

# Digital Communication and Innovation Strategies in the HoReCa Industry: A Case Study of the Braşov Tavern Keepers' Guild, Romania



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**Abstract** The Hotels–Restaurants–Cafes (HoReCa) industry is vital to the economy and cultural heritage. Crises accelerate technological adoption and profoundly impact the industry. The COVID-19 pandemic presented unprecedented challenges, ranging from operational restrictions to radical shifts in consumer behavior. This chapter analyzes how the Braşov Tavern Keepers' Guild (*Breasla Cărciumarilor Braşoveni* in Romanian), a vital support for the local community and a key promoter of the hospitality industry, adapted and innovated using digital communication strategies to overcome the former crisis and strengthen its current market position. The present study highlights the importance of digital strategies for operators and businesses within the HoReCa industry, where online visibility, direct customer interaction, and optimizing the user experience on platforms such as social media and websites are crucial for attracting and retaining consumers. The analysis of online reviews from the pandemic period (2020–2022) on platforms such as TripAdvisor, Google, and Facebook reveals the direct impact of digital communication on consumer perception and satisfaction. These reviews provide a detailed overview of the member establishments' performance during and after the pandemic. In conclusion, this paper demonstrates that the Braşov Tavern Keepers' Guild's adaptability to digital trends and communication were essential to its survival and success, as shown by their ability to negotiate favorable terms with delivery platforms, maintain high consumer satisfaction in online reviews, and influence public policy during the crisis. The findings provide valuable insights for HoReCa operators, industry associations, and marketing professionals on how to use digital strategies for crisis management and sustainable growth. The findings present a model of adaptability that can be applied by similar business associations when facing crises.

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# 1 Introduction

In the contemporary era, technology and the online environment are continuously developing and becoming an essential part of daily life, as well as an integral component of the Hotels–Restaurants–Cafés (HoReCa) industry [1]. In response to these changes, the HoReCa industry is redefining its communication strategies to stay relevant and competitive. The term *HoReCa* is key in the business world [2], referring mainly to the food service sector, that is, establishments that prepare and serve food and beverages. This sector comprises commercial units that produce and sell food intended for consumption outside the home [3].

The HoReCa industry comprises a wide and diverse range of food and hospitality services, including luxury restaurants, cafés, hotels, and event catering services. It is generally influenced by tourism trends, consumer preferences, food safety regulations, and service quality. A fundamental aspect is the experience they offer consumers. From the atmosphere and interior design of restaurants to the quality of service and food preparation [4], every detail contributes to the overall impression and customer satisfaction.

The industry is essential to stimulating economic progress. It significantly impacts employment opportunities and promotes local infrastructure. It also promotes and preserves a region's cultural and gastronomic heritage and is an integral part of the travel experience for tourists. HoReCa management faces many challenges [3], including seasonal demand fluctuations, efficient stock management, and staff recruitment and training [5]. To remain competitive, businesses in this field must adapt to new technologies and modern management practices to optimize their operations.

In 2020, the industry was profoundly affected by the global pandemic due to restrictive measures imposed by authorities. Without financial support from states, it seemed that businesses could not survive, nor could jobs be maintained. The crisis led to the suspension of flights, the closure of restaurants and cafés, hotels operating under restricted conditions, and the closure of museums and theme parks. This affected the entire hospitality industry and the HoReCa sector [6], p. 219. The pandemic put substantial and unprecedented pressure on the European hospitality sector. Disruption of both domestic and international travel led to a significant decrease in revenues, causing financial difficulties for everyone involved in the tourism industry [6], p. 221. The crisis had a devastating impact on the industry during the 2020–2021 period [7]. The closure of all businesses caused a drastic drop in income, forcing many companies to reduce their activity significantly or close permanently. Tourism was one of the sectors most affected by lockdown measures and restrictions imposed by authorities, facing unprecedented challenges. The pandemic also led to significant changes in the preferences and behavior of consumers in the HoReCa sector. Faced with a decrease in consumption in establishments, they became more oriented toward online orders and home delivery [8]. Additionally, customers became more aware of safety, hygiene, and social-distancing aspects in public spaces, requiring adaptations from merchants.

While the pandemic had a negative impact, the HoReCa industry had to quickly adapt and reinvent its business models to survive [9]. Some companies took advantage of new opportunities by developing delivery services, investing in outdoor terraces, or digitizing processes. However, numerous challenges remain, ranging from high operating costs to finding and retaining qualified staff. Asalos and Lazăr analyzed statistical data and found that Romanian tourists saved Romanian tourism [6]; 97.7% of arrivals were Romanian, while the others were foreigners' arrivals. The average length of stay in July 2020 was 2.7 days for Romanians and 2.2 days for foreigners. The crisis underscored the HoReCa industry's vulnerability to international travel disruptions and highlighted the critical importance of the domestic market [3]. With foreign tourism virtually non-existent, the sector's focus pivoted entirely toward attracting Romanian tourists, who became the primary driver for the industry's survival. Consequently, Romanian tourism benefited from the cancellation and limitation of international flights, allowing it to explore its immense tourist potential, which had not been effectively exploited until the pandemic period.

Starting in 2022, as the economy recovered and restrictions were relaxed [10], demand in the hospitality industry began to increase. Tourists gradually returned, and restaurants and hotels reopened and resumed activity at increasing capacities. According to the National Institute of Statistics, the number of overnight stays in tourist reception structures recovered about 80% of the pre-pandemic level in 2023, and the volume of restaurant sales reached over 90% of 2019 values [11]. This recovery has continued its positive trajectory into 2024. Early data shows a 1.3% increase in foreign visitor arrivals [12]. There has also been a 3.4% growth in HoReCa turnover for January [13]. This highlights a key lesson from the crisis. The agile digital communication and adaptive business models developed out of necessity are no longer temporary fixes. They are now fundamental components of the industry's framework for future crisis management and sustainable growth. Thus, the aim of this paper is to analyze how the Braşov Tavern Keepers' Guild adapted and innovated by using digital communication strategies for effective crisis management and strengthen its market position.

## 2 Literature Review

The modern world is marked by an unprecedented digital transformation [14], which has revolutionized the way we interact and communicate. Digital communication has become essential in all aspects of our lives, both personal and professional [15], p. 2048. It offers new methods for sending and receiving information, as well as discussing and collaborating in real time using various platforms and devices.

Digital communication offers several benefits [16], p. 5. These include the ability to efficiently reach large audiences, enhance engagement through personalized messaging, and allow for detailed performance evaluation using robust monitoring and analysis tools.

In the modern world, digital communication is facilitated by advanced platforms and technologies. Popular online communication platforms include social networks, websites, mobile applications, online forums, and instant messaging. Social networks such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and LinkedIn offer extraordinary opportunities to build an online presence, promote content, and interact directly with consumers or followers [17].

A digital communication strategy is a comprehensive framework that guides an organization's use of digital channels and platforms to achieve marketing, branding, and communication goals. An effective strategy includes environmental and audience analysis, setting SMART goals, developing a content strategy, optimizing the online presence, using social media channels, measuring and analyzing performance, and continuously adapting the plan based on results and feedback.

Optimizing this presence involves three key elements: Search Engine Optimization (SEO), User Experience (UX), and attractive website design. SEO is a set of techniques that makes a site more visible to search engines, thus increasing organic traffic [18], p. 63. UX is essential because it provides site visitors with a pleasant and intuitive browsing experience. Additionally, a modern and attractive visual design is crucial for conveying a professional and trustworthy brand image [19]. Nikolaichuk studied current trends in the hospitality industry [20] as it emerged from the pandemic and reached the following conclusions: reform in hotel operations is inevitable as virtual reality becomes an increasingly important part of consumers' lives. The hospitality industry's primary focus should be on developing digital technologies given the growing convergence of online and offline marketing.

Communication is now essential for the success of the HoReCa industry because modern consumers are eager to discover culinary and hospitality experiences through online platforms. Companies in this sector must adapt quickly to new trends to remain competitive [21], p. 103. The effective use of digital channels can bring numerous benefits, such as attracting new customers and improving service and relationships with them. Improving visibility is crucial for this sector. A well-managed online presence can be highly effective in attracting customers and strengthening the brand [22].

Social media platforms are essential for any HoReCa business [23]. Most people use social media to find information about places to order from or stay, making platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok extremely powerful and accessible marketing tools. Additionally, collaborating with industry influencers is an excellent way to increase visibility and attract new consumers.

### 3 Methodology

This research analyzed the impact of the pandemic and the effectiveness of digital communication strategies by focusing on the online presence of establishments within the Braşov Tavern Keepers' Guild. The study analyzed online reviews posted on the influential travel and tourism review platform TripAdvisor during the crisis period of 2020–2022. TripAdvisor allows users to provide detailed reviews and star ratings (from one to five) for hotels, restaurants, and other tourist services.

The analysis involved compiling and examining reviews for each member establishment to identify common themes and consumer complaints or praises related to service quality, food, and adherence to health and safety measures during the pandemic. In addition to TripAdvisor, data from Google and Facebook reviews were collected to create a comparative overview of each establishment's performance across different digital platforms. This multi-platform approach provided a detailed picture of public perception of service quality and pricing for each establishment.

## 4 A Case Study of the Braşov Tavern Keepers' Guild

The Tavern Keepers' Guild (*Breasla Cărciumarilor Braşoveni* in Romanian) is a non-governmental, non-profit organization founded in Braşov in June 2018. Established by tavern keepers and alcoholic beverage producers, the Guild protects their interests and promotes high standards in the hospitality industry. Currently, the Guild is one of the most influential professional associations in the city, composed of eight founding establishments and 24 active members, at the time the analysis took place (*After Stube, Artigianale, Bistro Albert, Bistro de L'arte, Brutăria Simplu, Cafe Central, Ceaun, Haplea, Dean's, Dei Frati, Times, Tipografia, Twin Beans, DPC, Grătar Urban, Luado, Manole Caffe, Massimo, Next Door, Opus 9, Pilvax, Publick, Fixelli and Sub Tâmpa*). The Guild's motto, "The fingers of one hand are nothing; the clenched fist is power," highlights the unity and strength of its members. The organization is actively involved in community support, from managing waste collection to prevent unpleasant odors for customers, to organizing charitable events where funds are donated to organizations like Hospice.

The impact of the COVID-19 crisis on the Guild was profound, affecting its economic, social, and cultural aspects. A drastic reduction in customer flow and temporary venue closures led to a severe revenue drop, with some member establishments even facing bankruptcy. In response, the Guild engaged with authorities. They met with the Ministry of Health to implement precautionary measures, allowing them to open their terraces and, eventually, their interiors while respecting social distancing. The Guild is a founding member of the Federation of Hospitality Industry Employers of Romania, which was instrumental in establishing a constructive dialogue with the government [24]. A significant achievement of this dialogue was maintaining the 9% VAT on food for partner associations. Furthermore, in 2020, the Guild successfully negotiated a preferential commission rate with the delivery company Tazz, starting at 12% and stabilizing at 21%. This was a critical support measure in an uncertain economic context.

To regain consumer trust and promote their businesses, the guild's members employed several innovative strategies. They organized traditional and themed events, such as serving a special bean and sausage dish on Romanian National Day at all of their locations. They also developed and promoted specific local products, including a traditional Transylvanian dessert called "Işler" and a local craft beer called "Mustaţă" (Moustache), which features the Guild's logo. The Guild used Facebook and other digital platforms to publicize events and special offers, building a close connection

with their audience. They embraced technology to improve the customer experience by implementing mobile ordering systems to reduce wait times and provide detailed menu visibility. They also encouraged digital payments by accepting “Edenred” cards, adding a layer of convenience and flexibility for customers.

### 5 Analysis of Consumer Perception (Online Reviews)

An analysis of online reviews from the pandemic period reveals a wide spectrum of customer experiences, as described in Fig. 1. While the average rating of the Guild’s establishments was high (around 4.5 stars on TripAdvisor), indicating general satisfaction, there were significant variations on other online platforms.

| ID               | TripAdvisor | Facebook | Google | Estimated cost | Total number of reviews |
|------------------|-------------|----------|--------|----------------|-------------------------|
| After Stube      | 4.50        | 3.80     | 4.60   | 2              | 27                      |
| Artigianale      | 5.00        | 4.40     | 4.80   | 2              | 51                      |
| Bistro Robert    | 4.50        | 4.40     | 4.50   | 2              | 566                     |
| Bistro de L'arte | 4.00        | 0.00     | 4.60   | 2              | 878                     |
| Brutăria Simplu  | 4.50        | 4.60     | 4.80   | 2              | 9                       |
| Cafe Central     | 5.00        | 4.60     | 4.70   | 2              | 21                      |
| Ceaun            | 4.80        | 4.50     | 4.60   | 2              | 2,820                   |
| Haplea           | 5.00        | 4.70     | 4.50   | 2              | 105                     |
| Dean's           | 4.00        | 4.50     | 4.50   | 2              | 527                     |
| Dei Frati        | 4.50        | 4.80     | 4.80   | 2              | 1,326                   |
| Times            | 4.50        | 4.10     | 4.00   | 2              | 138                     |
| Tipografia       | 4.50        | 4.20     | 4.70   | 2              | 10                      |
| Twinbeans        | 5.00        | 4.80     | 4.90   | 1              | 203                     |
| DPC              | 5.00        | 4.50     | 4.50   | 2              | 10                      |
| Grătar Urban     | 4.50        | 0.00     | 4.60   | 2              | 602                     |
| Luado            | 5.00        | 4.40     | 4.60   | 1              | 25                      |
| Manole Caffee    | 0.00        | 5.00     | 5.00   | 1              | 0                       |
| Massimo          | 4.50        | 4.30     | 4.50   | 3              | 100                     |
| Next Door        | 4.50        | 4.50     | 4.70   | 2              | 107                     |
| Opus 9           | 5.00        | 4.80     | 4.60   | 2              | 134                     |
| Pilvax           | 4.50        | 4.50     | 4.50   | 2              | 416                     |
| Publick          | 4.50        | 4.60     | 4.50   | 2              | 62                      |
| Fixelli          | 5.00        | 3.80     | 4.70   | 2              | 4                       |
| Sub Tâmpa        | 4.50        | 4.60     | 4.70   | 2              | 792                     |

**Fig. 1** Average ratings, estimated price (that indicate the average price level for each location, classified into three categories: low (1), medium/affordable (2), and high (3)), and number of reviews received on TripAdvisor, Facebook, and Google reviews

Positive reviews often praised businesses for their efforts to ensure a safe environment through hygiene and social-distancing measures. However, negative reviews pointed to specific shortcomings. The most common criticisms include the following: poor food quality, described as “not good,” “not cooked well,” and “disgusting”; unprofessional employee behavior, including rudeness and indifference; poor service, such as long waits for food and drinks; questionable business practices, like refusing to accept card payments and asking customers to withdraw cash from an ATM.

These negative reviews highlight the importance of service quality, staff training, and ethical business practices for maintaining positive customer relationships, particularly during a crisis. A comparative analysis of reviews on TripAdvisor, Google, and Facebook revealed that certain establishments, such as *Dei Frati*, consistently received high ratings on all platforms, reflecting a solid reputation for quality and service. In contrast, others, such as *Times*, received modest ratings and had fewer reviews, indicating room for improvement.

## 6 Discussion and Conclusion

The HoReCa industry experienced a profound transformation following the COVID-19 pandemic, with digital communication becoming an essential factor for adaptation and survival [25]. The pandemic accelerated the adoption of digital technologies, and an analysis of the communication strategies implemented reveals the importance of technology and digital platforms in maintaining customer relationships, promoting services, and optimizing internal operations. These changes are evident in various aspects of the industry, including the use of social networks, website optimization, and mobile application implementation. Social media platforms [26] such as Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok were used extensively to communicate with consumers and maintain business visibility. Online review platforms such as TripAdvisor proved invaluable for managing reputation. The Braşov Tavern Keepers’ Guild is an excellent example of how digital communication can support and transform businesses in this sector. The organization demonstrated remarkable adaptability to new realities by effectively using digital technologies. Their presence on review platforms and social media increased their visibility and reputation. The Guild’s digital strategies were diverse and innovative. They included creating engaging content on Facebook and Instagram and implementing mobile ordering systems that improved operational efficiency and customer satisfaction.

In conclusion, the Braşov Tavern Keepers’ Guild’s strategies demonstrate the effectiveness and importance of these approaches in the HoReCa industry. Adapting to new technologies and trends, personalizing communication, and engaging in community and strategic collaborations are essential for long-term success. By continuing to innovate and commit to quality, the HoReCa industry can successfully navigate future challenges and thrive in a competitive environment. While this is a single case study approach, the Guild’s success provides a transferable model. The core lesson is that a combination of collective action, digital agility, and deep

community integration provides a powerful framework for local businesses in any sector to build strength, overcome challenges, and achieve long-term growth.

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