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The Instagrammable Hotel: A Sequential Explanatory Design Study of Hotel- and User-Generated Content †

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Abstract: This paper examines Instagram's increasing influence on the hotel industry, an area that remains under-researched from both consumer and hotel perspectives. Through a sequential explanatory design, combining a quantitative analysis of 1031 posts with qualitative interviews from hotel professionals, the research uncovers the types of content that resonate most with users and how hoteliers strategically leverage Instagram. The findings reveal which content formats, hotel attributes and post characteristics capture audience attention. Additionally, the study offers unique insights into Instagram's distinct role compared to other social media platforms in the hotel industry. The study provides a novel definition of what makes a hotel "Instagrammable" from both consumer and industry viewpoints, offering valuable insights into how hotels can strategically harness Instagram to attract and engage their audience.

Keywords: Instagram; social media; sequential explanatory design; user-generated content; hotels; hospitality management; mixed methods

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1. Introduction

Type into your search engine on your browser, "*How can hotels use Instagram?*" or "*How do I make my hotel Instagrammable?*" and there will be over a million hits sent in return, with a plethora of web pages providing "tips for insta-success" for hotels or "steps to building an Instagram marketing strategy for your hotel". This barrage of tips, content strategies, hotel design ideas and more comes as no surprise, as social media has become a natural extension of a traveler's writing and narration toolbox [1], with over 60% of travelers now sharing their own content from holidays or travels on social media [2]. This bears significant implications for the hotel and travel industry, as studies have revealed that social media (SM) directly affects travel movements, experiences, choices and behaviors [3]. Hoteliers must therefore place great emphasis on these technological advances, as in "the current market conditions where people are constantly connected to SM, it becomes clear that hoteliers' failure to devise and execute an effective social media strategy" [4] would be detrimental for a hotel's competitive advantage and a "dereliction of duty" [4]. It is therefore explicable that hotels are increasingly understanding the importance to provide their guests with an *Instagrammable moment* [5]. Instagrammable, defined by the Cambridge Dictionary as "attractive or interesting enough to be suitable for photographing and posting on the social media service Instagram" [6], signifies that hotels need to "step back and view their space through the lens of Instagram" [5]—ensuring that their marketing, guest journeys, experiential designs and spaces are tailored to connect with guests on a visual storytelling level.

Academia has made significant advances in SM research [7], and the hospitality, tourism and travel industries are no exception [8,9]. In particular, research on SM's value in the hotel industry has focused on value creation and financial accomplishments, such as hotel performance and metrics [10,11], online reviews [9], return on investments [4], (electronic) word of mouth [10,12], marketing strategies for image and brand building [11].

Yet, research in "hospitality social media is still in its early phases" [11] (p. 1) and there are several research lacunas to study which are of high academic and managerial relevance. Firstly, research on SM—particularly in the hospitality sector—tends to view the various SM networking sites and platforms (e.g., Facebook, YouTube, X, TikTok, Instagram, blogs, review sites such as TripAdvisor) as near interchangeable, and they are therefore lumped together into an analogous SM "category". Studies should analyze specific SM platforms, as they offer different advantages and experiences—both from an enterprise and user perspective [13,14]. Secondly, there is a specific paucity of research on the Instagram platform in hospitality in comparison to other SM networking sites and platforms [15], a surprising cleft, given Instagram's unique aesthetic platform [16] and that its users tend to be more engaged with positive vibes, pictures, comments and good experiences [17]—of great value to hotels who desire to instill such emotions and engagements to their (potential) guests. Thirdly, much less attention has been given to the segmentation and analysis of the content generated by *both* hotels (supply side) and guests (demand side), as well as to identifying the type of content that captivates and generates the engagement of users (ergo, what is considered Instagrammable in the world of hotels?).

There has been a greater call for (and response to) using mixed methods approaches in social sciences [18], as there are numerous advantages to be had, most notably that "when used in combination, quantitative and qualitative methods complement each other and allow for a more robust analysis, taking advantage of the strengths of each" [19] (p. 3). This development has also been the case in tourism and hospitality research, as mixed methods research helps "address specific issues that are critical to tourism and hospitality studies, including the importance of context and the need to reflect multiple perspectives, positions and insights to address complex issues and phenomena" [20] (p. 1571). Truong et al. have highlighted that while mixed methods research has significantly grown, studies are dominated by prioritizing quantitative studies and using qualitative studies as a mere subsidiary. While this does not necessarily signify that such designs are problematic, the "continued prioritization of the quantitative may overshadow the utility of the qualitative and the contributions it has to offer" [20] (p. 1573).

We address this issue by using a sequential explanatory design method [19], where we equally weigh the quantitative and qualitative. This paper thereby contributes to addressing three research gaps, namely (i) studying a specific SM platform in terms of advantages and experiences, from both an enterprise and a user perspective in the hospitality sector, (ii) studying specifically Instagram in a hospitality context and (iii) studying (comparatively) video and photographic content generated from both supply (hotels) and demand (guests) by providing an in-depth analysis, combining both quantitative and qualitative data.

In what follows, the paper presents our theoretical background—on social media in hotels and specifically, Instagram; our research design; findings for our quantitative and qualitative studies (and how we integrated the data); discussion and conclusions with theoretical and practical implications, as well as limitations to the study. This article is a revised and expanded version of a paper entitled *Are you Instagram worthy? An analysis of hotel-and user generated content*, which was presented at the EUROCHRIE conference in Vienna, Austria, 1–3 October 2023 [21].

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. SM—A Ubiquitous Instrument for Dialogue Between Travelers and Hotels

In a world where attracting users' attention is becoming increasingly harder as the information load increases on SM [22], the challenges for hotels to operate successfully in the online multiverse are therefore significant. Yet, a strong SM presence is a must, as it has

metamorphosed the manner in which companies connect to their respective markets and consumers [15]—particularly the hotel and tourism industry, as the purchasing process of such services is based on the collection of obtainable information [23].

This connection is significant, as SM expediates "social interaction between users, facilitating the creation and sharing of knowledge, and transforming monologue (company to customer) into dialogue" [24]. Such a direct pathway has proven advantageous to companies, as this allows them to bring information, quality, credibility and authenticity directly to (potential) guests [7]. Moreover, this dialogue allows firms—those who are proactive and strategic—to gain unique customer insights due to the sheer amount of user-generated content (UGC) SM platforms garner. With 60% of the world's population (4.62 billion) active on SM, spending an average of 2.5 h a day on SM´ [25], it is intuitive that UGC and social media have been widely used in various forms as they develop, proving to be effective marketing tools for the hotel and tourism industry, such as increasing purchase intentions for hotels [26].

Therefore, SM presents unique opportunities for a two-way dialogue betwixt (potential) guests and hotels, both offering the ability to showcase travels and hotels with quality, credibility and authenticity, as well as learning about shifting customer expectations and demands for the hotel industry. It is therefore surprising to see that there is a dearth of research in digital technology studies "conceived from a holistic perspective which simultaneously takes into account the points of views of users and hotels" [27] (p. 13).

While research has predominantly revealed the positive aspects and development potentials of SM with hotels and tourism, research has also noticed numerous caveats. From a consumer (demand) perspective, concepts such as selfie-gaze tourism, fear of missing out (FOMO) and social comparisons on SM are highlighted as impactful on well-being and the experience of the trip and/or accommodation [28]. Moreover, active use of social media and peer influence has influenced users to not only contribute to spreading positive experiences but also negative experiences online [29]. From a hotel (supply) perspective, examples are (but most certainly not limited to): negative online reviews and social media strategies [30], SM's power and ability to influence travel and lodging choices [31]—thus potentially bypassing a hotel's own efforts—as well as the challenges of implementing internal strategies and technologies (such as enterprise social media) and the potential techno-stress it can have on employees [32].

2.2. Instagram's Rise and Influence on the Hotel and Travel Industry

Instagram has rapidly become a powerhouse within the realm of SM platforms, reaching 1.28 billion users as of 2023 [33], becoming the fourth most popular SM platform in the world, behind only Facebook, YouTube and WhatsApp [34]. As the Instagrammable definition in the introduction reveals, photos and other visual tools such as video are key elements of the platform. Specifically, Instagram is a visual storytelling platform offering a blend of information and image-based experiences [35], a beneficial combination for both hotels and their (potential) guests who wish to showcase what they offer and experience, respectively. It is therefore telling that research has unearthed positive relationships between high levels of social activity (e.g., travelling, dining) and being motivated to use Instagram as a means of documentation [16], as well as being an important source of information and inspiration in the destination selection process [36].

Instagram also offers unique possibilities for hotels and (potential) guests due its aesthetic platform [16] and that its users are more engaged with positive vibes, pictures, comments and good experiences [17]. With users seeking (and receiving) such positive experiences, it is understandable that Instagram scored significantly higher than other SM platforms with regards to entertainment when assessed by users [14]. This is corroborated by an industry report that found that the engagement rate from users on Instagram posts from hotels and resorts was significantly higher than that of other SM platforms, e.g., Facebook and X [37]. This validates the idea that that Instagram is not only an important tool for searching for positive vibes and experiences, but a viable instrument for information

collecting about travelling, lodging and dining, playing an important role within hotel decision-making and contributing to harnessing an "objective and authentic overview" [38] (p. 109). From a hotelier's perspective, Instagram is also a valuable information collection tool "at a time when much more innovative and exciting hospitality experiences are preferred by consumers, image-based, user-created content can help businesses catch up with the changing demands" [39] (p. 2).

It is therefore surprising to see that Instagram is a far-less-researched platform than its counterparts—particularly with focus on the hotel industry [8]. Moreover, as Instagram's strength and uniqueness is attributed to its visual storytelling capabilities, it is peculiar that Instagram–hotel studies have "focused on the textual content of posts" and that "research focusing on the visual contents of posts is scarce" [25] (p. 268). This is corroborated by Minor et al., who note that current research is still predominantly textocentric, rather than photocentric [40]. While research avenues have started to cement with regards to photocentric content and restaurants [41–43], thanks in part to the "foodstagramming" phenomenon [44], where people embark on capturing and sharing food photos [42], there is still a paucity in understanding Instagram's role and impact on the hotel industry.

Specifically, exploration is needed into understanding the platform's influence on the evolving dynamics of lodging and travel, as its capacity to offer distinctive visual content intersects with shifting consumer preferences, and to examine the types of photos and videos travelers capture and the specific locations they prefer. These insights can aid in crafting tailored experiences and gaining a clearer understanding of consumer preferences.

The aim is to:

1. Explore what type of hotel- and user- (guest) generated content develops most traction on the SM platform Instagram;
2. Uncover how hoteliers (strategically) work with Instagram and how they perceive the Instagrammable phenomenon in hotels;
3. Assess if and how hoteliers view Instagram as a unique SM platform.

3. Research Design

This paper bridges several research gaps regarding Instagram and hotels. Specifically, we address (i) what type of photo- and videographic content generated by both hotels (supply side) and UGC (demand side) harnesses the most engagement by means of likes on Instagram, (ii) how hoteliers (strategically) work with Instagram and how they perceive the Instagrammable phenomenon and (iii) how hoteliers perceive the Instagram platform in comparison to other SM networking sites and platforms. Likes were chosen as the instrument of measurement, as previous research has highlighted how likes can generate economic and statistically significant revenue [45], increase purchase decisions [46] and increase positive (electronic) word-of-mouth [47].

This was achieved by following a mixed-methods sequential explanatory design (SED) [19], signifying that quantitative data was collected and analyzed first, then followed by a qualitative data collection phase and analysis. Specifically, the quantitative data for this study was a manual content analysis, and the qualitative data was semi-structured interviews (described in greater detail in the following sub-sections).

As this study was trying to explore what visual photo/videocentric elements by both hotels and users generates the most excitement on Instagram, as well as to deepen our understanding of how hoteliers strategically use such knowledge and data to work with and, ultimately, to understand how hoteliers are operating in the "Instagrammable" marketplace, the SED was as an apt approach. First, this was due to its ability to provide contextual understanding of the quantitative data derived from the content analysis (that is, what are users and hotels posting—and what generates traction?). Second, the qualitative data served to illustrate the quantitative findings, or, as Bryman aptly notes, to put "meat on the bones of 'dry' quantitative findings" [48] (p. 106)—but not merely as a subsidiary, as Truon et al. argue [22], but as an equally prioritized set of integrated data. While the data are presented sequentially, the survey design for the qualitative phase could not have been

carried out without the data from the quantitative analysis (more on how this was done in Section 5.1). Third, the semi-structured interviews, combined with the content analysis, will serve to both provide credibility and utility [48] for practitioners and academics alike.

In other words, the sequential approach enabled a clearer interpretation of the data, allowing the research to not only identify what content works on Instagram, but also to understand if and how it aligned with broader marketing strategies for the hotels in the study. By combining these two data sources, the sequential explanatory design method ensured a more nuanced understanding of the subject, balancing both user behavior and industry practices.

4. Quantitative Study

4.1. Method and Research Site

A content analysis was chosen as an apt method due to its ability to provide quantitative summaries of visual elements [49]. The quantitative content analysis was conducted in order to convert qualitative data into numerical variables and items [50], thus permitting comparative studies—a method used previously with success in the hospitality and tourism sector [51]. For this study, this meant hotel and user-generated content on Instagram—photos, videos and stories.

In Denmark, 25 different hotels were selected. Denmark was chosen as an ideal location due to the significant presence of Instagram—the second largest SM platform in the country, trailing only behind Facebook [52], where 40% of the population (ca. 2.3 million individuals) has an active Instagram account [53]. The Danish population are also very active on the platform, with 70% of users engaging daily with the platform, 93% on a weekly basis and 99% on a monthly basis [54]. To represent Danish hotels across various types and geographical regions, we selected five distinct types of hotels (conference, city, resort, inn/castle and beach hotels), each situated in the five regions of Denmark: the capital city region, Zealand, Southern Denmark, Middle Jutland and Northern Jutland. Prior to inclusion, the hotels underwent a screening process by the authors to confirm the presence of an active Instagram account, characterized by regular content posting. To ensure that not only the most popular hotels on Instagram were included, hotels with a wide range of followers (from 307 to 117,000 followers) were selected. All hotels were stand-alone hotels (i.e., not franchise hotels), as our screening process found that franchise hotel chains tended to have one Instagram account for all the hotels in the chain/country and not for a specific hotel, thereby not permitting comparable studies on a hotel level. UGC was captured when their posts tagged the hotels. Data collection took place during one of the peak seasons for Danish hotels, spanning from 8 June–11 July 2022. In total, we gathered N = 1031 posts, 602 from hotels and 429 from users.

4.2. Codification of Content Units

The codification process comprised three steps:

1. Development of two coding scheme tables: one for hotels and one for UGC, with appropriate categories and sub-categories to accurately allocate content units (see Table 1);
2. Coders (fulfilled by authors) identified each content unit and associated it with relevant category/subcategories;
3. Manual measurement of likes for the content units.

The content of the coding scheme tables was derived from various sources [39,55,56] as well as from the authors. Step 2 was conducted daily throughout the data collection phase, with coders assessing different yet overlapping units. Step 3 involved recording the content units at the time of data collection and subsequently in August 2022, to ensure adequate time for posts to reach saturation on Instagram. To ensure intercoder reliability [57], coders convened weekly during data collection to resolve any discrepancies. A total of 58 posts exhibited disagreement (94.4% agreement rate). These posts were re-evaluated by coders, discussed collectively and rectified accordingly.

4.3. Findings Quantitative Study

4.3.1. Format of Content

Hotels predominantly utilized single "images" for their posts, accounting for 41.2% of all posts, while "video" (9.6%), "UGC + Hotel story" (5.15%), and "video + multiple images" (0.66%) were the least preferred categories. This preference becomes even more pronounced when excluding the three "story" category variables ("UGC + Hotel story", "Hotel story", and "UGC in Hotel story"), where single images comprise 61.8% of all posts. While UGC also favored single images (38%), they showed a higher propensity for multiple images (38.69%) and video content (16.55%). The least utilized content category for UGC mirrored that of hotels, being "video + multiple images" (6.76%). This is noteworthy when comparing likes generated by content category (Table 2 and Figure 1). Video content, particularly "video" and "video + multiple images", garnered significantly more likes per post (410 and 490, respectively) than static content such as "image" (108 per post) and "multiple images" (187 per post). The impact of video content becomes even more apparent despite comprising only 23.31% of the total posts, as they accounted for almost half of all likes (47.12%). Similarly, hotels saw the highest likes per post in the "video" category (311), surpassing "single image" (145) and "multiple images" (161). However, "video + multiple images" received fewer likes per post (130), potentially indicating hotels' reluctance to utilize this content category, although the sample size was small (N = 4).

4.3.2. Hotel Attributes

The content of the posts—the hotel attributes—showed greater variety between hotels and UGC. In the case of hotels, it was evident that posts featuring multiple hotel attributes tended to attract higher levels of likes. Conversely, posts containing only single attributes, such as physical features, service offerings or people, did not generate the same degree of engagement per post as those combining multiple attributes (e.g., physical attributes paired with service offerings—Table 2 and Figure 2). Similarly, for UGC, there was a comparable pattern of increased engagement when pairing physical attributes with people, suggesting that guests tend to connect their personal experiences and activities with the spatial design of a place—corroborated by Han and Lee's research [39]. However, single hotel attributes also generated significant likes per post in the case of UGC, such as physical attributes, people, communication and service offerings. Perhaps surprisingly, posts concerning sustainable services (Tables S1 and S2—see Supplementary Materials) were very limited for both hotels (N = 20) and UGC (N = 6).

4.3.3. Post Characteristics

The distinction between sales-related and informative posts proved to be pivotal in generating likes. Informative posts, aimed at providing information to potential guests (e.g., showcasing a new menu in a restaurant), significantly outnumbered sales-related posts, which focused on promoting products or services (e.g., a picture and price of a hotel room with a booking link)—see Tables 2 and 3 and Tables S1 and S2. Interestingly, despite the prevalence of informative posts, sales-related posts garnered substantially more likes per post (351) compared to informative ones (130). This discrepancy is particularly noteworthy given that conventional SM research suggests that mentions of prices and deals tend to correlate with lower levels of likes and engagement [58]. However, this also aligns with the same research, which indicates that mentions of prices and deals can drive higher engagement when combined with brand personality-related attributes.

Table 1. Overview of categories and sub-categories. Reproduced with permission from Maria Katelieva, Changing Realities—New Opportunities; published by the Proceedings of the EUROCHRIE 2023, [21].

Category	Sub-Categories	Hotel (Supply)/UGC (Demand)
Content category	Video (Reel)	Both
	Hotel story	Hotel
	UGC in hotel story	Hotel
	UGC + hotel story	Hotel
	Image	Both
	Multiple images	Both
	Video + Multiple images	Both
Type of post	Sales-related	Hotel
	Informative	Hotel
	Other	Hotel
Physical attributes of hotel	Ext. views of hotel	Both
	Int. views of hotel (general)	Both
	Lobby	Both
	Room	Both
	Bathroom	Both
	Food and beverage facilities	Both
	Conference facilities	Both
	Spa/pool/beach facilities	Both
Service offerings	Events/happenings	Both
	Wedding	Both
	Accommodation	Hotel
	Food and beverage	Both
	Spa (treatments)/pool/beach	Both
	Other services (e.g., turndown)	Both
	Sustainable services	Both
People	Employees/staff	Both
	Guests	Both
	Selfie	UGC
	Other	Both
Branding	Hotel brand	UGC
	Other brand	UGC
Communication/ information	Credentials	Both
	Corporate social responsibility	Both
	Safety/security	Both
	Off-site experiences	Both
	Travelling	UGC
	Job posting	Hotel
	Other	Both
Likes	At time of post + in August 2022	Both

Table 2. Likes.

UGC					
Variables	**Total**	**Percentage**	**Likes**	**%**	**Likes per Post**
Content Category	*429*	*100.00%*	*92,001*	*100.00%*	*214*
Videos/reels	71	16.55%	29,140	31.67%	410
Image	163	38.00%	17,603	19.13%	108
Multiple image	166	38.69%	31,042	33.74%	187
Video + multiple image	29	6.76%	14,216	15.45%	490
Hotels					
Variables	**Total**	**Percentage**	**Likes**	**%**	**Likes per Post**
Content Category *	*401*	*100.00%*	*69,254*	*100.00%*	*173*
Videos/reels	58	14.46%	18,050	26.06%	311
Image	248	61.85%	36,039	52.04%	145
Multiple image	91	22.69%	14,645	21.15%	161
Video + multiple image	4	1.00%	520	0.75%	130
Type of post *	*401*	*100.00%*	*69,254*	*100.00%*	*173*
Sales-related	78	19.45%	27,414	39.58%	351
Informative	321	80.05%	41,751	60.29%	130
Other	2	0.50	89	0.13%	45

* Excludes stories, as we cannot measure likes.

Figure 1. Likes per post—UGC and hotel content.

Table 3. Likes for categories.

Category	**UGC**			**Hotels**		
	Total	**Likes**	**Likes per Post**	**Total**	**Likes**	**Likes per Post**
Physical attributes of the hotel	37	7496	203	64	5782	90
Service offerings	32	4068	127	60	3335	56
People	8	1360	170	3	213	71
Branding **	2	127	64			
Communication/information	6	1058	176	11	626	57
Physical attributes +Service offerings	17	674	40	63	13,857	220

Table 3. *Cont.*

Category	UGC			Hotels		
	Total	Likes	Likes per Post	Total	Likes	Likes per Post
Physical attributes + people	30	9582	319	9	941	105
Physical attributes + branding **	6	311	52			
Physical attributes + communication/information	16	1409	88	24	4391	183
Service offerings + people	25	1986	79	30	2844	95
Service offerings + branding **	10	1962	196			
Service offerings + communication/information	5	685	137	23	2054	89
Communication/information + people	7	445	64	7	367	52
Branding + communication/information **	7	298	43			
**People + branding ** **	1	6	6			

** Branding category was only conducted for UGC.

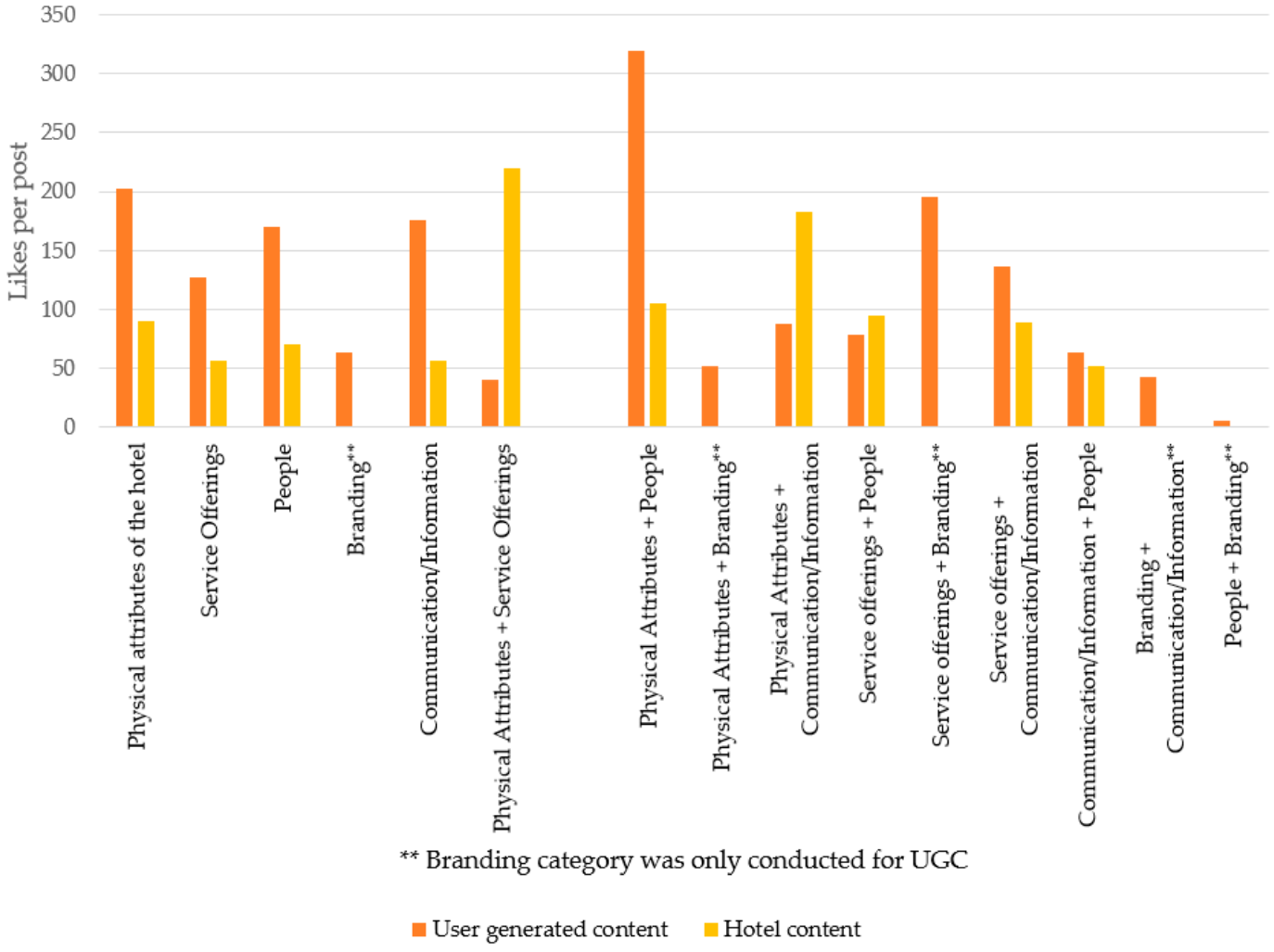

Figure 2. Likes for categories—UGC and hotel content.

5. Qualitative Study

5.1. Connecting the Phases and Method

Based on the content analysis, we desired to gain a deeper understanding of the findings by interviewing staff of a selection of hotels from the content analysis. Hotels were purposefully selected to cover each type of hotel, each geographic region, a range in number of followers, as well as their activity on the Instagram profile (those who were

more active were deemed more relevant to interview due to the strategic perspective). Staff responsible for SM and marketing were interviewed. Ten were invited, with two hotels declining, resulting in N = 8, specifically R1 (capital city, resort); R2 (Northern Jutland, conference); R3 (Southern Denmark, beach hotel); R4 (Middle Jutland; castle/inn); R5 (capital city, city hotel); R6 (Southern Denmark, city hotel); R7 (Northern Jutland, resort); R8 (Zealand, beach hotel).

The interview protocol was designed based on the content analysis and the SOSTAC (Situation, Objectives, Strategy, Tactic, Action, Control) SM and marketing model [59]. A set of 12 questions were developed beforehand, but follow-up questions were possible in case respondents raised something of relevance to the study, until a point of saturation was reached [60]. The shortest interview took 39 min; the longest, 97 min.

The SED design was especially advantageous here, as unexpected results that arose from the quantitative study were able to be integrated into the qualitative survey framework. Specifically, each overlying category from the SOSTAC framework [59] had integrated elements from the findings in the content analysis (sometimes with an overlap due to the findings' significance across the categories). An example was how sales-related posts outperformed informative posts. This was an unexpected result from the content analysis, and this meant that when presenting said finding to the respondents, we were able to ask questions for their insights and understanding of this result, which resulted in a far more nuanced and contextual understanding of the result (see Section 5.2.1 for more on this).

5.2. Findings Qualitative Study

5.2.1. Hoteliers' Strategic Use of Instagram

All hotels worked strategically with Instagram, and thematic patterns arose amongst the respondents, namely strategic planning, key performance indicators, synergizing brand attributes and the use of influencers. While similar themes arose, there were noteworthy differences amongst them.

All respondents highlighted the use of digital technologies to plan their content, particularly META Business Suite (R1-R7), where hotels planned ahead their content on different timeframes, e.g., weekly (R2), monthly (R1) or per season (R5). Despite all having scheduled content, there was an analogous interjection that great flexibility was needed, as content posted also depended on which *"areas of the hotel needed more love than others"* (R1), corroborated by R4, who stated that it was tantamount to pivot to *"which departments in the hotel need attention right now, what is going on in-house at the moment"*. R5 further added that it was also important to *"go beyond our hotel, also see what is happening in our city, can we post something relevant to* it—i.e., *large events"*. When prompted as to how the hotels work with this flexibility, there were two frames of mind: to hold regular strategy meetings with departmental managers (e.g., R1 had meetings every third week) or experienced presentiments. As R4 claimed, *"we have a strategy, yes, but it's also important to follow our gut feeling—what's going on outside in the world today, what do we feel people need right now?"* When prompted why there were so few posts regarding sustainability, all respondents replied analogously that this was not the correct platform to do so, claiming that this was done on the more business-oriented SM platform LinkedIn.

Respondents revealed their key KPIs, ranging from number of followers (R2, R5) to bookings (R4, R6), awareness/top of mind (R1, R6, R7, R8), reach (R4, R6) and engagement rate (R4, R5, R8). A noteworthy discovery here was that while all hotels bar one (R3) had KPIs, respondents were obstinate that the most important strategic function of Instagram was to have a content portfolio that reflected core brand attributes of the hotel. As R1 stated, *"we are a luxury hotel, and all posts must match our brand—we strive for quality over quantity"*. This was supplemented by R6, who claimed that *"our identity is about being playful—so our online identity and brand needs to reflect this, so there is a strategic choice on what content we upload, and also how we describe our tone on Instagram"*, and R7's goal for Instagram was *"about sensing our spirit and atmosphere—where you can feel our presence"*.

Respondents were therefore intrigued to learn that sales-related posts outperformed informative posts in terms of generating traction, as they felt that these types of posts—while they were used sporadically on Instagram—were used far more frequently and strategically on Facebook. As R1 commented, *"Facebook is used more for events and purchase-based posts [sales-related], whereas Instagram is more about creating an atmosphere and storytelling"*. R2 stated that their Instagram posts' purpose was *"informative—sales-related would then be buying advertisement space on Instagram"*. Lastly, R3 corroborated that *"Facebook is made for sales-related posts, and Instagram for informative posts. We do it sometimes on Instagram, but that is not our goal"*.

It is therefore insightful that all respondents (except R2 and R3) revealed that rather than making use of sales-related posts as a tool for reaching KPIs and harnessing brand synergy, they hired SM influencers. SM influencers are "people who develop and maintain a personal brand and a following on social media through posts that intertwine their personality and lifestyle with the products (e.g., goods, services, ideas, places, people) that they promote, which can influence the way their followers behave (e.g., attitudes, perceptions, preferences, choices, decisions)" [61] (p. 2). All respondents were strategic in selecting which influencers to hire, ensuring that *"they match our target group and our [hotel's] values, and we need to have good chemistry with them"* (R7) and that *"contractual agreements are written beforehand on what type of content is made—we want to keep control of our narrative"* (R1). R5 was a prolific user of influencers, stating that they *"don't use a photographer for our pictures, we actually mostly use influencers' pictures for our collection*" and that different influencers were used on a monthly basis, to ensure that they receive new and different content of their hotel's attributes. R8 heavily used influencers as they *"wanted show an authentic and credible stay at our hotel"*.

5.2.2. Instagram: A Unique SM Platform for Hotels and Guests

All respondents echoed in unison that Instagram was a *"different beast"* (R4) when comparing it to other SM platforms for hotels. Most notably, respondents commented on Instagram's unique ability as a showcasing "window" due to its visual storytelling abilities and its importance in the consumer journey.

R1 likened Instagram to an "*exposition window, using it to showcase our products and services. . .being a luxury hotel, we believe that all the content we put out there, has to be of the same quality, and Instagram can deliver on this dimension"*. This was corroborated by R2 and R7, who stated that *"Instagram is different because it allows us to show us at our best" and "Instagram is an authentic way to showcase our hotel and surroundings"*, respectively. This was in part due to its unique visual storytelling abilities, as detailed by R6: *"Instagram is clearly a more visual tool we use, compared to our other SM platforms [Facebook], and the captions we upload are no way as important as the image or video content"*. This is, according to R5, due to the *"visual part, videos or photos, being unique to Instagram [compared to other SM platforms] and is much better for capturing attention"*.

The respondents therefore resonated positively with the content analysis findings of videos generating significantly more activity online, as noted by R5, who stated that *"videos are critical for us for generating traffic on our sites—they generate massive interest"* and *"videos and influencers are our main strategic tools"*. R4 added to this notion that Instagram had a unique ability to harness UGC, particularly video content, to help *"showcase our hotel from the guest side"*, strategically knowing and uplifting unique "spots" at the hotel (more on this in the following finding).

Respondents also revealed the great importance of Instagram as a crucial element of the consumer journey, that is, "the need to understand consumers as they select, create, integrate, use, adapt, and discard products and services in order to meet needs and accomplish goals" [62](p. 187). Instagram manifested in different manners along the consumer journey. R3 noted that prior to making a booking, their experience was that "*Instagram is for inspiration, not for selling. Its especially relevant when people are looking for options to book*", highlighting it as an important platform to reach their target segment. This is in line with R5, who noted that "*we can reach far more people on platforms like Tiktok, we can reach more of the*

right people on Instagram". Upcoming guests would also use Instagram as a safety-check, as R6 noted: "*Our (first time) guests use Instagram as a safety-check—does our hotel really look this, does it really offer the facilities they say they do. Instagram is as authentic and believable, if not more, then sites such as Trustpilot [after booking on OTA's—such as booking.com], to assess that they made the right choice in booking"*. Lastly, Instagram even served as a direct communication tool with guests prior to their check-in, as R5 noted: "*Instagram is for us, the reception the guests need before they actually arrive. We receive so many questions and comments about our hotels—so the platform is a very important checkpoint on their journey".*

5.2.3. The Instagrammable Hotel Phenomenon

Every respondent was asked for their definition of an Instagrammable hotel. Responses greatly expanded on the definition provided in the introduction, noting that being *"attractive or interesting enough"* was not sufficient. R1 reiterated the finding of Instagram's use for harnessing brand synergies, stating that "*it's about delivering on your promise—in our case, it's to create dreams—so for us, Instagrammable is being beautiful, and aesthetic, allowing the user to dream and say 'wow, I want to be there'"*. R8 corroborated this, stating that *"instagrammable is being aesthetically beautiful, but at the same time authentic—it can't seem too staged—so it needs to be real, but at the same stylishly pleasing".* R8 further added the notion of Instagrammable also being true to its brand, revealing that *"we use Instagram as a brand-building platform, where we want to visually communicate who we are as a brand—our values are personal, professional and playful, and we need to instill these values into our Instagram profile"*. Like R1 and R8, a sense of beauty was also highlighted by R4, stating that "*Instagrammable is being beautiful, something that catches the eye, it's a special moment in time"*. Linking this to the success of posting multiple hotel attributes, R5 also highlighted the importance of aesthetics: *"Instagrammable is being different. . .a 'wow' experience, and that the design combines many aspects, such as color, nature, and unique elements such as water"*.

This understanding of harnessing brand synergies, being aesthetically beautiful and highlighting physical attributes of the hotel also revealed that all hotels had an intricate understanding of their Instagrammable *spots* (as named by R4). An Instagrammable spot was defined as a location within the hotel or its grounds that was actively sought out by guests to visually document their stay at through Instagram. When respondents were prompted to what their spots were, they were generally categorized into physical attributes of the hotel, nature views of the hotel's grounds or food and beverage areas where aesthetically pleasing food and drinks could be showcased. Examples are R5, who stated, *"without doubt, our indoor pool is an absolute show-stopper, and continuously generates significant traction on Instagram—whether it is us posting it, or our guests"*, and R4, who stated, *"we have a window on one of our staircases which offers a great view of the entire park and the fjord, and guests daily come and ask where this window is so they can capture it themselves".* R2 highlighted that *"our bar and pictures of our food are always sure winners"*.

When asked whether these Instagrammable spots were identified by users/guests or created by the hotel, respondents highlighted that spots were almost always created—but not with the primary aim of serving Instagram or social media, but rather to create unique areas delivering unique experiences for guests (e.g., relaxation, "wow" moments, luxury and self-pampering, etc.). As corroborated by R4: *"We have definitely created our own spots. But they have been created organically with the thought of offering unique places of reprieve and relaxation for our guests, definitely not for the benefit of social media".* Only one respondent, R5, had designed certain areas with social media in mind. These were, however, of a temporary nature: *"We do like to design certain areas with Instagram in mind—obviously not all the time as this is not sustainable—however, for events, we always make sure there are areas we know are great for guests to visually document their experience"*.

6. Discussion and Conclusions

This paper investigated the intrinsic link between the SM platform Instagram and hotels. Through an SED research approach, the study—the first of its kind—answered

three main research objectives. First, we discovered what type of hotel and user-generated content developed the most traction from multiple perspectives, namely in terms of content format, hotel attributes and the characteristic nature of the posts. Second, we uncovered how hoteliers strategically work with Instagram—through strategic planning, utilizing a wide array of KPIs, synergizing brand attributes and using influencers—and how hoteliers perceived the Instagrammable phenomenon in the hotel industry. Third, we assessed how hoteliers viewed the uniqueness of Instagram and how it serves as an important tool for both guests and hotels alike during the consumer journey.

The study provided a unique insight into the advantages of video content, in contrast to its static counterparts of images, justifying Minor et al.'s [40] call for more research into photo- and videocentric SM research. Our research has also significantly expanded on Minor et al.'s research, as they only focused on photo content (we included video and, further segmented by reels, stories and combinations of video and photos), which was also only segmented by the ascribed labels to the photo (thus potentially missing out multiple categories as we ensured through or content analysis categories and sub-categories). Han and Lee's [39] research also only focused on photos (and even within multiple photo posts only included the first one, thereby missing out on data). Moreover, we also compared UGC to hotels content, something done by neither of the previous studies [39,40].

While Ren et al.'s research [63] compared both UGC and hotel content, much like their predecessors, it only focused on photographic content (and also used different SM platforms). Our research also expands on Ren et al.'s research in how to best combine different attributes to instigate better engagement between hotel and travellers (as opposed to just having one main dominant attribute to an image post).

In addition, none of the studies involving Instagram and hotels (to the best of the authors' knowledge) used both qualitative and quantitative data. This became even more apparent when, diving deeper into what was specifically present on the video and photographic content, we revealed that content thrived best when physical hotel attributes were paired with other categories, such as people or service offerings. This was strengthened by the interviews, when it was revealed that respondents laid claim to Instagram's value and purpose of displaying their hotel's brand-personality attributes. This finding also brings credence to the notion that guests wish to connect their personal experiences and activities with the spatial design of a place [39]. This also highlights how Instagram sets itself apart from other SM platforms, and how hotels can tap into the good vibes and experiences that users are seeking on the platform. These brand-personality related attributes on Instagram also gives rise to the discussion of whether to post informative or sales-related posts to generate traction, as our study revealed that sales-related posts were immensely popular. Yet, would they still be as popular without an existing portfolio of informative posts?

The interviews revealed that influencers were an integrated part of the hotels' Instagram strategy—in particular with regards to displaying authenticity and credibility (i.e., you as a (potential) guest can have the same type of stay), as well as strategically selecting the right influencer who matches the brand attributes of the hotel. This builds on previous research, moving beyond traditional use of influencers for hotels, e.g., to increase purchase intentions [64] and ROI [65]. These findings corroborate Bastrygina et al.'s research [66] on the importance of influencers in hospitality with regards to factors such as authenticity, trustworthiness and influencer–brand alignment. Yet, it is also pertinent to note that while the hotels strongly displayed the advantages of strategically working with influencers, there was far less (if any) focus on the potential pitfalls of using influencers, ranging from (but not limited to) distrust [67], the potential negative moderation between parasocial relationships and perceived brand credibility [68], risk of potential misinformation [69], brand dilution [70] and reduced credibility through over-endorsement [71].

It was very surprising to discover a lack of sustainability in both UGC and hotel posts. The interviews with hotels did not reveal a sufficient answer, as the hotels provided an analogous answer that Instagram was not the right platform for those type of posts, but rather for LinkedIn (which is more a B2B SM platform). This is peculiar, as research has

revealed that sustainability on Instagram can lead to a selection of a sustainable destination (through influencers) [72], and, from a hotel perspective, positively framed, cause-related marketing advertising green practices produces a favorable hotel image, leading to a higher booking intention [73]. While perhaps seemingly counterintuitive, this does pair with recent research on hotels preferring to digitally communicate commercial information, as opposed to sustainability and good practices [74], SM communication of environmentally friendly practices not leading to an increase in guests' perceptions of a hotel nor a recognition of their green efforts [75], as well as hotel guests not willing to pay more for eco-label practices [76].

The findings paint a picture of Instagram's growing importance in the hotel industry and how it plays a multifaceted role in terms of experience, marketing, communication, branding, safety, quality control, strategy, service and dialogue with (potential) guests. The ability to provide and stage an Instagrammable moment for guests is well acknowledged by hoteliers, with all respondents being acutely aware of their spots and how to leverage them strategically. It is increasingly apparent that Instagram will continue to grow in strategic significance to hotels, and practitioners and researchers alike should monitor the impact Instagram will continue to have. Based on our content analysis and subsequent iterations of being Instagrammable by the respondents, we propose a definition for an Instagrammable hotel:

A hotel which delivers on its brand promise by strategically leveraging its brand personality through its physical spaces and attributes, together with its service and experiential offerings. It is a hotel which strives for uniqueness through aesthetic beauty, combining both natural and constructed design elements, making guests want to document their stay on Instagram through video and photographic content, while making potential guests increase their desire to stay at the hotel.

6.1. Theoretical Implications

The study provides several theoretical implications for researchers:

- Contributing to several research gaps: These gaps include (i) studying a specific SM platform in terms of advantages and experiences, both from an enterprise and user perspective, in the hospitality sector, (ii) studying specifically Instagram in a hospitality context and (iii) studying (comparatively) video and photographic content generated from both a supply (hotels) and demand (guests) side.
- Understanding the Instagrammable phenomenon: This study is the first of its kind to tackle what it signifies to be Instagrammable, as well as how hotels strategically work with the SM platform. The study contributes to offering a more precise understanding of what an Instagrammable hotel is and how hospitality researchers can assess hotels from an Instagram and/or social media "lens".
- Using SED as a mixed-methods approach: There is a greater call for mixed-method research approaches in academia, particularly within tourism and hospitality, and the SED proved pivotal in integrating our data, thus allowing us to better understand a complex phenomenon [77]. This study can hopefully serve as an inspiration to other researchers to apply a mixed-methods approach when conducting a future study within SM and hotels—especially from a comparative perspective of UGC and hotel content. This study also revealed several times how certain findings from the qualitative data would not have been discovered had it not been for integrating the findings from the quantitative phase into the survey framework. These unexpected findings provided far more rich, detailed and nuanced perspectives than the quantitative data could have projected alone.

6.2. Practical Implications

The study provides several "hands-on" practical implications for the hotel industry:

- What type of content to post: Continuously build a portfolio of content, which ensures that (potential) guests receive more than a static experience, and bring to the forefront the hotel's personality attributes and brand promise by pairing physical spaces with

experiences and services. Ensure that there is ample video content, as this generates more engagement, as well as sales-related posts. However, ensure that the sales-related posts do not dominate the portfolio, as this may potentially hamper bringing forth the hotel's personality attributes and brand promise.

- Use of influencers: Work strategically by selecting the right influencers, remembering that in order "for collaborations to be successful, maintaining consistency between the brand image and the impression created by the influencer is vital" [64] (p. 3034). Influencers are successful if they are seen as relatable, reachable and credible [78]. By conducting regular market and profile analyses of hotels' guests and target market, hotels can better select the right portfolio of influencers, both in terms of profile and size, knowing that they are relatable, reachable and credible to the hotel's (potential) guests. Selecting the right influencers is key, as there are a host of detrimental effects if the wrong one is chosen (see discussion and conclusions for more).
- Be Instagrammable and understand the importance of spots: Understand what it means to be Instagrammable (see above). Understand which parts of your hotel are considered Instagrammable spots by your guests, and nurture them. Conduct regular analyses of UGC to find out which spots are most popular within and around the hotel. Marketing staff at hotels should, at regular intervals, ask their operational staff how the guests are documenting their stay, since they are on the frontlines and see the day-to-day evolution of the hotel. Marketing staff should ask themselves what content from the hotel is shared (reposted) the most. Moreover, understand that spots that are manufactured simply for the objective of being Instagrammable may not work. Focus instead on creating unique areas that deliver unique experiences for guests.
- Understand Instagram's role in the customer journey: Instagram has the potential to be more than just a marketing and sales tool. As the results revealed (particularly the qualitative analysis), Instagram serves (potential) guests as a source of inspiration, a safety check for authenticity and believability and a direct communication channel to the hotel for practicalities. This signifies that Instagram has multiple roles, and therefore Instagram needs its own strategy (see the following point).
- Instagram needs its own strategy: Hotels should tailor their Instagram work strategically. This strategy should naturally still be in harmony with the hotel's overall marketing and SM strategies, but as the results revealed, Instagram is a unique SM platform compared to the other major SM platforms used by hotels. Ensure that Instagram has a focus on harnessing brand synergy attributes, setting clear KPIs in line with their marketing and branding goals, and allocate the necessary (human) resources to ensure staff beyond the marketing department can contribute to its success.

7. Future Research and Limitations

While the study has helped bridge several research gaps, the results have also opened up possibilities for future research avenues:

- Instagram content portfolios: The findings from the content analysis revealed a preference for sales-related posts, as well as video content. However, would a hotel's Instagram profile perform as well without informative posts and static photographic content? Future research should investigate finding an optimal "balance" of content to build the most Instagrammable portfolio.
- What makes a hotel Instagrammable: The study highlighted which attributes of a hotel drives content and, based on the SED, was able to offer a definition for an Instagrammable hotel. However, future research should delve into what makes a space within a hotel Instagrammable—that is, how do "hard" features (e.g., décor, lighting, layout) work in tandem/contrast with "soft" features (e.g., mood, ambience, people)?
- Instagrammable in a global context: This study focused on Danish hotels, yet the Instagrammable phenomenon is a global context. Future research should offer comparative studies in an international context. This would be particularly useful when viewing Instagram in the lens of the consumer journey.

- Expansion of comparing hotel- and user-generated content: This study can be seen as a springboard for future studies, where models should be developed consisting of dependent, independent and mediating variables, thus allowing for richer analyses. Moreover, this paper chose to focus on likes as its measure of engagement, but future studies should incorporate other measurements, such as number of shares and comments.
- Instagram vs. other SM platforms: Future studies could make use of comparative studies, that is, comparing Instagram's performance to other SM platforms. Again, the SED approach would be an apt method to collect the data.
- What about sustainability?: There was, as the findings revealed, very little focus on sustainability posts, either from a UGC or a hotel perspective. This is an area of tremendous value to both hotels and guests, and future studies should delve into its importance for hotels on Instagram, particularly as previous research has revealed both advantages and pitfalls.

The paper is not without its limitations. While the content analysis offered novel insights into Instagram and hotels from both a supply and demand side, the inclusion of a dependent variable to perform statistical analyses would have strengthened the paper—e.g., assessing Instagrammable dimensions with bookings, profitability and other financial KPIs. Moreover, we grouped UGC into one group, "users". This is a simplistic way of assessing (potential) guests, and the study would have been strengthened if we could have segmented users into different categories and demographics. Lastly, the geographic focus of this study was limited to Denmark, thus limiting generalizability. Future studies could offer a glimpse into whether geographical (and cultural) differences play a role with regards to Instagram and hotels.

Supplementary Materials: The following supporting information can be downloaded at: https://www.mdpi.com/article/10.3390/tourhosp5040079/s1, Table S1: Post by Hotel type—Hotels; Table S2: Post by Hotel type—UGC.

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