). The study addressed a very specific context, a very focused context, which was the "crossborder" context of a contiguous region between two countries (CBR—ERNPG). This specific context helps to understand why the sample base is limited. At the same time, the empirical study was developed during the COVID-19 pandemic, at a time when several hotels were closed.

6. Conclusions

6.1. Theoretical and Practical Contributions

The pandemic caused by crisis management (e.g., COVID-19) is the most significant crisis in all the human history, surpassing the size of other world-known crises, such as those of a world war. The impacts caused by this disease have not been limited to the loss of human lives, but also include short and long-term social, economic, and political effects (Toanoglou et al. 2022; Pitanatri et al. 2022), which have caused significant changes in the life of society, namely the dimensions of social life, mobility, socialization, consumption patterns, leisure and work. Social and economic deterioration seems evident, especially in the tourism industry, which suffered a significant drop in revenues and was one of the most affected sectors and industries by the pandemic. In this sense, this manuscript focuses on the analysis of digital communication as a way of responding to the negative effects caused by the currently existing pandemic. The overall objective of the research is to understand how digital communication helped hotel management respond to the pandemic context in the tourism industry in the region of Northern Portugal and Galicia. Therefore, as specific objectives, the study aims to analyze the strategies implemented, identifying either the ones that were most successful and those that failed, to realize how organizations adapted to the different phases experienced during the pandemic and understand the learning process and improvement of hotel management regarding the use of digital communication.

During the pandemic, the main strategies of using digital platforms common to all hotels were the communication of the establishment's closure, reopening and communication of security measures implemented by companies, causing concern on the part of managers

in maintaining the reputation of the establishment online, keeping the information always updated inducing customers to feel safe to book and travel. One of the main strategies implemented was e-commerce, where entrepreneurs sold vouchers and made promotions for customers to enjoy when the establishment opened. This strategy was one of the most important because, in the tourism industry, revenue is permanently lost due to the capacity not being sold. The application of online trade in hotel establishments forced entrepreneurs to redefine their target audience and rethink their strategies more to the domestic and proximity markets than to international and distant markets. The domestic market was the one that reacted the most because it was the one that could respond to the most needs, as it did not have the constraint of border closure. This strategy is emphasized by the World Tourism and Travel Council by stating that the pandemic has changed the focus of tourist trips and that despite uncertainties, a reinforcement of domestic tourism is expected to be enhanced through promotion campaigns that encourage people to travel locally and regionally and, therefore, to stimulate the economy itself.

Finally, the pandemic has brought numerous concerns to customers regarding check-in and cancellation conditions, which led establishments to innovate and create online applications, accessible on mobile phones or tablets, which allowed all rules, information, conduct and behavior to be adopted in the hotel establishment. This strategy was implemented so that no surfaces had to be touched, given the nature of the virus. However, this measure has failed some of the customers, especially the most senior who are not so familiar with using the internet and technology and often do not have internet on their mobile phones. There are several organizations, such as the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), that advocate advances in innovation and digital transformation, encouraging investment in digital skills and qualified human resources for this purpose. There were many companies that took advantage of the pandemic period to make a sustainability and digital upgrade. Objective: To understand how organizations adapted to the different phases experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic. The tourism industry is very conditioned by seasonality concentrated in summer. In general, occupancy rates accompanied government authorizations and prohibitions and all restrictions imposed. According to interviewees, the months where hotel establishments were most affected, were March and April 2020, compensated with the summer months, between June and September 2020. In this sense, through the data provided by the National Statistics Institute in Portugal (INE), it is possible to verify that in fact, there was an increase in hotel establishments closed or without guest movement in April 2020 and a significant decrease in August and September 2020. There was a permanent change in what managers knew they should do in terms of content, that is, foresee and know in advance what to communicate at the right time, depending on the pandemic phase. There was an exceptional demand for information on digital marketing and what should be done as the pandemic advanced. Very creative content in digital marketing was shared to involve people with the establishment even if they were not available to buy the hotel product or service. The generality of respondents acknowledged that digital communication was used with greater predominance in the months they were closed and at the time of reopening. Companies that were already used to advertising the establishment regularly on social networks did not change the frequency of publication, but the type, more commercial, and more generous content during the confinement period. There was a change in the choice of target audience to achieve, depending on the restrictions that countries had to follow in the different stages of the pandemic. Objective: Understand how the learning and improvement of hotel management was about the use of digital communication. During the pandemic, the establishments were very active on all digital platforms because people were very responsive to this type of communication. Most respondents suggest that social networks are the main customer communication platform, showing the best results in promoting the hotel establishment. However, these are not the most tangible ways to book and buy hotel services. As the literature states, companies have been focusing on social networks, with the aim of involving customers in their publications and constantly sharing information, letting consumers communicate with each other and with

the brand, increasing their recognition and notoriety. On the opposite perspective, other interviewees advocate the use of the website, directly linked to Google searches, as the platform with the most interest in hotel managers, once the research engine is critical in the purchase decision process.

The process of improving management with the use of digital communication is possible through feedback from previous publications, considering publications that have more taste or more engagement with the consumer and word of mouth (Ishida et al. 2016; Anastasiei et al. 2023; Lee et al. 2020; Bae et al. 2023). During the pandemic, it was important for hotel establishments to realize how ads work before an audience that was confined at home, not knowing when they could travel again. On the other hand, during the different stages of the pandemic, hotel companies realized that digital communication employees and managers did not have the necessary training to meet consumers' expectations and needs. They realized that it is not enough to know the digital tools, and how to work with them, but to understand what the shared content should be. The pandemic led to the investment of companies from specialized human resources that helped create relevant content on online platforms, based on the target audience that the establishment sought to retain. This investment must be seen as an influencer of customer behavior through online recognition, which generates benefits in customer relationships, loyalty, satisfaction, retention, and, additionally, greater brand loyalty and reputation. As a process of learning and improving hotel management, it is also possible to highlight the use of benchmarking, as a management tool that allows the best practices of competitors that make sense to be implemented in hotels, increasing competitive advantage in the market.

6.2. Limitations

Essentially, it is possible to highlight two limitations felt throughout the study, the first felt in the literature revision phase and the second in data collection, since the research was carried out as the pandemic situation evolved. First, since COVID-19 is a recent virus and caused a pandemic never lived before, it was possible to verify that this theme was still emerging, and therefore, the literature review required the need to research reliable information. Over the months of research, there was a recurring update of studies and scientific articles related to COVID-19 and the consequent impact of the pandemic in the tourism industry of Northern Portugal and Galicia and in consumer decision-making. This limitation allowed the references to be quite recent, as well as the information present throughout the discussion on the subject. On the other hand, the information was changing as the pandemic situation evolved, essentially from the prospects regarding the future of the hotel context and successive trends that emerged in the industry during the different stages of the pandemic. Regarding the interviews conducted, one of the most relevant limitations was the absence of response by some possible participants, especially in the region of Galicia, preventing a holistic analysis, applied to both regions, despite the recognized similarity in all the perspectives analyzed.

6.3. Future Research

One of the recommendations of this research suggests applying the study to each of the regions in particular (in Portugal and Spain) and then analyzing it globally to assess other inequalities/specificities diagnosed. It is also recommended to understand how crisis management has affected the decrease in tourist activity in the hotel context. It is noteworthy the interest, in the application of the study to the level of qualified human resources and the sustainability of tourism for the recovery of this industry. Additionally, future research could analyze the type of content, as well as their perception of tourists, in order to understand the process of engagement between hotel establishments and their consumers on digital communication platforms during crises, whether economic, public health or natural catastrophes. Additional research could explain whether content changes and related activities are strategically planned or simply driven by circumstances. It is also suggested to carry out this study from the client's perspective, that is, to resort to a

quantitative study, through questionnaires, with the objective of perceiving what customers think of the use of digital communication by hotel establishments and, analyzing the strategies implemented, identify the ones that best perceived and others not so successful. The application of questionnaires to tourists, allows us to understand the motivations of travel, the most privileged tourist products and services, and those willing to stop enjoying. Finally, it is highlighted the possibility of performing a focus group with participants, in order to analyze the objectives defined for this research, achieving more concrete data, considering future perspectives, medium- and long-term strategies, as well as new trends to be implemented. Further research on the influence of sustainable issues on cross-border tourism should be developed. There is an expectation to develop studies of a qualitative nature (i.e., in-depth interviews with specialists and stakeholders in the industry and a focus group for consumers in specific segments and niches of CBR tourism). From an interdisciplinary perspective, this manuscript presents insights into niche marketing (i.e., CBR tourism, segmentation and destination management) and local and sustainable concerns and sustainable development (i.e., digital trends).

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Institutional Review Board Statement: Ethical review and approval were waived for this study since written informed consent was obtained for the in-depth interviews before each session. In the survey, a link to the online survey platform was sent by social media and partners' social media, and at no times was contact established between researchers and participants. Moreover, the interview script and the personal questionnaire did not include any information and on histories. As such, all data accessible to the researchers were stripped of respondents' names, addresses, or birth dates and cannot be linked back to them.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: Data available upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Appendix A. Interviews (Script) Carried Out in the Context of Hospitality

Objective 1: Analyze the strategies implemented and identify those that were most successful and those that were not so successful.

1. What are the main advantages of using digital communication in adapting to the pandemic?
2. What were the new digital marketing (communication) strategies implemented to face the negative impact caused by the pandemic?
3. Which of the implemented strategies were the most successful and which were not so successful?

Objective 2: Understand how organizations have adapted to the different phases experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic.

4. Did the hotel establishment have to close during the pandemic?
5. During the pandemic, which was the time with the highest and lowest occupancy rate?
6. Was there any phase of the pandemic where you used more digital communication to advertise the establishment?
7. Have digital marketing strategies changed during the different stages of the pandemic?

Objective 3: Understand how was the process of learning and improving hotel management regarding the use of digital communication.

8. During the pandemic, did you try to be active on all digital communication platforms (for example: website, social networks, blogs) in the same way?
9. Which digital platform has the greatest impact on consumers?
10. Is the reach of publications made on different platforms proportional to the form of contact (for example, booking) with consumers?
11. How was the learning process for improving management regarding the use of digital communication?
12. Do you try to pay attention to the hotel market and understand the competitors' strategies to differentiate themselves?
13. What are the expectations for the use of social networks and digital platforms after COVID-19?

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