

The Implementation of Integrated Multichannel Services in the Hospitality Sector in Vietnam

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Abstract. The research streams on multichannel integration (MCI) in the hospitality sector recently caught the attention of academics and practitioners. However, knowledge and understanding of integrated multichannel services are still unfamiliar to enterprises, especially small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and enterprises in developing countries like Vietnam. Since this topic is limitedly exploited in the hospitality industry, the paper explores the opportunities and challenges for implementing integrated multichannel services in the hospitality sector in Vietnam based on the service science perspective. In the context of emerging digital technology and changing consumer behaviour today, an exploratory study on integrated multichannel services of hotels was conducted on eight hotel managers, eight online travel agencies (OTA), and sixteen domestic tourists. The results show the variety of channels of hotels can reach customers thanks to integrated multichannel services. However, the current situation of channel integration (between the direct and the indirect channel of the hotel through online travel intermediaries) is currently inconsistent. For this reason, challenges related to integrated services, promotion and price, and information access in the channel integration of the selected hotels have been explored. Since then, several solutions are suggested to accelerate MCI in the hospitality sector to stimulate demand for domestic tourism.

1 Introduction

Development in digital technologies enables hotels to use both physical and online channels such as websites and mobile to offer customers more options to interact with enterprises and purchase suitable products and services. Amid the intensified local and global competition as well as increasingly complex customer travel purchasing behaviours due to the development of interactive technologies and mobile devices, expanding communication and

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sales channels with customers, beyond the conventional physical stores, is inevitable to reach more customers and increase revenue.

Concerning the hospitality sector, hotels and resorts nowadays use a combination of direct and indirect channels to distribute their services to domestic and international visitors, including brick-and-mortar, online stores, referral websites, social media, emails, catalogues, telephones, etc. [1]. Multichannel integration is, therefore, essential to increase operational performance and distribution efficiency and to improve customer service quality. However, the multiple channels may lead to “channel cannibalization” and a lack of interactions and synchronizations [37]. Moreover, service integration in multi-channel marketing has emerged as a significant challenge for enterprises to offer service consistency and service transparency for customers [29][32]. However, according to our observation, knowledge, and understanding of integrated multichannel services are still unfamiliar to enterprises, especially small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and enterprises in developing countries.

In light of the above, this study aims at exploring the opportunities and emerging problems in integrating multiple channel services from three different perspectives, namely tourists, hotel managers, and online travel agencies (OTAs). Several suggestions are also proposed to enhance the efficiency of hotel multichannel integration, especially during a prolonged Covid-19 pandemic crisis. This exploratory study was carried out in the heart of Central Vietnam. This region, including Hue, Da Nang, and Hoi An, is a perpetually attractive destination nationwide and worldwide, captivating visitors with many unique cultures and magnificent scenery. Indeed, Hue and Hoi An are listed as UNESCO’s World Heritage Sites while Da Nang is the key gateway of Vietnam with hotels, resorts, etc. spreading along the coast to meet the ever-increasing demands of tourists [12]. However, the rapidly growing number of accommodation services has made it difficult for tourists to choose a place that ideally suits their needs. This presents both an opportunity and a challenge for hotel accommodation businesses.

Therefore, the objective of this study is twofold: (1) to examine the opportunities of integrated multichannel services, and (2) to investigate the challenges for integrated multichannel services in the hospitality sector. This paper is organized as follows. First, the current literature related to multichannel marketing, multichannel integration, and dimensions of integrated multichannel services is presented. Second, the methodology and data analysis are followed. Next, a discussion about the findings is provided. Finally, the paper concludes with relevant theoretical and managerial implications, limitations, and future research directions.

2 Theoretical background

This section aims at describing the relevant concepts and specific theories that underpin our study. Based on the perspective of service science, the theoretical background is organized according to the three levels of a service organization: value creation network, service system and service levels [19]. The section begins with the value creation network level related the multi-channel marketing. Thus, the service system level concerning multichannel integration is presented. Finally, the service level addresses integrated channel services.

2.1 Multichannel marketing

Consumers tend to use increasingly more channels within their customer journey, either in the search, purchase, or after-sale phase [25]. **Channels** can be considered as the sum of routes or paths by which a company delivers products, services, or information to recipients [22]. More specifically, channels represent “*a set of interdependent organizations that help*

make a product or service available for use or consumption by the consumer or business user” [6][16]. Channels are, for example, a store, a hotline, or a website.

Multichannel refers to the design, deployment, coordination, and evaluation of the different channels through which marketers acquire, retain, and develop customers [25][30]. It is a situation where a firm uses two or more marketing channels to reach one or more customer segments and focuses on managing and optimizing the performance of each channel [16]. Multichannel businesses can generate a competitive advantage and increase sales revenues by exploiting the advantages and overcoming the limitations of each channel [35]. Previous studies have shown that a multichannel marketing strategy helps to increase the capacity of providing products and services to customers and of making customers more satisfied and loyal [21].

Driven by the rapid development of e-commerce and new digital channels, companies must adjust their channel management to provide the appropriate channel configuration and a seamless and unified experience across all phases of the purchase process and all channels. All of the information about products, prices, promotion policies and services that are needed will be consistent through diversified channels [5]. Therefore, the multichannel strategy represents the vision of the ideal strategy to offer various channels with regard to the latest developments and to match today's consumer behaviour.

2.2 Multichannel integration

Multichannel integration is recognized as a way to coordinate the use of multiple forms of interaction, such as the retail channel, media, fulfilment mode, website, and physical stores. Its goal is to leverage the advantages of every channel, eliminate cannibalization, create synergy, and subsequently increase firm performance [25]. Multichannel integration can be defined as the scope of online and traditional channels to interact with each other and cooperate in different marketing activities [10][34]. Moreover, there is a need for a strategy that involves decisions regarding how many channels to adopt, what sort of interactions are made with each channel, and the purpose of each channel for the customers [24][25][31]. Consequently, there is a comprehensive definition of channel integration such as “*The degree to which a firm coordinates the objectives, design, and deployment of its channels to create synergies for the firm and offer particular benefits to its consumers.*” [38].

Concerning the opportunities for multichannel integration, a systematic review on the channel integration literature shows that the effectiveness of a channel integration strategy varies according to industry characteristics [39]. Moreover, channel integration may increase customer retention, purchase intention, shopping value, and customer loyalty and satisfaction [13]. Consequently, several studies suggest multichannel integration quality, including the consistency of service elements, integration of channels and its attributes, is emerging for providing seamless service experience [13].

2.3 Integrated multichannel services

Channels of a hotel are said to be integrated when they have two main characteristics. Firstly, the hotel simultaneously employs a portfolio of complementary channels to provide products/services to customers that can be offline (e.g., physical store-fronts, 3rd party resellers) or online (e.g., web sites, mobile applications) [26]. Secondly, there is a synchronous coordination across channels related to the implementation of marketing activities (such as product development, pricing and communication) that aims at increasing

the advantage of each channel to maximize the customer experience as well as firm performance [25].

Integrated multichannel services are defined as services followed and offered by various channels based on an activity of a particular channel [33]. For example, these services can be initiated by an online purchase, and then they will be offered with other offline services such as in-store pickups or returns. Moreover, integrated multichannel service should provide standard and consistent services across all channels and after-sale services for each other [27][35].

Recent studies have shown that the dimensions of integrated multichannel services should cover the entire shopping process [4][14][27], including integrated promotion, product and price, transaction information, information access, and order fulfilment.

Integrated promotion means consumers should be able to find one channel's promotional activities in another channel. These practices not only help consumers to better understand other channels, but also enhance their awareness of the associations among channels [3][35].

Integrated product and price mean that there is consistent product and price information across the various channels. Consequently, consumers could be able to enjoy the same preferential in any channel, and they will avoid confusion and develop consistent evaluations [7][27].

Integrated transaction information means that hotels and their partners can use the same account to track and maintain all of the purchase records in the various channels. This ensures that every consumer is viewed as the same customer across all channels so that they can manage their purchase records conveniently [27][36].

Integrated information access means that consumers can access to information available in other channels, and they can easily switch to other channels [4][14][27] [36].

Integrated order fulfilment means that consumers can complete the whole transaction process (including order, payment, delivery and return) using any channel [27] [36].

3 Research design

This section aims at determining a strategy for addressing the research question by defining our overall approach and determining how we will collect and analyse data.

3.1 Research motivation

Research on channel integration has been primarily found in retailing [27][36] or banking services [15]. However, there has been little effort to investigate the influence of channel integration in tourism, especially in the hotel industry. Indeed, the effectiveness of a channel integration strategy varies according to industry characteristics [39]. Therefore, with the increase and importance of multichannel marketing in hotel businesses, there is a need for an exploratory study of channel integration related to the hotel industry in order to help researchers and practitioners improve their understanding and effectiveness of channel integration in this field.

3.2 Research question

The paper aims at exploring the matters for the implementation of integrated multichannel services in the hospitality sector. Correspondingly, there are two specific research questions:

- 1) How multichannel marketing can promote and reach customers?
- 2) How should a hotel design and manage integrated multichannel services to improve customer satisfaction?

3.3 Research method

Qualitative research was selected by the researchers for this study. The ability of qualitative research is to provide rich, in-depth knowledge from multiple viewpoints and to understand the meaning of action from the actor's point of view. In particular, this research method is especially appropriate for answering the 'how' and 'why' questions related phenomena and experiences in the service sector such as tourism and hospitality [8].

Additionally, channel integration and integrated multichannel services are still quite new research topics in developing countries like Vietnam, especially in the hotel industry. The intangibility characteristic of accommodation services also requires hotel businesses to better understand and deploy the multichannel integration strategy effectively for a seamless customer experience. Therefore, it is very important to explore the attitudes, feeling behaviours hidden deep inside the interviewees. This research method allows the authors to thoroughly explore the perspectives and opinions of managers or other actors directly involved in the hotel's channel integration activities to identify the undiscovered problems and understand the nature of events and phenomena.

3.4 Data collection

The researchers chose in-depth, semi-structured interviews to collect qualitative data, because this is an effective instrument in deeply exploring the opinions and perspectives of related subjects in an open-ended interview [9]. According to [28], a semi-structured interview is used to guide the interviewer because it allows the interviewer to formulate key questions to ask the respondent, while maintaining flexibility to pursue emerging topics and adapt to the respondent's background, such as their position or field of activity [28].

To optimize the multidimensionality and depth of information, a combination of snowball and quota sampling techniques is applied [11]. The three key stakeholders of the value creation network are determined as business managers, travel agents, and tourists. Consequently, the researchers selected eight business owners/managers or people directly involved in operating channel integration activities at 3-4-star hotels in Da Nang city; eight room sales intermediaries and sixteen domestic tourists visiting Da Nang to conduct in-depth interviews. The criterion for selected tourists is that they must be using at least two different channels simultaneously to gain access to information. Hotel managers and room sales intermediaries were selected based on their experience and comprehensive knowledge of marketing practices across multiple different channels. Approaching these three groups of interviewees will help get in-depth opinions and a complete picture related to the hotel channel integration.

Table 1 presents the summary of the respondents. Due to the confidentiality reasons, this paper does not include the full name, addresses and names of hotels of the respondent. In the Appendix, a list of respondents and a full description of the background information is provided to ensure a clear understanding of the respondents and quality of their responses.

Table 1. Summary of the respondents.

Category	Number	Male	Female	2 stars	3 stars	4 stars	5 stars
Hotel managers	8	62,50%	37,50%	0,00%	75,00%	25,00%	0,00%
Travel agencies	8	25,00%	75,00%				
Domestic tourists	16	25,00%	75,00%	6,25%	56,25%	25,00%	12,50%

To conduct the interviews, for hotel managers, the interviewer contacted each respondent by phone or email to arrange a time and place for the interview that is most convenient and

suitable for them. Each interview was conducted within 30-60 minutes, and interview period is during May and June in 2020.

A set of questions was prepared before each interview. In the interviews, the interviewers asked open-ended questions related to the channels, channel integration, customer services, and dimensions of integrated multichannel services, including integrated promotion, product and price, transaction information, information access, and order fulfilment.

For hotel managers and room sales intermediaries, most of the interviews were usually held at their workplaces in the morning or afternoon in person or by telephone for remote cases. For domestic tourists, the interviewers asked to interview tourists while they were resting in public places on the streets near tourist destinations in a relaxed and open atmosphere. Interviewers collect data by taking notes and capturing live recordings (if allowed) so that no important data was omitted.

3.5 Data analysis

The data processing was carried out by thematic analysis [23]. Emerging issues were identified, reviewed, cross-checked, and discussed among researchers to reach a convergence of findings.

First, the collected data was aggregated from face-to-face conversations, transcripts from interviews and recordings for data classification purpose. Next, the researchers divided the data into two basic groups of issues: i) *Channels* that hotels have employed to reach customers and how they control and monitor those channels; and ii) *Emerging issues* in hotel channel integration and suggestions for improving channel integration efficiency.

These data groups were further processed by coding based on the commonalities of the interviews' responses and screening many times to remove incompatible data, then selecting meaningful data to the topics. This way allows the researchers to select the best results for analysis and discussion in the following sections.

4 Findings

4.1 How multichannel marketing can promote and reach customers?

4.1.1 Multichannel strategy

From the hotel managers' point of view: Research results show that all hotels (8/8) use at least two channels to reach customers, including direct channels (booking via telephone, official website, Facebook's page, or directly at the hotel); indirect channels (via ticket agents, online travel agents such as booking.com, Agoda, TripAdvisor, etc.) or through travel agencies. The reason for using various channels is that these are new and effective channels to promote and reach customers.

"The hotel uses channels such as TripAdvisor, Expedia, booking.com Agoda, aivivu, Traveloka, Mytour. There are more customers booking through those channels than those booking directly at the hotel" (Informant #1.2).

"We all participate in channels related to customers with travel intentions such as travel agencies, online room sales agents, or sell rooms directly via hotline and Facebook, website" (Informant #1.4).

4.1.2 Selecting channels

However, considering these responses, it can be seen that depending on the hotels' strategic goals, the extent to which each of these channels is employed varies accordingly. Some businesses focus more on direct channels; others focus on the business market rather than the consumer market.

“For hotels, managers retain customers using price changes through direct booking at the hotel to get better deals. The channels for posting information and receiving feedback include OTA channels (Booking.com, Expedia, Traveloka), or social networks (Facebook). An official website was created to present the hotel's information, initiate and sustain customer trust” (Informant #1.4).

Therefore, the choice of communication and sales channels depends on the firm's objectives. Moreover, each indirect channel through OTAs (online travel agencies) in the market today aimed at specific customer segments. Hence, hotels need to develop appropriate sales channels for those different segments. For example, Chudu24, my tour, Traveloka target at domestic tourists, while Booking.com or Expedia focuses on European and American customers, and CTrip.com aims at Chinese visitors.

4.1.3 Monitoring channels

The hotels monitor current channels regularly for: i) following and selecting agent channels; and ii) monitoring customer reviews about the hotels on the Internet, asking for customer reviews on online channels.

“The hotel must monitor and select suitable online agency channels that understand the online market, gain high customer interaction, understand the booking activities of foreign as well as domestic tourists, and specialized channels that customers often use and easy for the hotel to gain access to”; “We try to maintain a good review score in every channel. If there is a bad review, the hotel will follow up and clarify the problem for dissatisfied customers to show that the hotel always cares about the customer's opinion both before and after their stay” (Informant #1.2);

“Hotels rely on customer reviews on agency channels as leverage their competition” (Informant #1.4).

More than half of hotel managers and room sales intermediaries mention the importance of monitoring customer feedback across different channels. Whether it is a good or bad review, once it is public, the hotels must show that they always care about customers and will solve the problems and improve their services accordingly. Indeed, customer complaints are the top issue that the hotel must address and settle. This shows customer care and listening; hotel managers can also keep track of daily operation at the lower levels, thereby making appropriate adjustments to improve service quality, and enhance customer satisfaction and loyalty.

4.2 How should a hotel design and manage integrated multichannel services to improve customer satisfaction?

The channel integration in hotels varies significantly in many different factors. However, after analysing the results of three interview groups, including hotel managers, room sales intermediaries and tourists, the researchers have identified the following key issues.

4.2.1 Issue # 1: Inconsistencies in promotion and pricing across channels

Integrated promotion policies, especially sales promotions, discounts, and pricing always receive great attention from both tourists and hoteliers, because these policies will directly affect the customer benefits and the firm's profits.

From the perspective of hotel managers or room sales intermediaries, they are aware of the need for consistency in promotion and pricing across channels (Informant 1.7). However, there exists a difference in prices and promotion policies between agents and hotels (Informant 2.1). Prices on mobile applications may be lower and there are more promotions

and giveaways at agents than on apps. Meanwhile, prices on hotels' official sources are listed prices and are often higher than prices in other channels.

"All interactive channels run the same promotion program. However, different OTA channels can run their own promotional activities to attract more customers and offset the costs of running these programs. The hotel's revenue is still the same" (Informant #1.4, #1.8).

"Promotion and after-sales services between direct and indirect channels should be uniform, so hotels will have less trouble with complaints related to discrepancies" (Informant #1.3).

"Because online sites are always managed by robots, it is easy to scan for false information or price differences. When there is inconsistency, the hotel will get complaints, as well as a drop in the rankings and enter the blacklist" (Informant #1.6).

From the point of view of customers, most of the interviewees (14/16 respondents) recognize inconsistencies in pricing policy between hotels and different room sales intermediaries. The final price perceived by customers when booking for the same hotel across channels is different, and this will lead to the risk of customer complaints related to this price difference, thereby affecting the image and reputation of the hotel.

"There is often a price difference across multiple channels" (Informant #3.4, #3.7, #3.8, #3.10, #3.13, #3.14, #3.15).

"You can get a better price on Facebook or applications than on the hotel's website" (Informant #3.2, #3.3, #3.5, #3.6, #3.9, #3.12).

In summary, from the perspective of hotels, the revenue may stay unchanged when offering the same price policy. Nevertheless, from the perspective of consumers, their benefits and costs will be very different after getting deals from different channels. This depends on the policy of OTA channels and the monitoring of the hotels with these partner channels on a regular basis so that the information about promotions and pricing as well as after-sale activities are updated and synchronized across channels. The fact that hotels receiving complaints and being blacklisted or downgraded is inevitable when implementing channel integration.

4.2.2 Issue # 2: Inconsistencies in information and information access

Hotel managers are aware and interested in the synchronization of hotel information and access in all channels, from hotel information (hotel names, images, logos) to room types, prices, promotions, and services provided. In particular, since accommodation service is intangible, more attention should be paid to the integration of information to establish trust and reputation for the hotel.

"All information is consistent across channels regarding room prices, room types and other benefits; the website is also regularly updated" (Informant #1.2).

"Accommodation is an intangible product; we cannot touch or feel it when making the purchase. So, it is necessary and imperative to be consistent in terms of information and images" (Informant #1.6).

However, from the point of view of customers, the hotel information integration across channels has not been effective. Many mixed opinions about information and access to information are mentioned and complained by customers. The problem of information inconsistency is mainly related to room availability (available or sold out, room view), prices, and promotions. As a matter of fact, the information on hotel websites and the reality of staying at the hotels is from time to time inconsistent.

"According to the information provided by the hotel, there will be a 10% discount, but actually at the hotel, the promotion can only be applied simultaneously with the use of their extra services" (Informant #3.4).

"The Deluxe rooms are sold out on Booking.com but in reality, they are still available at the hotel" (Informant #3.2).

“When I booked on the app, the room was still available, but at the hotel, the room was sold out” (Informant #3.12, #3.13).

“Once, I booked a sea-view room on Booking.com. However, when I checked in, the hotel said that there was no room with sea view and put me to another room. I felt the inconsistency between the room sales agent and the hotel” (Informant #3.7, #3.9).

“Once, I saw on the website the pictures of a very beautiful hotel, but when I got there, it was not what I saw. I was quite dissatisfied with the room quality” (Informant #3.8).

4.2.3 Issue # 3: Integration of customer services

There is the issue of integrated customer services. Customer support in all channels needs to be seamless to make them feel convinced and satisfied, then to increase the possibility of booking at the hotel. Most of the hotel managers and sales agents believe that service quality is the key factor that needs to be taken into account when booking, right from the first contact with the hotel through various channels.

“The living standard is higher, so customers want more. They need to feel welcome and comfortable right from the moment of booking” (Informant #1.2).

“In the past, channels were often separate, but now many channels are integrated together to support customers on booking. Regarding communication with hotel staff, every time a reservation is made, there is a connection and communication section so that guests can ask for some things. This communication is extremely easy and fast” (Informant #1.6).

However, the provision of standard and consistent customer services across channels is still limited. In short, it is a matter of procedures, payments, and additional services on channels such as free breakfast, cooking allowance, and airport pick-up.

“I called the hotel to ask in advance, and the staff allowed me to cook. However, after I went to the market to buy food, the hotel asked me not to cook” (Informant #3.15).

“The procedure for exchange and refund is a bit complicated” (Informant #3.7, #3.9).

“There is a difficulty in making payments with sales intermediaries because they don't accept the cards I used” (Informant #3.7).

“When booking, the breakfast is included. However, in reality, I had to pay” (Information #3.10).

“The service quality of the hotel is not as good as the information stated on the intermediary sites” (Informant #3.11, #3.13).

Therefore, hotels need to pay more attention to provide integrated customer services across different channels, receive feedback from customers in order to improve service quality and enhance customer satisfaction. Currently, many hotels have been able to apply business technology in customer relationship management across various channels.

“Hotels can use “SiteMinder” which is a platform connecting room sales distribution channel system and promptly update information in all channels” and “using “booking engine” (which is a modern software application, installed on the hotel's website, Facebook page, etc.) to manage information quickly and efficiently” (Informant #1.2).

“If there is a bad online review, the hotel should be honest, admit the mistake, investigate the information and apologize publicly” (Informant #1.2).

Even though accommodation service is intangible, well-integrated customer services will help sustain customer relationship, which is a key factor for customers to consider and choose a hotel to stay in and for past customers to introduce new ones. This factor helps hotels to establish customer trust and to build their reputation.

4.2.4 Propositions for improving channel integration efficiency

In summary, Table 2 presents our propositions to address the issues as mentioned above.

Table 2. The propositions for improving channel integration efficiency.

<i>Issues</i>	<i>Propositions</i>
Inconsistencies in promotion and pricing across channels	It is crucial that hotels regularly control and coordinate with online channels to offer appropriate pricing policies (Informant #2, #2.2) as well as promotions (Informant #3.10, #3.11) and advertising across channels to ensure consistency and unity. For effective management, the hotels should assign a person in charge of managing various room sales channels (Informant #2.5, #3.15), along with the use of a specialized software for channel management (Informant #2.2).
Inconsistencies in information and information access	Hotels need to collect and analyse all reviews of customers on social media networks (Informant #2.4, #2.5) to respond promptly to customers and adjust information/policies accordingly, and implement a filter system to detect fake accounts that degrade the businesses. Regarding customers, hotel managers and authorities need to have a better policy on managing information posted online. Customer information may be disclosed and used for scam or fraud (Informant #3.15).
Integration of customer services	Hotels need to provide complete and consistent information, from authentic pictures to extra services and prices (Informant #3.4), as well as collect and handle complaints promptly and effectively to avoid unfortunate confusion. The flexibility of return policies, room changes or additional services and customer support (Informant #3.5, #3.6), especially in the post-Covid-19 period, is crucial for the hotels to quickly overcome difficulties, bring added value to customers and enhance customer satisfaction.

5 Discussions and conclusions

Channel integration in the hotel industry is a significant research topic in the context of Technology 4.0 and rapidly changed consumer behaviours. This article introduces the channels that hotels can participate in and the need for regular monitoring on these channels to ensure a seamless customer experience by highlighting service integration in multi-channel marketing. The result shows that although the channel integration is now recognized by hotel managers, there still exists three outstanding issues from the perspectives of customers, hotel managers, and room sales intermediaries such as inconsistencies in promotion and pricing across channels; inconsistencies in information and access to information; and need for integrated customer services.

5.1 Theoretical contributions

This study explores the channel integration in the hotel industry. Previous studies have focused mainly on the retailing sector [24][27] [36] and banking services [15], very few research efforts have addressed the field of hotel channel integration [2]. Furthermore, the increasing importance of channel integration in hotel businesses should also be emphasized in the era of digital transformation. The contributions of the study are as the following.

First, this study shows that hotels now have shifted and adapted to changing customer behaviours in the context of Technology 4.0 by using at least two channels to reach target customers. Thus, the selection, monitoring and supervision on these channels have also been explicitly addressed. Consequently, hotels have tried to integrate channels in terms of information access, promotion, pricing, customer services.

Second, the extent of synchronization across channels is still limited. In the context of prolonged Covid-19, limited financial resources and tightening consumer spending, it is inevitable to consider the price of each trip. Since Vietnam is a developing country, GDP per capita is low, and the price difference across channels becomes a concern for many people. The good news is that Vietnam is on track to create synchronism in infrastructure as well as

information technology from the ministerial, sectoral to local levels as well as the linkage between functional departments (such as providing citizen identification cards, health insurance, etc.).

Third, creating an effective hotel service supply network from the departmental level to the local level also takes time to create information consistency across channels at the macro and micro levels. In addition, whether each hotel, depending on its resources (financial, human, etc.) will equip itself or not with a software system to manage information inadequacies on different channels may also lead to problems in hotel information management. Inconsistency in hotel services across channels is also partly a consequence of information asynchrony. The truth is that hotel services depend greatly on people, on the quality of service staff (on knowledge, professional skills and service attitude) in addition to supporting service policies provided by the hotel.

5.2 Managerial contributions

With the results drawn from the exploratory research, some practical implications can serve as a reference basis for hotel businesses and state management agencies in Vietnam and the Central region.

First, hotels should be acutely aware of the importance of using and integrating various channels to increase customer interaction, attract more customers and ensure a seamless customer experience. However, depending on the strategies and goals of each business, the selection and implementation of various channels should be appropriate and flexible, because each channel will target different market segments based on different policies. If there is no careful selection of distribution channels, sometimes it becomes a “double-edged sword”, the relationship with partners and customers will become less sustainable. This situation creates opportunities for competitors to enter and negative business impact. Not only choosing the right channels, but the hotel's strategy also needs the use of multiple, which also requires close and regular monitoring and supervision on all channels to ensure consistency and synchronization. The hotels can create sustainable development with the use of many different channels to reach customers. If the hotels are aware of and well implement the channel integration, it will reduce channel conflicts across channels, thereby enhancing customer benefits and hotel brands reaching customers faster and more efficiently.

Second, the emerging dimensions of hotel channel integration include information and access to information, promotion and pricing, and integrated customer services. For intangible products such as hotel accommodation services, the integration and synchronization of information as well as prices, promotion, and hotel services are extremely important for customers to easily visualize and decide to book or stay at the hotel. Once customers find the seamless, smooth interaction between channels, they will have a good impression of the hotel, helping to establish trust and enhance the hotel's reputation. On the contrary, once customers notice the inconsistencies in information and the hotel's policies, their feedback is not promptly addressed, and they will have a negative and unfavourable impression of the hotel, thereby affecting the trust and image of the hotel. L'interoperability of systems can be a viable solution to this problem [20].

Third, from the perspective of state management agencies, understanding and improving the seamless customer experience is necessary, especially in the Technology 4.0 era with the appearance of various intermediary channels and the increasing popularity of mobile applications and smartphones. These seamless experiences should be created as soon as tourists click on official tourism websites. In fact, OTA channels or websites are not only sales channels but also an effective marketing tool in the hotel industry. Since Vietnam has been affected by the Covid-19 epidemic for the past two years, the number of visitors has been sharply reduced and unstable. Therefore, it is necessary for state management agencies

at this stage to have strategies and initiatives to review processes and procedures to improve the quality of accommodation businesses, avoid unfair competition across channels and create synchronization and consistency in the introduction of information on the official tourist sites of the provinces, thus creating trust, attracting and retaining visitors.

In summary, the paper highlights the strategic and operational management of a specific case of digital transformation that focuses on the digital technology-enabled shift from a product-centric, or a service-centric logic, to an inter-organizational service-centric logic, and identifies the sociotechnical challenges underlying this transition.

5.3 Limitations and future research

This study has researched a limited number of domestic tourists in the Danang-Hue-Hoi An area. Each region and country may have different cultural characteristics. Therefore, further studies can be conducted by doing interviews in different destinations throughout the country. Besides, the study can also be expanded to include foreign tourists.

In order to provide a more comprehensive picture, a qualitative and quantitative study with a larger sample size in the future should be considered to validate the factors affecting channel integration in the hotel industry. Another future research direction is to focus on service integration driven by customer intelligence with an aim to optimize customer experience and recommend the right services for the right customers during the different stages of pre-purchase, purchase, and post-purchase.

Finally, a well-integrated multichannel strategy needs to include highly-integrated promotions, product consistency across channels, and an integrated information system [5]. Therefore, another research direction is to design and implement an inter-organizational information system for integrated multichannel services, which shares customer information, pricing and inventory data across multiple channels [18].

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Appendix

List of basic information of respondents participating in the in-depth interviews

Table 3. Hotel managers.

Informant no.	Gender	Age	Position	Experience in the hotel industry	Classification of hotel	Capacity
1.1	Female	30	Hotel manager	6 years	3 stars	24 rooms
1.2	Male	33	Hotel manager	11 years	4 stars	92 rooms
1.3	Female	38	Hotel owner	4 years	3 stars	40 rooms
1.4	Female	27	Receptionist/ Sales	4 years	3 stars	23 rooms
1.5	Male	39	Hotel manager	11 years	3 stars	82 rooms
1.6	Male	31	Sales/ Marketing manager	9 years	4 stars	133 rooms
1.7	Male	28	CEO	3 years	3 stars	36 rooms
1.8	Male	27	CEO	7 years	3 stars	120 rooms

Table 4. Travel agencies.

Informant no.	Gender	Age	Position	Experience in hotel industry	Location	Target market
2.1	Female	25	Salesman	1 year	Son Tra- Da Nang	Central
2.2	Female	27	Tour operator	5 years	Ho Chi Minh	North Central - South central
2.3	Male	30	Booking staff	2 years	Hoi An- Da Nang	Central
2.4	Female	25	Customer care staff	2 years	Ho Chi Minh	South - Central
2.5	Male	20	Salesman	1 year	Ngu Hanh Son- Da Nang	Central
2.6	Female	23	Salesman	2 years	Son Tra- Da Nang	Central
2.7	Female	39	Salesman	3 years	Da Nang	Viet Nam
2.8	Female	35	Salesman	5 years	Da Nang	Viet Nam

Table 5. Domestic tourists.

Informant no.	Gender	Educational background	Age group	Job	Location	Classification of hotels
3.1	Female	Graduate	26-45	Businessman	Da Nang	4-star
3.2	Female	Graduate	18-25	Businessman	Da Nang	3-star
3.3	Female	High school	26-45	Employee	Da Nang	4-star
3.4	Female	Undergraduate	18-25	Employee	Da Nang	4-star
3.5	Female	Undergraduate	18-25	Student	Da Nang	3-star
3.6	Female	Undergraduate	18-25	Employee	Da Nang	5-star
3.7	Female	Undergraduate	18-25	Employee	Da Nang	5-star
3.8	Male	Undergraduate	18-25	Student	Da Nang	4-star
3.9	Male	Undergraduate	26-45	Government official	Da Nang	3-star
3.10	Female	Undergraduate	18-25	Student	Hue	3-star
3.11	Female	Undergraduate	18-25	Businessman	Da Nang	3-star
3.12	Female	College	18-25	Employee	Da Nang	3-star
3.13	Female	Undergraduate	18-25	Employee	Da Nang	3-star
3.14	Male	Undergraduate	18-25	Employee	Da Nang	2-star
3.15	Male	Graduate	26-45	Employee	Da Nang	3-star
3.16	Female	Undergraduate	18-25	Employee	Da Nang	3-star