Brand management strategies of hotel chain sub-brands
Sheraton Marriott and DoubleTree by Hilton

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The aim of this thesis is to compare the brand management strategies of Marriott International and Hilton Worldwide and that way find out the best tools to build and maintain the most valuable hotel brand in the world. Since both hotel chains have several sub-brands, this thesis is limited to cover one sub-brand from both chains. In the research there are two point of views when it comes to these brands: the hotel chains in a bigger picture as well as more specific viewpoint for brand management of the sub-brands.

The used research method was qualitative method, because the goal of this thesis was to find out ways, meanings and reasons behind the topic. I used theme interview and observation as data collecting methods to gain deep understanding of the topic. I interviewed one brand and marketing professional from both sub-brands to learn about their brand management strategies. I also observed each brand’s presence and activity on Instagram to find out how strong the brands are online and how their brand message comes through on that platform. The research was dated in spring 2019.

As main results I find out that the biggest brand with largest audience isn’t always the strongest and doesn’t always have the best activity and engagement on Instagram. I also list six tools to build a valuable hotel brand, that include for example having different marketing strategies for each social media channels and changing and adapting new strategies faster than others to stand out. Finally I present my conclusions, that showcase that the world’s most valuable hotel brand of the future is built today by balancing in between old and new, staying tech-savvy yet authentic and being able to cope with constant high-speed change by turning every new challenge into a possibility for success.

Keywords
Brand management, brand value, hotel brand, Instagram
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1 Introduction

The objective of this thesis is to find out the key tools and requirements of being the most valuable hotel brand in the world, particularly in terms of brand value and the factors affecting it. The used aspect is comparing the brands of two hotel chains that are listed not only one of the biggest ones, but also the most valuable hotel brands in the world: Marriott International and Hilton Worldwide (Brand Finance 2019). Since both chains are very large and contain tens of sub-brands, the theme of this thesis is limited to focus only one sub-brand from each hotel chain, Sheraton from Marriott and DoubleTree by Hilton. The main purpose of this study is to clarify the brand management strategies of given brands, compare them to each other and finally bring together the best strategies from both parties. The results this study unfolds are useful and interesting to anyone working with hotel brands or hotel marketing. Therefore, the aim of this work is to provide a lot of valuable information for those working with this topic.

This study is qualitative, and the first data collection method is theme interviews. By interviewing professionals working in managerial positions of brand and marketing from both sub-brands, I gained a deep understanding of the most important and used brand management strategies and activities. Later I used social media observation to find out how the given strategies and brand goals are seen on their Instagram accounts, and how the brands appeal to their potential customers there in terms of activity and engagement. I chose Instagram as the only social media channel for this thesis, because both brands have a strong presence on that platform, and it is the fastest growing social network in general (Southern 2018). I’m also very familiar with the platform myself.

I started working with this thesis in January 2019 by first studying the topic well and then writing the theoretical part. During the spring I continued the work even though I was in my student exchange and managed to do the interviews to both hotel brands by using the contacts of my local teachers of my exchange destination. I had the honour to interview persons working in charge of brand management and marketing activities of both sub-brands, and I learned a lot of important insights from the interviews. After the interviews I was able to do the social media observing part after first learning more about the brand management goals and strategies of the given brands. Like planned, I finished this thesis just in time in May, so the duration of this thesis was four months.

This thesis starts out by outlining all the most important topics and areas of brand management: brand identity, image and personality, that are all aligned but still differentiated, then brand value and equity that both have to do with the persuasion that people have
about the brand, and after that the best activities and tools used for managing international hotel chain businesses from brand perspective. The second part focuses on the actual and most used brand management strategies with different goals and areas of function, following by the research methods and results. Conclusions and discussion part afterwards take the results to the next level and give some take-aways to the reader.

2 Marriott and Hilton

Like mentioned, the companies used in this study are Marriott International and Hilton Worldwide. The first of them is an American global hotel chain that was founded in 1927 and opened its very first hotel in 1957 in Virginia US. Over the next 25 years, Marriott became a diverse global company. Nowadays Marriott International is offering one of the biggest brand portfolios in the industry, with 30 brands and more than 6700 properties in 127 countries across the world by operating and franchising hotels as well as licence vacation ownership resort around the world (Marriott International 2019). It started as a family business and grew into a huge global family. The sub-brand I’m using in this thesis is Sheraton, that was first opened in 1937 and currently this brand is having more than 400 hotels in more than 70 countries around the world, being the third largest brand on the Marriott brand portfolio and the largest one outside of the US in terms of room count. Sheraton is located in the class “premium” in the brand map of Marriott. Whereas Marriott’s core value is family, Sheraton’s core value is close to that: community. (Sheraton 2019).

Hilton Worldwide is also an American hotel chain with a mission of becoming the most hospitable company in the world, that opened its first hotel carrying the Hilton name in 1925 in Dallas US. This date, Hilton has 16 brands and more than 5600 properties in 113 counties around the globe (Hilton 2019a). It operates through two segments that are management and franchise, and ownership. This hotel chain giant owns, leases, manages, develops and franchises hotels and resorts (Bloomberg 2019). DoubleTree has been part of the Hilton brand since 2011 and experienced a little re-branding process while moving under Hilton’s brand umbrella. DoubleTree offers upscale accommodation both in getaway cities and vacation destinations. (DoubleTree 2019)
3 What is a brand?

“A brand is the way in which a company, organization, or individual is perceived by those who experience it.” (Lischer 2018) Brand is the most important thing the company has. Basically, anything with a name can be a potential brand, be that a city, a person or an event. Even though brand usually has to do with a physical product or at least a service, it’s mostly about the perception and promise a company gives to its customers. A brand differentiates your company and its offerings from others and tells the customers what to expect when being loyal to your brand. (Williams 2018)

3.1 Identity, image and personality

When creating a new brand and defining its characteristics, there are three basic components to be used. Those are brand identity, brand image and brand personality – components that describe the same unity in different ways and from different point of views. Brand identity is what consumers see and remember from ads and marketing campaigns: the name, the logo and the colours of the brand. In addition to those, brand identity also includes things like the nationality and the products and services of the brand. Those factors are carefully designed to support and define the identity of a brand, which should be clear foundation on which to build the image of the brand. (Johansson & Carlson 2015a, 2-7). The importance of brand identity is growing all the time, since the competition is huge at any industry and consumers are overloaded with information. Having a strong and clear brand identity helps the consumers to make a buying decision and trust the brand over its competitors. The best kind of brand identity has the ability to give a quick presentation about the company and its offerings to the consumers. The clearer the identity, the bigger the chance to form a positive brand image to customers minds. (Professional Academy 2018)

The image of the brand is built from its identity. Brand image makes the impression and creates recognition to the company and is therefore urgent not only to build and maintain correctly, but also lead to the right direction. If brand identity is the logo and the name of the brand, brand image encompasses all the visual elements and associations related to the brand, like speed, quality and reliability. Brand identity tells what the brand is, and the brand image is what the brand seems to be to customers. As service companies, like high-end hotels in this case, all intangible things like customer service are strongly involved to the brand image. (Timothy 2016). Brand image is developed based on the experiences that customers may have with the brand. Every negative experience harms the
brand’s image and the company needs to work hard to change the perception of the cus-
tomer. Customer perceptions of quality, service and all associations that come to cus-
tomer’s mind when seeing or hearing the brand’s name are one of the most valuable 
things a company can have. Generally, brand image builds credibility and equity for the 
brand and is important for any business. (Murphy 2019)

Brand personality is based on all the interactions that consumers have with the brand, 
from stores and advertising to typical brand users. Each brand tends to have its own typi-
cal users, who strongly relate to the characteristics of the brand and its personality. This 
has to do with how the brand is marketed and what’s the slogan and core of it. This out-
ward expression of the brand is also called the brand style, which is the way the brand 
makes its users look and feel like. The stronger and clearer the brand personality, the 
easier it is to the consumers to express their own personality and style by using the brand. 
(Johansson & Carlson 2015b, 9). People want to see the humanity within the business, so 
human personality traits are powerful elements when building the brand personality. There 
are five basic traits when classifying a brand personality: sincerity, excitement, compe-
tence, sophistication and ruggedness. The personality and the voice of the brand together 
are a great tool to allow business to build a personal connections with its audience. (Mar-
ketingMo 2019). The more the consumer segments can relate to, resonate and enjoy the 
personality of the brand, the more value it adds to the brand. That’s because the carefully 
built personality directly creates an emotional association in the mind of the target con-
sumer. (Kenton 2018)

To summarize all the above, brand identity answers the question “Who is Ritz-Carlton?”, 
brand image answers the question “What comes to mind when thinking about Ritz-Carl-
ton?” and brand personality on the other hand answers the question “What kind of person-
ality is Ritz-Carlton?”. When all three components are diffused in the marketplace, the 
brand has become an established brand. (Johansson & Carlson 2015c, 21)

3.2 Brand value and equity

Like mentioned before, brand is one of the most valuable assets a company can have. 
Brand value is the quality all companies and brands are craving, and no wonder. Practi-
cally it’s the total sum the customers are willing to pay extra, how often they choose the 
brand over competitors as well as all the memories, expectations and relationships with 
the brand over alternatives. (Olenski 2015). In other words, it’s the financial worth of the 
brand. It’s defined as the ability to deliver profits, and without delivering profits, the brand
has no financial value (Kapferer 2008a, 14). Yearly brand value rankings list the most financially valuable brands with their worth in terms of future revenues, when in some explanations brand value is seen as the intangible “goodwill” contained in the brand. No matter what’s the way of defining brand value, it tends to rise when the brand is extended to new markets. That being the case, many businesses are focus their marketing resources on one or two main brands with international or even global presence. (Johansson & Carlsson 2015d)

The figure 1 above is an example of yearly brand value ranking list, in this case of global hotel brands. It shows the top ten hotel brands of the year 2018 and points out the brand value in millions of dollars during the given year in comparison with the value of previous year. There are several ways to calculate brand value, but the most popular one is based on estimating future cash flow derived from the brand and calculating the net present value, NPV (Roll 2014). As we can see, the two hotel giants compared in this thesis, Hilton and Marriott International, are strongly dominating the global hotel industry. In addition to these main brands being the top two, both have one sub-brand in the top ten list: Hampton Inn is part of the Hilton brand family (Howard 2018) and Courtyard belongs to Marriott (Marriott International 2019a).
There are several important benefits for companies to have a high brand value: pricing advantages, channel advantages, entry advantages and stock market advantages. The most visible one for customers is probably the pricing. A strong brand has the ability to charge higher prices even when the product or service is comparable to the alternative one. Where the strong brand can add value to its offerings, a weak brand on the other hand often times reduces it. This is also related to price changes. A strong brand with high customer loyalty can increase the prices without much damage to the brand, but companies with weaker brand must compete on price with reductions. When talking about distribution channels, for a strong brand it is much easier to lower the distribution costs by negotiating good deals with retailers. A strong and well-known brand also has more changes to succeed when entering to new and especially foreign markets and overcome entry barriers. The fourth advantage has to do with higher share prices. It’s a very valuable asset for a company to have a recognized brand in the stock market, since the stronger the brand is, the more secure investment it is for the potential investors. (Johansson & Carlson 2015e)

Brand value and brand equity both address the worth of the brand, but they are not exactly the same. While brand value tells about the financial significance the brand has, brand equity refers to how important the brand is in the eyes of the customer. Positive brand value doesn’t automatically create positive brand equity. Brand equity can be measured and seen as brand visibility, brand associations and customer loyalty. Brand visibility is the awareness and credibility the brand has, and the customer’s needs it can fulfil. Brand associations include any negative or positive feeling toward the brand and customer loyalty provides the business flow of services and products that consumers value high and are willing to purchase over alternatives. (Aaker 2016)

3.3 International hotel brands online

Like any business nowadays, also hotel brands need to re-examine their situations and budgets for digital marketing in order to keep up with success and reach their guests also in the future. As Google continues to grow its presence and influence in travel search and online booking, becoming the main competitor to traditional travel agencies, hotel brands must navigate shifting strongly online with updated websites for direct bookings and social media accounts guiding the followers to the website to engage with the brand. Also, the more visible the hotel brand is in Google search, the easier it is to find.

“A profitable hotel website is one that builds trust with its visitors and influences them to book directly on the website. All elements, from branding to layout and colours to “calls to action”
(CTAs) play a crucial role in engaging with users and increasing the hotel website conversion.” (Mensak 2018b)

Company’s online reputation in hospitality industry is more important and sensitive than in other industries, because potential guests can’t “try” the hospitality product like they can try clothes for example. The opinions and experiences shared online by former guests are the key to attract more customers – according to TripAdvisor, the rate of people using online reviews before booking a hotel reaches 93%. Potential guests are looking for guidance and social proof, which makes hotels with small amount of reviews less appealing for travellers than those who have many reviews. It’s also studied that user generated content, such as comments and pictures made by peers, are much more trustworthy to other travellers than social media posts made by professionals or the hotel brand itself. That being said, a hotel can take an advantage of its online reputation management as an operational tool for marketing by considering it as an indicator of their performance since it allows a hotel to measure their guest satisfaction. Online reviews make valuable, free and easily available resources to hotel managers that help recognize and follow the results of their work. Managing hotel’s online reputation is not an option anymore, since it clearly leads a hotel to a success with increased revenue when done correctly. It’s more like a top investment priority that every hotel brand must practice and develop. (Ishida 2017)

After a hotel chain has its website on point, social media activity is effective and well targeted, a hotel is easy to find from search engines like Google and there are many great reviews of it on TripAdvisor, it’s time to develop the online game even further. Since mobile phones have developed a lot lately and have become embedded in people’s everyday life, especially while travelling, hotel brands need to be easily available via mobiles. Different mobile-first approaches are constantly embraced and required by today’s guests, like self-check-in/out and a digital door key to a hotel room. Guests are even willing to download hotel brands’ own apps to make their travels easier, which is a great fact for hotel brands’ loyalty programs and guest satisfaction rates. (Hertzfeld 2019)
4 Brand management strategies

After establishing a brand with crystal clear attributes, strategic brand management comes into the picture. Its role is to take the brand equity to the next level by adding value to brand with different strategies and positioning the brand strongly into minds of the customers. (Bhasin 2018a). Because of digitalisation, everything is available to everyone, which makes brand management an urgent tool for growth and standing out. It develops the brand perception in the market including all associations of the brand and brand experience, as well as the relationships with the purchasing process. The goal of brand management is to increase the value of the brand, which then allows higher prices and stronger relationship with the customers. This makes the brand sustainable and successful. (Schmidt 2018)

4.1 Positioning and Competition

The very first step of strategic branding is to define the position the brand needs to achieve. This has to do with analysing the main competitors and their positions in the market compared to the position your brand is aiming for. Positioning is seen as two-stage process including the indication of the competitive set the brand should be compared, as well as the indication of what makes the brand different from other brands and products within the named competitive set. Positioning confirms that consumers make their purchasing choices based on comparison, so that is what brand managers need to do as well. When comparing the brand to others in the competitive set, there are four questions that help defining the right position. Those are: Why? When? For whom? Against whom? These questions clarify both consumer benefit aspect and target consumer aspect.

Creating a brand management strategy can be seen like drawing out a map, where positioning is determining both your location and destination. There are four main strategies used in terms of brand positioning. Other companies fit into one strategy, others are using several ones. The first one is about learning from example, and in this strategy the company is trying to become a new market leader by beating the existing one on its own game with similar kind of a product or service. This can take a lot of money, but its benefit is that the customers already have an idea of what is it that the company is offering. However, this can only work if there’s a well-established market category. The second one is about creating a niche within an underserved market which needs are not being met by the current market leader. Again, the customers already have an idea of the offerings, but now they are just getting a better fit. This makes a company a specialist in providing its services to a specific industry. The third one is about reframing the existing market in new terms. It means highlighting new benefits and strengths that then can beat the ones that
The current market leader is underlining. The fourth strategy on the other hand, is about changing the whole game. It’s used when there’s no a proper market for the company’s offerings, or when there’s a new need that’s not been met by the other market categories. In this strategy, a company builds a new product-market fit from scratch. (Willis 2019)

The reason why positioning process is so important, is that products increase customer choice, whereas brands simplify it. Positioning is also very competition-orientated, since it details the best ways to attack competitors’ market share. Brand positioning is in a way related to the brand identity, but they are not the same. Positioning can change through time, although it shouldn’t change too often to avoid losing its identity and confusing customers. Brand identity on the other hand is more stable being strongly tied to the roots of the brand. (Kapferer 2008d) However, when talking about luxury brands, positioning is not seen as important as for traditional brands. That’s because in the world of luxury, what really counts is being unique and having a creative identity, not comparison with competitors. Above all, luxury is ‘superlative’, not ‘comparative’, and therefore luxury brands are more interested in staying true to their identity rather than worrying about their positioning compared to their competitors. (Kapferer & Bastien 2009a)

### 4.2 Marketing

Brand marketing is done to implement the previously made brand positioning. Well done brand marketing involves several media vehicles, as well as a strategy for above the line, which means mass marketing, and below the line, meaning direct marketing. In both ways the brand message is targeted, but in below the line marketing it needs to be highly targeted for reaching and engaging the end customers. Above the line marketing is mostly used in large corporations for building brand, whereas below the line marketing fits for companies who want more penetration in the market. Along with the media, brand marketing activities, like different kind of marketing communications, are also effective tools for building brand value. Generally, brand marketing is seen as a middle step in between planning and implementation. (Bhasin 2018b)

When creating a brand marketing campaign, the goal is to increase customers’ awareness of company’s offerings and reputation. It’s all about communicating the brand’s core being so that it stays in the minds of the potential customers. This involves identifying the key things the company wants to be known for. The main thing is that the brand personality is in line with the core values of its target customers. Brand marketing campaigns should always have well defined and measurable objectives, such as market leadership or market innovation, which could be measured by different references, like media. After that the
marketers and brand managers know what kind of marketing activities to create in order to accomplish the named objectives. The used activities could be for example social media campaigns, press releases, events etc. (Marketing Schools 2012)

When managing a luxury brand, the traditional laws of marketing are no longer valid - traditional marketing stops at luxury. Those laws may apply to premium brands, but not luxury. There’s even a theory that the marketing techniques used for traditional brand management could even be harmful for luxury brands. One of the reasons is that in traditional brand marketing, everything needs to be super clear and easily accessible, whereas luxury brand is something that has to be earned. The more time and effort the customer needs to put in to find and get the dream product or service, the more luxurious and desirable it finally feels (Kapferer & Bastien 2009c)

It’s safe to say that social media plays a big role in today’s brand marketing. The newest social media marketing trends highlight that engagement is the key brand objective, since that is the way consumers start to build a relationship with a brand and finally do business with it. Brand engagement guarantees future growth, customer loyalty and profitability. Therefore, identifying real emotional values and using them to build emotional engagement especially with video content is what makes a brand to stand out even when consumer expectations are increasing. (Passikoff 2018) Other trends for brand marketing in social media are social listening, micro-influencers, timeliness and last but definitely not least, Google Ads. Social listening means searching any mentions (also untagged mentions) or other key words of the brand in social media channels. Its main goals are customer service and reputation management, and since people keep sharing their ideas, worries and experiences on social media, this will only get bigger in the future. Micro-influencers came into social media marketing game when bigger influencers raised their prices up. Also, micro-influencers exist in every marketing niche and with less than 10 000 followers they are still more authentic and trustworthy persons who have a great engagement and marketing potential, as we can see from the figure 2 below. (Barysevich 2018a)
Timeliness in social media means real-time communication, such as 24/7 customer support, chatbots, looking after potential social media crisis and real time social selling. All this is crucial since social media never sleeps, which means that brands need tools to see mentions of the brand in real time and to help customers quickly anytime. Consumers expect that their needs are met, and problems solved right away, the sooner the better. Taking responsibility and reacting to all kinds of comments and feedback also builds more trustworthiness and makes the consumers feel they are important to the brand. The picture 1 below is an example of how Hilton Hotels reacted real-time to a tweet of their customer, even though the tweet wasn’t a question, but just a thank you. (Barysevich 2018b)
Since Google still dominates the online search world, it can be said that Google Ads is a crucial part of any brand’s marketing strategy. In fact, it holds 63% of the market and 98% reach in the whole internet and is therefore a powerful tool for brand marketing in social media. For Hotel brands, Google Ads can be used to make smart and strictly targeted booking moves. To enjoy the benefit of reaching potential customers with it, a brand needs to have its website, apps and customer-relation management in order. It also has to do with competition on the industry, since if for example hotel marketers are not participating in Google Ads, they are automatically giving more marketing space for their competitors like other hotels and travel agencies that then are easier to find by customers. (Hoisington 2018)
4.3 Performance

After defining the brand positioning goal and starting brand marketing accordingly, it's important to measure and analyse the brand’s performance in the industry. There are several different metrics to measure brand performance, such as social media engagement and the number of visitors at company’s website that will be discussed in a minute, but the most effective and obvious one is sales metrics. It is said that a strong brand has a quantifiable effect on sales in the following areas: volume, velocity and value. Volume tells the demand for the brand’s products and services and can be measured by lead generation metrics, in other words the brand’s ability to attract customers. Velocity on the other hand points out the speed a customer travels through the buying process. Loyal customers who love the brand are quick and efficient when purchasing, which translates into faster sales. This can be measured by tracking the time it takes for a customer to go through the whole customer journey from research to close. Value in this case means the ability to sell at premium price and avoid discounting. It can be measured by looking at the pricing metrics – how often does the brand discount to win? The stronger the brand, the less the brand needs to discount. Actually, customers are often willing to pay a premium for the market leader. (Miller 2017)

Like mentioned earlier, social media is crucial part of brand management and therefore it’s important to also analyse how the brand is performing on different platforms and to understand the customers better. In a nutshell social media metrics give data about brand reach, engagement level and overall influence. Whether a brand aims to build overall awareness or to increase engagement among loyal followers, it’s important to keep that goal in mind when paddling through all that data you can find from social media. There are many platforms available to companies for gathering insights and making individualized messaging possible. This kind of social listening, like mentioned before, enables the brand to get to know its customers more personal level and that way increase the engagement with them. (Long 2017)

4.4 Adding value

After gaining loyal customers, a brand must not only take care of those customers, but also make sure not to lose them later to another brand. By building deeper relationships and giving more value to its customers, a brand can make this happen. That’s why so many brands have some kind of customer loyalty programs for their long-term consumers. According to studies, 72% of adults online are part of at least one loyalty program. In addi-
tion to points, loyalty programs are nowadays also much more – discounts, free re-
sources, events and other valuable things the customers appreciate. Most attractive loy-
alty programs increase sales of the brand, thanks to its members that are proven to be
very good marketers for the brand – even 73% of loyalty program members are more
likely to recommend the brands that have great loyalty program benefits to others. A new
form of reward programs is the concept of influencer marketing programs, where chosen
social media influencers with certain amount of audience promote the products or services
of the brand to their followers. (Mulqueen 2018)

Hilton Hotels has a loyalty program called Hilton Honors. New members of this program
can join for free and earn points with every dollar they spent at Hilton Hotels and are also
guaranteed to find the lowest prices when booking via hilton.com. If a customer finds a
lower price somewhere else, Hilton promises to match that and even get 25% off. Mem-
bres of this loyalty program can also use Hilton app, where they can do many things, like
choosing their room and unlocking the door. Elite-level customers get even more benefits
all the way from free breakfasts to rollover nights, and there are all together four catego-
ries of the benefits available, like we can see in the figure 6 below: member, silver, gold,
diamond. The more points, the more benefits. (Hilton 2019) Marriott International has also
a loyalty program for its customers called Marriott Bonvoy. As a member of this program,
customer can earn points by staying in any of their 6 700 hotels from 29 brands around
the world. This is possible, since at the beginning of 2019, the three rewards programs
Marriott has, were united together as one to offer even more value and benefits for their
customers. (Marriott International 2019c)

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<th>Points earned with every $1 spent on stays:</th>
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<td>18 Pts. (100% Bonus)</td>
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<td>20 Pts. (100% Bonus)</td>
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Picture 2. Hilton Honors (Cashwell 2018)
4.5 Budget & pricing

Where traditional brand marketing can be called as ‘demand-based’ which means that it in a way tries to meet the current needs of the target customers and do pricing according to that. When marketing luxury brand and its offerings on the other hand, it could be called ‘supply-based’ since it first creates the offering and after that its price, depending on how much the customers see it as luxury. Generally speaking, when the prices go down, the demand goes up. When a luxury brand does the same, usually happens the contrary. In traditional marketing there’s often a launch price of a product or service, and by the time the competition comes along, the price falls. With luxury brands this doesn’t happen, because price is more like a technical detail. When the price becomes an issue in the price-demand relationship, we are not talking about luxury anymore. (Kapferer & Bastien 2009d)

Nowadays price itself is not a characteristic of luxury, since also brands other than luxury have high prices. Because some premium brands have higher prices for their product than some luxury brands have, there’s no longer a separation between the two classes in the terms of pricing.

4.6 Growth & Sustainability

Every brand’s goal is to be their target customer’s first choice. Achieving and maintaining this goal is only going to be tougher with more and more businesses starting up and constant algorithm changes in social media platforms that affect to the engagement and visibility of brands. This being the case, brand and marketing leaders need to be on point when developing brands further to be sustainable and to maintain brand recognition. One of the most common tools to achieve the named goals is to make customer discovery a priority. This means identifying contributions to brand loyalty and learning what works for the main competitors. The ideal situation would be that the customers would promote the brand themselves after being satisfied with its offerings. Another good tool is to create and most importantly, maintain, a crystal-clear mission that carries the brand through changing times. Linking up and working together with other brands of the community is also very beneficial and a great way to share audiences and gain more trust. (Greenwade 2018)

When talking about brand growth and building, there are two main ways to do it: brand extension and line or product extension. The first one, also called as brand stretching,
means using an established brand name for new service or product categories. This leverages brand’s reputation as well as popularity, which then helps to increase demand for new products or services. The key thing to make this successfully is to have a logical association between brand’s original product and the new one. Without any or weak association the result can be brand dilution, or it can even harm the main brand. When brand extension is done correctly, it makes it possible for the brand to increase market share and profits. In addition, it also allows the brand to diversify its offerings and works as a great marketing tool for a new product or service. There are many ways to do brand extension: it can be an original product in a new form, a combination of unique existing products, moving into a whole new market segment or capturing a more significant market share. The risk of failure is lower and the price cheaper with brand extension than introducing a new product without an established brand behind it. The only way to really fail with brand extension is to extend to products or product lines that are so unrelated to the original ones that the brand image tangles. (Kenton 2018)

Brand line extension on the other hand, means using an established product’s brand name to launch a new, slightly different one in the same product or service category. Generally, more than half of all new products launched every year are brand line extensions. These kind of extensions are always dependent on customer’s recognition of the main brand’s name on the new products or services. Brand line extension can be for example new flavours, slightly different contents or new package sizes. The benefits of line extension are gaining more potential customers, lowering promotional costs of new products while increasing profits, offering more variety to current customers but also gaining more new potential customers. Among with all the benefits, there are two potential risks to take in consideration. First of them is to fail to satisfy the customers with the new product, which will damage the customer’s attitudes towards the brand in general. Another risk is to have competition in between original and new products. This won’t happen if there’s a clear difference between the products, although they are similar. Putting it in a nutshell, brand line extensions are like new branches of the same plant, not completely new products. (Giddens & Hofmann 2010)
5 Qualitative research method

This chapter explains the research method used in this thesis, as well as the two different ways of collecting data: theme interviews and observation. It also gives arguments and comments on why this research was done the chosen way. The object of this research was to collect and compare data of the brand management strategies of two hotel sub-brands that are each other’s competitors, and later analyse what does it take to build and maintain the most valuable hotel brand in the world.

Qualitative research is one of the scientific study methods that aims to understand the characteristics, qualities and meanings of the subject as comprehensively as possible. When comparing qualitative research method to quantitative research method, it can be said that everything that is not quantitative, is qualitative. (Eskola & Suoranta 2000, 13-15). Qualitative research method is used especially when there’s not so much existing data about the subject, so when the subject is poorly known. This research method includes several approaches as well as data collecting methods. It’s more flexible than the quantitative method and it can change its shape throughout the research, since it sinks into a deeper understanding of the subject by analysing things like personal experiences and different characteristics. In some situations, this can also be a disadvantage, because too many options can be difficult to analyse and wrap up later. (Kananen 2015, 70-72).

In this research method the researcher is responsible for deciding the research layout according to his or her understanding and vision, which makes qualitative research method very flexible on personal preferences and allows every researcher to personalize the research that way. The researcher decides everything from what to observe, how to do the observing and how to analyse the collected information. (Kananen 2014, 150-151). This was the main thing why I felt already before deciding the topic of my thesis, that this research method would be the best one for me. It allowed me to take advantage of my strengths and interests when planning and executing the research process.

The most common way of executing a qualitative research is by organizing interviews, which are a very good way to gain deeper understanding of the research problem and its impact. The more there are open questions in the interviews, the more information the interviewer usually gets out of them. Another way of collecting important information is providing a research form with well thought, mostly open questions. Of course, with this way there is always a chance that the interviewee leaves some of the questions empty, without an answer. Qualitative research can also be done by observing. An example of this is observing people’s buying habits and behaviours in a store. (SurveyMonkey 2018).
From the very beginning it was clear to me that I would do a qualitative research. That’s because the most important things that I wanted to study about of the chosen topic were the meanings and reasons of the brand management strategies used by the given hotel brands. Of course, there’s also a way to study this topic by numbers using quantitative method, but then the collected data would provide different kind of information – at least the point of view would be very different. Like mentioned before, qualitative research method aims to understand not the numbers, but things like meanings behind actions. Since brands are somewhat abstracts and mostly about the perceptions of people, it felt better and more interesting to me to take the qualitative perspective into this thesis.

5.1 Theme interviews

Theme interview is a half structured interview method, in which the interview is targeted to specific topics. In this interview method it’s common to have a vision and point of view ready beforehand, but to have still space to other aspects to come up during the interview. When a researcher wants to study thoughts, feelings and/or experiences of the interviewees, this interview method is a good choice. That’s because theme interview is always addressed to subjective experiences. Theme interview can be used in both qualitative and quantitative research methods. Generally speaking, interview is always a social situation, which is based on language and communication. The object of the interview is always the content gathered from the interview. Even though the interviewee is on the spotlight, the presence and communication skills of the interviewer are important factors since they affect directly on the interview situation. (Hirsijärvi & Hurme 2000, 47-48).

I used theme interview as my first data collecting method. Like said, I really wanted to understand the reasons and meanings of the different brand management strategies used by the chosen brands and find out the carrying values behind them. I was honoured to interview one person from each brand, that were both working with marketing and branding activities in managerial positions. My plan was to organize interviews with people working in high positions of branding and marketing to really be able to get the bigger and deeper picture of how and why they are operating like they are. I knew that those kind of people are usually very busy with their work and aren’t always available for interviews, so I’m very grateful I got the chance to talk with experts. To get in touch with these kind of people I used the contacts and networks of my teachers of my student exchange university. Luckily my school has very close connections with many hotel chains, so it helped me a lot.
I created and chose the interview questions based on everything that I had read about the topic and the chosen brands so far. My goal was to ask so well-thought questions that the interviewees would feel like they are talking with another professional. Therefore, I studied the webpages and social media platforms of the brands beforehand, to see what kind of message they are sending out. This way it was easier to me to catch the most important values and brand messages from the interviews. I only interviewed one marketing person from each sub-brand, because I also had another data collecting method to collect information.

The first two questions were about the core of the brand personality, it's characteristics and the main slogan of the brand. I wanted to start with these questions, because when building or rebuilding a brand, these are usually the first things to go through. Next questions concentrated on the ideal client, the ways how to reach the client and the ways the brand offers value for its client. Following these, I asked how the brand is marketing its loyalty program and how are they measuring brand management. I also asked about the importance of Instagram and use of influencers. Later there were questions about competitors, most difficult and important things about hospitality marketing and what does it take to stand out and to be the most valuable hotel brand in the world. I only had fourteen questions since I wanted to keep the interviews short and sharp yet informative enough to go deep into the topic. All the questions are to be seen in the appendix 1.

5.2 Observation

Observation as a data collecting method is always based on the notes and experiences of the researcher and is therefore subjective. Observation is done by systematically observing the objects used in the research, according to defined and approved methods. The observation methods can be divided in five: overseeing observation, committed observation, activating committed observation, learning by trying and hidden observation. (Vilkka 2016, 10-42). The observation method used in this research is committed observation, which was done by following the Instagram accounts of the given brands during about four months from January to April 2019.

I used social media in this thesis to find out how the brand management strategies and activities of the given brands are to be seen by their followers and potential customers online. To manage to do this, I kept social media in mind when planning and choosing the interview questions. That's because first I needed to gain a deep understanding on how those brands are managed and what is the core message they are aiming to send to their
customers via social media. Only after that could I observe whether that message and activities are clear and logical to their followers. Since social media is so huge and contains multiple channels, I chose Instagram for my research to be more specific. I started following the Instagram accounts of the chosen brands a while before even starting to write this thesis, just to have enough time to really get to know their content and presence on Instagram and see how the brand personality comes through the internet.

Instagram is owned by Facebook and has one billion monthly users. At the end of the year 2018 over 13% of everyone on Earth was using the platform and Instagram adds were expected to generate almost 11 billion dollars during the year 2019. Figures like these make this platform the place to be for marketers. Even though Facebook beats Instagram on audience size and Twitter on activity volume, Instagram has the strongest user engagement like we can see from the picture 3 below. Brands on Instagram have ten times higher engagement rate than Facebook and 84 times higher than Twitter. (Phillips 2018). Even though Instagram is the best place for image sharing (Patel 2019) what I looked in my observation wasn’t only photos, but also the captions under the photos, branded hastags, stories, influencer using and engagement. That’s because nowadays anyone can put professional photos on Instagram so that’s not a way to stand out anymore. Instead, a text with a photo tells much more and can give a story or intention behind the picture to the followers. Captions also help to build deeper relationship with followers and they can also be used to activate the followers to engage with the brand by asking questions and that way creating conversations. Influencers on the other hand can support the brand image with more authenticity, when chosen and used wisely (Mathew 2018). This being the case, I wanted to gain a comprehensive view of the Instagram usage of the chosen hotel brands.

![Image of social media engagement](socialbakers.png)

**Picture 3. Social media engagement (SocialBakers 2018)**
Both brands and their given sub-brands are having quite a strong presence on Instagram. Both main brands have their own Instagram accounts, but also every sub-brand is having their own accounts. In addition to that, both brands are also having big accounts for their careers and open positions. Having several accounts in one social media platform is a great tool to reach bigger audiences, especially if the company is operating in several countries and offering many products and/or services, because in this case the company has multiple customer segments that needs to be taking cared of (Majaya 2019).

For Instagram observation I created an observation form to be able to compare and analyse different themes from the Instagram usage and activity of the two hotel brands and their named sub-brands. I divided the form in eleven themes, that include for example following, activity, content, engagement, influencer marketing and the ways of sending the brand message to the followers. The number of followers and posting activity often affect straight to the engagement, since usually the bigger the following the smaller the engagement percent (Barysevich 2018a). Engagement means how the followers like and share the published content, how much they comment and how the brand reacts to the comments to build relationships. The content part contains not only the pictures, but also texts used with them and Instagram stories. The type of content then leads to the part that discusses how the brand message is put out there. Is it clear and aligned with what I learned from the interviews? All this can be seen in the appendix 2.

5.3 Description of the research process

I knew for a long time that I would like to do my thesis around hotel brands. I came up with the actual idea for this thesis when finding a diagram of the most valuable hotel brands in the world of the year 2018, based on brand value. Hilton and Marriott are companies that I would love to work for in the future. When finding out that those two are the top hotel brands in the world and therefore each other’s competitors, the idea and topic were ready. Since I knew I would be on my exchange semester during the thesis work, I checked out what hotels from those brands exist in my exchange destination for possible interviews. Studying hotel brands and different ways of leading them as a topic is something that I would see myself working with some day, so this thesis has also been a very educative experience for me. Like mentioned before, qualitative research method is about understanding things and their meanings. Leading successful hotel brands was something that I wanted to understand, so deciding the research method was easy for me.
When choosing the data collecting methods, theme interviews were in my mind first. It wasn’t only the fact that you can gain a lot of interesting insights and reasons for actions from these kind of interviews. I also had a strong desire to have a conversation with a brand or marketing manager of a big hotel brand, to see what kind of person fits into that kind of position and whether I could see myself in that position in the future. Organizing the interviews wasn’t so easy at first, because people in higher positions are very busy and aren’t therefore available for student interviews at any time. I also had to reschedule one of the interviews twice, because the person had some urgent projects to take care of. I got the contact details from my teachers, which made it a bit easier to reach those persons in the first place – without their networks I probably wouldn’t been able to get in touch with them at all.

After the interviews I went through all the gathered information from both interviews by comparing the information and highlighted the main findings into six topics, according to the interview questions. At this stage I aimed to strike out all the “not so important” information to be able to sharpen the most important findings. When analysing the results, I only highlighted the main findings that came up from both interviews, since if there’s a strategy that is been used in both hotel brands, it must be rather effective. For me the interview results were the base knowledge and information of the brand management strategies of the given brands, which then helped me build up my knowledge and insights with observation. I gathered my analysed interview results into a concept map in the picture 5 to showcase them as the key tools to build the most valuable hotel brand in the world. I also compared the specific brand personality traits of both brands used in marketing to be able to observe later, how those factors are present in social media. These findings can be seen from the picture 4. Both mentioned pictures can be found from the next chapter.

In addition to theme interviews, I wanted to have another data collecting method to support the data I got from the interviews. Different way of collecting data would also give a wider picture of the topic. Since social media is so important channel in today’s marketing (Phillips 2018), I thought observing the chosen hotel brands online would be interesting addition to my interview findings. I chose Instagram to be the channel I observed, since I’m so familiar with it and I have studied several courses about Instagram marketing before. It was hard to organize the interviews, but luckily social media is available at any time to anyone, so there weren’t problems collecting information that way. I started to follow the chosen brands on Instagram as early as possible to be able to follow their activity and content a while before actually starting to analyse it. I was able to follow the Instagram presence of both brands around 3-4 months. After the interviews I created an observation form where I collected my findings of the different themes like mentioned before.
With this form I wanted to get an answer to the question: how the brand personality comes through Instagram and how strong is the brand message there?

5.4 Content analysis

Content analysis is a scientific method that aims to create clear conclusions especially from communicational, verbal or symbolic data. The documents used in this method are all written materials, like books, reports, articles and dialogs. Also, materials that are not meant to be researched can be used. This method can be used also when analysing fully unstructured materials. The goal of content analysis is to analyse the material systematically and objectively to create a verbal and clear description of the researched phenomenon. The essential thing is to search for the meaning of the used materials and organize the material into sharped and summarized form. Content analysis helps to build more informative value by creating a solid big picture of the material, even when the used material is dispersed. There are three stages in content analysis: first the material is summarised, then classified and finally the most essential info is separated from the material. In the second stage the original material is studied carefully by searching for concepts representing similarities and/or differences. After analysing the materials this way, it’s easier to make clean and trustworthy conclusions. In the third stage theoretical concepts are created and researcher forms a description of the research object. Researcher also creates new theory by comparing theory and conclusions to the original material. (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2004, 93-135)
6 Interview results

This chapter goes through the main findings and outcomes from the interviews. Those outcomes are presented by the seven leading themes that in my opinion are the most important ones concerning the topic of this thesis. Since this research deals not only with the sub-brands but also with the main brands behind them, Marriott and Hilton brands have been taken into account in the themes when necessary. That’s also because every brand has its own voice and message, even though one brand might be operating under another. This chapter showcases only the results I gained from the interviews, and the next chapter concentrates on results from Instagram observation. Like mentioned shortly before, I interviewed two persons - one from each sub-brand. Both of the interviewees are working with branding and/or marketing in higher positions with many years of working experience in the named sectors. I was honoured to receive so many interesting insights from them.

6.1 Brand personality and slogan

Marriott’s main brand is all about people and community. Marriott is still the same family business as it was when starting out, now just a huge global family. It carries a slogan “travel is our business”. Sheraton’s brand personality is all about community and sharing space with friends and family. “This is the core message we try to convey everywhere and in everything that we do in marketing - sharing open space with groups, not individually. So, it’s all about community.” The main slogan of Sheraton is “actions speak louder”.

Hilton’s core values are passion for exceptional service, integrity, teamwork and discipline. Their goal is to let their guests experience something they can’t translate and see the world unfiltered. Hilton’s slogan is “the world is right here”. DoubleTree’s key value in branding is a warm welcome, anywhere in the world. Its feature is a warm chocolate cookie that every guest gets when checking in, in every DoubleTree hotel around the world. It’s a symbol of warm welcome. The brand describes itself by its slogan “a place where little things matter”.

6.2 Customer segments of the sub-brands

Sheraton has business people as its main target, and the second one is leisure. Those are basically individual travellers who go to a destination to do business, or groups and conventions. Sheraton appeals to a customer that is more price sensitive and to a customer who is not in the destination only for the beach, but also wants to experience the island. Sheraton Puerto Rico has also a lot of local customers, and the US is the main
source of tourists for them. Customers are reached nowadays mostly digitally, but also through the main brand – anytime when Marriott properties are out there, Sheraton is presence. It’s important to keep the webpages updated and be active on social media by customizing the brand message to different customer segments. For example, Sheraton Puerto Rico has specified marketing efforts locally, in the US and globally for different targets.

The core of DoubleTree is that small things matter. This brand has the same target markets as Sheraton: business and leisure travellers. DoubleTree has several attributes and facilities to serve those segments as well as possible. “We are mostly located in getaway cities and vacation destinations to appeal both business and leisure guests. We aim to be near to business networks as well as local attractions”. Every hotel has 24 hour business centre with Wi-Fi and space for meetings to make working as smooth as possible. They offer true comfort and upscale accommodation mainly digitally to reach the busy business people and tech savvy young adults effectively. Just like Sheraton is present anytime when Marriott is mentioned, DoubleTree is also strongly part of the perception of Hilton brand, and gets guests also through the corporation.

**Sheraton vs. DoubleTree**

- Community, sharing space
- Business & Leisure
- Affordable, accessible
- Also selling the destination

- Warm welcome, small things matter
- Business & Leisure
- A place where to escape
- Experts of the local culture

Picture 4. Brand personality traits.

### 6.3 Value proposition & loyalty programs

Sheraton is of moderate budget and appeals to different segments like mentioned before. It is an affordable leisure destination for families but at the same it serves for business purposes. In destinations that support the leisure, like Puerto Rico, guests can use Sheraton for both. “Since Sheraton’s core value is community, we always try to support the destination with our marketing – for example in Puerto Rico, we do not only sell the hotel, but
all the experiences on the island as well." Sheraton as a brand aims to be accessible, friendly and easy for the customer. Because of Marriott’s new loyalty program Bonvoy that includes all the previous three loyalty programs, guests have now more benefits than ever before.

DoubleTree offers its values in a package: as a hotel and brand it’s a place where to escape the daily routines, enjoy little things in a paradise with style and get to know the destination’s neighborhood like a local. For DouleTree it’s important to be an expert of its destination and be able to provide the best tips and attractions for the guests. “With DoubleTree you as a guest will notice that you’re staying in Hilton, but at the same time you will be strongly aware of the destination you are in. We want to cherish the personality of each destination.” Hilton’s loyalty program is branded as Hilton Honours and it’s so far the only hotel chain loyalty program that offers both points and air miles. The goal and meaning behind any loyalty program is to engage the guest strongly with the brand and earn guest’s trust in exchange of added value and benefits. Loyalty programs are also the number one thing to attract business travellers.

6.4 Current brand management strategies/activities

Sheraton Puerto Rico’s current branding activities include generating lead that would bring more business to the property by adapting the strategies depending on the segment they are appealing. It’s all about giving the right message to the right segment: for convention segment they highlight the great meeting space they have, for leisure guests they are affordable and close to everything and the message for business traveller is that they can have everything in Sheraton. Everything they do with marketing needs to be measured and come with results, whether it was with partners or suppliers. Every month they have a call to see all the marketing efforts on the previous month and for having a look what worked and what didn’t.

DoubleTree also focuses strongly on personalized brand message to different target markets. “If you are trying to speak to everyone, you are actually speaking to no one. That’s why the message we send must meet the exact needs and desires of the chosen target market and be resonating to them.” One hotel can be appealing to different target markets, but the things it offers to attract those target markets are different. DoubleTree is known for its chocolate cookies as warm welcome while check-in, and well personalized little things like this can be key tools to stand out in today’s competition. They are still branding the cookies to be more visible and stronger part of their brand personality.
6.5 Social media

For Sheraton, every social media channel appeals to different market and they target each of the social channels they have. They are currently sharpening different marketing strategies for each social media channel to be more effective. Instagram for this exact hotel is more for the younger crowd and they are using 1-2 influencers each month to attract them, depending on the marketing goals. When choosing the influencers, the key thing is to find the right audience, whether it’s locals, internationals, lifestyle or food enthusiasts. Next big thing on social media for Sheraton is to build presence in Youtube where they don’t have proper content yet.

Generally, DoubleTree has its strongest social media presence on Facebook. Their so-called social media trademark is funny short video clips of chocolate cookies that they use everywhere to stand out. They have some content on Youtube but the presence there is still in the making. Now their goal is to build up and strengthen their Instagram presence to be more active and effective there. “We have a strong brand with well thought personality, now we just have to take advantage of it effectively and get it out there.” There are different strategies for Instagram accounts of DoubleTree brand and each of its hotels’ accounts. For example, influencer marketing and user’s posts are strongly used in individual hotels’ accounts, but not in the DoubleTree brand’s Instagram account. One reason is that usually individual hotels are marketing not only the hotel itself, but a lot of the destination and its attractions as well. For this purpose, the posts of their guests work perfectly, but for the brand’s general account they may not be as suitable.

6.6 The most important things in hospitality marketing

Nowadays everything changes from one day to another in marketing, so the message you send today may not have an impact tomorrow. Sheraton as a brand should change faster all the time to keep up and even be one step forward. Marriott’s goal is to be the best travel company in the world, so that when customers thinks about travelling, they think about Marriott. “Train and treat the associates well and the associates will then take care of the customers.” Sheraton and the whole Marriott group are still a family company even though they are one of the biggest companies in the world. Marriott still spreads the family-like culture everywhere to keep itself down to earth and authentic.

“Since the world of marketing is changing all the time, it’s crucial for us to as an individual brand and brand family to keep ourselves updated and keep up with all the new things constantly.” Adapting and reacting quickly to constant changes is the key. No matter how long work experience someone has, learning new things never stops. Today traditional
hotel industry is competing with sharing economy, which didn’t exist a few years ago. Things are changing fast and so should DoubleTree and Hilton as hotel brands. “When you see opportunities in new and challenging things, you will be succesfull.”

Picture 5. Key tools for building valuable hotel brand
7 Instagram results

This chapter presents the results and findings from my other data collecting method: Instagram observation. The goal of this method was to gain a bit more information around the interview outcomes and find out, how the brand personality comes through Instagram and how strong is brands’ presence and message there. In this chapter I will concentrate mostly on the overall presence and usage of each brand on Instagram and discuss more about the content and its quality in the following chapter. To collect the needed data, I created an observation form where I listed my findings under eleven different themes from both main brands and their sub-brands. Therefore, there are Instagram accounts of four brands listed and analysed in the form. I have observed the mentioned brand accounts during the time of writing this thesis: four months, from January to April 2019. The themes in the form include things like activity, engagement, likes, shares by users and influencer marketing, and all of them can be found in the appendix 2.

7.1 Main findings in figures and tables

![Figure 3. Followers on Instagram](image)

Like we can see from the figure 3 above, the number of followers varies a lot in between the brands. If we look at the two main brands, Marriott has only 136,000 followers, whereas Hilton has exactly twice as much, 272,000 followers. When looking at the sub-brands instead, the situation is opposite: DoubleTree by Hilton has only 50,500 followers, while Sheraton has more than triple of that, 161,000 followers. When comparing the brands in two groups, Marriott with Sheraton and Hilton with DoubleTree, the first brand
family has 297,000 followers all together, while Hilton’s family has a huge number of 322,500 followers.

Figure 4. Activity – posts per month.

The figure 4 above points out the hotel brands monthly posting activity on Instagram. This figure has only taken account the feed posts without Instagram Story posts, since they usually vanish after 24 hours of posting (Read 2016). Like we can see, Marriott has been overpowering on this, with average of 13,25 posts per month. Hilton with average of 10,25 being the second and Sheraton the third with the average of 9,5 posts monthly. DoubleTree has clearly the lowest posting activity, with only 2,25 average posts per month.

When looking at the figure 4 in general, there are some differences to be found in between the two brand families. Hilton and DoubleTree seems to have the most stable posting rhythm, whereas Marriott and Sheraton both have peaks and lows throughout the timeline. This is a sign of different kind of Instagram strategies in between the brands.
The figure 5 shows the number on monthly likes of each brand. It’s easy to see how strongly Hilton dominates this figure with total number of 533,569 likes in four months and average of 133,392.25 likes per month. Marriott on the other hand has a total number of 55,570 likes and average of 13,892.5 monthly likes. Sheraton comes after that with altogether 29,925 likes and average of 7481.25 monthly likes. Since DoubleTree has the lowest number of followers, it’s expected that the number of likes is also quite low in comparison to other brands with big audiences. This brand has only 21,885 total likes and average of 5,471.25 monthly likes.

The figure 6 shows the number of monthly comments of each brand. Sheraton has the highest number of comments in all four months, with Marriott following closely. DoubleTree has the lowest number of comments, which is consistent with its low number of followers. Hilton’s comments are also quite low, which is expected given its lower audience size.
Figure 6 above presents the amount of monthly comments of each brand. When comparing the figure 5 and 6 together, they go quite well hand in hand, since usually posts that attract a lot of likes also gain quite a lot comments. Just like with monthly likes, Hilton also dominates this figure with total number of 2,393 likes and average of 598,25 monthly likes. Marriott was the second strongest with likes and it’s the same with comments, with 659 likes totally and average number of 164,75 likes per month. Sheraton being the third again with 338 likes altogether and 84,5 average likes per month. DoubleTree only gained 186 likes totally that makes an average of 46,5 monthly likes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month</th>
<th>Sheraton</th>
<th>Marriott</th>
<th>DoubleTree</th>
<th>Hilton</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>January 19</td>
<td>4,2%</td>
<td>4,3%</td>
<td>11,2%</td>
<td>54,1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February 19</td>
<td>4,4%</td>
<td>9,3%</td>
<td>0,6%</td>
<td>65,2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 19</td>
<td>3,0%</td>
<td>15,0%</td>
<td>0,6%</td>
<td>19,9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 19</td>
<td>6,9%</td>
<td>11,2%</td>
<td>30,8%</td>
<td>56,7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Monthly engagement rates.

Since any account on Instagram can purchase more followers and therefore have a huge number of fake audience, the number of followers alone doesn’t tell much about how strong effect the brand has. That’s why more important big audience is having a high engagement rate. (Jacquelyn 2019). This means the volume of reactions and the number of people reached with the posts. In the table 1 above I calculated the monthly likes of each brand and divided them with the number of followers to get the percentage of the engagement of each month. I only took into account the likes and not the comments, since giving a like is always much easier and faster than writing a comment.

Like we can see from the table 1, engagement rates can differ a lot from one month to another, depending on the posting activity and content. Like discussed earlier in the chapter 4, usually huge social media accounts are not enjoying as high engagement rates as smaller accounts, since the bigger and more professional the account, the more difficult it is to keep it authentic. This being said, it’s very impressive to see how great engagement rates Hilton has, even though it also has way bigger audience of the other brands. Having engagement rates higher than 50% is not easy nor common. In addition, Hilton isn’t the most active with posting
7.2 Content

Content and interaction are the number one things for building and maintaining high engagement rates on Instagram. That’s because the changes of Instagram algorithm that now fills up the news feed according to previous engagement – the posts and accounts a user has been reacting the most lately. (Statusbrew 2018). That’s why keeping all the published content interesting yet in line with brand’s personality and message is crucial. This section showcases how strong the brand message of each brand is on Instagram and how each brand keeps up with communicating with followers.

Like the table 2 below shows, DoubleTree has generally the strongest content and interaction with its followers. Marriott being the second with strong hashtag usage but weak interaction, Hilton the third and Sheraton the last with weak interaction and little usage of the brand’s hashtag.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Sheraton</th>
<th>Marriott</th>
<th>DoubleTree</th>
<th>Hilton</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Main hashtag usage</td>
<td>2.6%</td>
<td>96.0%</td>
<td>55.0%</td>
<td>25.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reaction to comments</td>
<td>Weak reaction</td>
<td>Weak reaction</td>
<td>Very active reaction</td>
<td>Good reaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brand message</td>
<td>Strong and clear message</td>
<td>Strong and clear message</td>
<td>Very strong and clear message</td>
<td>Quite strong and clear message</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final note</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Content and reaction on Instagram.

Even though DoubleTree is the newest and still the smallest brand of the four given hotel brands, it’s brand message on Instagram is better than other brands’, like presented in table 2 above. Whereas other brands use their message or slogan here and there on their Instagram posts, DoubleTree has some kind of connection to its core in every post. From the pictures 6 and 7 below we can see examples on how the brand creates interesting and diverse content without forgetting its heart and voice. It can be done for example by reacting to local events which bring the brand closer to its destinations, or showcasing beautiful facilities of a hotel with picture text created around the brand’s slogan. DoubleTree presents its brand personality naturally yet effectively by being creative, funny and diverse.
7.3 Summary

In this section I bring together all the earlier presented outcomes to make the results of this data collecting method as clear as possible. There are many factors and characteristics to take into account when observing brands online and things are not always so straightforward and simple, because everything effects to everything. In the table 2 below are presented the strengths of the hotel brands according to different themes and comparing the brand families as competitors. The listed themes are the same ones as in the earlier figures of this chapter. In addition to those I also listed the number of shares by users and the use of influencer marketing to make the summary more overall. Points are given so that the best brand of the given theme gets 1 point, the second best gets 2 points and so on. At the end the points are calculated together, and the lower the final number, the better.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Sheraton</th>
<th>Marriott</th>
<th>DoubleTree</th>
<th>Hilton</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Biggest following</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Best activity</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3. Instagram results summary.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Most likes &amp; comments</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Best engagement</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most shares by users</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most influencer marketing</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total points</strong></td>
<td>17</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Like the table 3 above presents, Hilton has the overall best Instagram presence. Marriott being the second and Sheraton the third with quite similar points and DoubleTree the fourth with more than twice as much points as Hilton. When comparing the two brand families, Sheraton & Marriott vs. DoubleTree & Hilton, first one’s total points are 32 whereas the second one’s points are 31.
8 Conclusions

In this chapter I bring together and present my main conclusions from the outcomes of this research. Conclusions are made from both the theme interviews and social media observation. At the end I also talk about the reliability of this thesis and the things affecting on it.

8.1 Main conclusions

Like discussed in the very beginning of this research, the clearer the brand personality and message, the stronger the brand. According to the outcomes presented earlier, the case is exactly the same online. In order to build an appealing, interesting and personalized brand presence on Instagram, brand’s personality and message needs to be communicated actively and showed clearly to followers. This is done not only with pictures and videos, but also with things like carefully targeted picture texts, colours, themes and hashtags. The message sent out there not only needs to be about the brand’s overall vibe, but it also must be planned and targeted to reach and resonate to chosen target groups.

It's effective to build different marketing strategies to each social media channel used, since every channel attracts different kind of groups and users. This makes it easier to speak directly to several chosen ideal clients at the same time, since both the channel and the message are a bit different and well personalized.

Like we can see from the table 3 in the chapter 6.3., the biggest brand is not always the strongest and most active on social media. Instead, a rather new and small brand may have better activity and engagement, as well as more likes and comments than a brand with many times bigger following.

Individual hotels should not only sell themselves as hotels, but to connect their perks and services to the destination they are located. By taking advantage of its destination a hotel can easily create more interesting marketing content, be more attractive to guests interested more of the chosen destination than the chosen hotel and give more value to its guests by being an expert of the destination. This strategy also helps the individual hotel to stand out from its competitors and this way better its reputation not only as a sub-brand, but also as global brand family in a bigger picture.
Like the picture 4 above illustrates, quality goes over quantity when aiming for successful social media presence as a brand. By this I mean the posted pictures and videos, but of course active interaction with followers is extremely important. Quality is the key not only in posted content, but also followers – real individuals who support the brand are much more useful than bought fake followers. When more and more potential audience has been reached who really resonate with the brand, the earlier results are multiplying themselves and the process starts over with the new followers.

One of the most crucial things is constantly keeping up with the rapidly changing world around us. New marketing channels, possible strategies, competitors and challenges come up all the time, so always being one step forward helps to maintain a strong and trustworthy brand reputation and high brand value. It’s not enough to only recognize the new things and changes, but also to react to them and adapt the best ones into the brand’s marketing strategies. Brands and their perceptions are built within many years, but brand value is something that can collapse rather quickly. You can have the strongest and most valuable brand today, but when lacking the passion of constantly building it forward, soon another brand can take your place.

8.2 Reliability

The biggest meaning of any research is to provide as trustworthy information as possible. When evaluating the reliability of a research, there are several things to take into account. First ones are the object and meaning of the research, so what is researched and why. Other important thing is the importance of the research for its researcher, so what is the commitment in between those two. In the research process the chosen data collection methods have also quite important meaning when it comes to the reliability of a research. If the used data has been collected with interviews, also the specific interview method and the number of interviewees are important things to consider. It’s always good to mention how and why the people participated in the research have been selected, although their
names as well as other personal and professional information cannot be published. (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2002, 135-138).

The evaluation of the reliability of a research starts to take its shape already in very early stage of the process and has to do with researcher’s ability to create a meaningful research layout. Especially in qualitative research the researcher is in the key role of making different decisions throughout the process that are based on his/her subjectivity. Therefore, qualitative research is based on bringing forth the researcher’s authentic interpretations. (Aaltio & Puusa 2011, 155-159).

In my case, the knowledge and understanding that I had towards brand management and Instagram marketing have affected on the reliability of this thesis by influencing on the research layout and later research data analysing. I did have some ideas and models from Instagram marketing courses on how I could analyse the collected information, but most probably someone working daily with Instagram marketing would have done the research a bit differently. Therefore, what affects on the reliability of this thesis at least a little is my lack of true professionalism on brand management and social media marketing as a researcher, although I was familiar with the industry and the hotel brands used in this research. I had also used Instagram daily for many years before the research, so I was very familiar of the usage of the platform and knew more or less how influencer marketing is working on Instagram. As a researcher I was in interaction with the brands on social media just like any of their customers and observing them according to my knowledge and understanding.

Interviews are an important factor when it comes to reliability, since every answer is as honest as the interviewee in that specific moment. Every answer is based on the knowledge and experiences of that person, which makes every interview situation a little bit different. Like mentioned in the interview results, the world of digital marketing is changing very fast and new things and strategies come up all the time. This affects to the reliability of this research as well, since the results and information this thesis provides may not be relevant anymore in five years. This is something that only time will show.

8.3 Reflection of the writing process

Writing has always been quite natural to me and since it was a big part of this research, I can say I didn’t have much problems generally. However, I have never produced this
much formal text in English before, so sometimes I needed a while to figure out how to ex-
press myself clearly and correctly. I found the theoretical part of this thesis the easiest and
most interesting one, since while writing it I was also studying the topic from many point of
views and therefore learned a lot along the way. The parts with more scientific content
and analysing on the other hand were more difficult and time-consuming for me, but at the
same time I felt that I’m constantly improving my writing skills and knowledge forward.

The only thing that really challenged me during this process was my student exchange se-
semester on the other side of the world. I was very motivated throughout this process, so it
wasn’t about that, but it was constant balancing in between exploring a new culture, study-
ing the exchange courses and writing this thesis. Luckily, I got some time from work to
start this thesis already before leaving Finland, so when arriving to my exchange destina-
tion I already had a great start with more than ten pages of the theoretical part done. If I
should had started everything from the very beginning somewhere in between the student
exchange courses, I’m sure it would’ve taken me much more effort. All in all, I’m happy
that I got to keep my motivation up till the end and I’m proud of myself for reaching my
goal to finalize this thesis in time like I had planned. If I would’ve written this thesis while in
Finland, my goal would have been the best possible grade, which is five. Now that the cir-
cumstances have been very different during the whole process, I’m happy with a grade of
four.
9 Discussion

A brand is a value creation system charged with peak performance and values. Real value is only created when a performance, like certain type of service quality, is perceived through a well-managed brand and that way appreciated by its customers. (Feike 2019). Like discussed in the previous chapter, a hotel brand’s marketing content needs to be much more than just the hotel facilities and services. Creating and adding value around any brand means diving deep into the core values the brand stands for as well as the emotions and feelings it wants to awake in its target customers. The challenge in this is the constant high speed development of new lifestyles and services as well as environmental events that influence on and change the values of the customers. Knowing the customer inside out and being able to stand out from the competitors by added value makes the brand even more valuable.

Fast speed of social media platforms’ development and real time communication as well as global marketplace and new competitors will challenge the brand marketing in the future even more. Only a brand manager who understands how the ever-changing social media platforms affect to brand conversation and can define the future of the respective brand will be successful. (Compton 2016). Hotel chains like Marriott and Hilton both have a long history and their brands have been developed step by step along decades, but this doesn’t mean they will always be as strong and valuable brands as today. Probably the trickiest thing for brand managers is how to respect the history, heart and tradition of a hotel brand while aggressively developing it forward with new features and strategies to stay up to date, attractive and able to compete.

As a respond to the main research question, the most valuable hotel brand of the future is built today by successfully balancing between old and new, staying tech-savvy yet authentic and being able to cope with constant high-speed change by turning every new challenge into a possibility for success.
References


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Hoisington, A. 2018. Why Google Ads is critical to your marketing strategy. Hotel Management. URL: https://www.hotelmanagement.net/sales-marketing/why-google-ads-are-critical-to-your-marketing-strategy Accessed: 8 February 2019


Appendices

Appendix 1. Interview questions

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. How would you describe the very core of your hotel’s brand personality? Brand characteristics?
2. Do you have a main slogan? What is it?
3. Who’s your ideal client?
4. What do you do to reach those customers?
5. What kind of value proposition your hotel has? How do you provide that value to your customers?
6. How are you marketing your loyalty program?
7. What kind of brand management strategies are you currently working with?
8. How do you measure the brand performance?
9. How important is Instagram for you? Are you using influencer marketing?
10. What hotel brand is your main competitor?
11. What has been the most difficult thing to do/achieve lately with marketing?
12. What do you think is the most important thing in today’s hospitality marketing?
13. What kind of person fits in your position as brand/marketing manager?
14. What does it take to be the most valuable (=the best) hotel brand in the world?
### Appendix 2. Instagram Observation Form

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Sheraton @sheratonhotels</th>
<th>Marriott International @marriottintl</th>
<th>DoubleTree @doubletree</th>
<th>Hilton Worldwide @hiltonhotels</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Followers</td>
<td>161K followers 857 posts</td>
<td>136K followers 440 posts</td>
<td>50.5K followers 1,075 posts</td>
<td>272K followers 1,800 posts</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Activity | Jan – 10 posts  
  Feb – 10 posts  
  March – 4 posts  
  April – 14 posts | Jan – 8 posts  
  Feb – 12 posts  
  March – 22 posts  
  April – 11 posts | Jan – 1 post  
  Feb – 2 posts  
  March – 2 posts  
  April – 4 posts | Jan – 3 posts  
  Feb – 8 posts  
  March – 9 posts  
  April – 11 posts |
| Content | 2 videos totally  
  Only 1 pic at the time  
  Embracing the local culture in art and cuisine, gathering place, connection point, community, history, bringing people together, good conversations, family, friends, fellow travellers | 5 videos totally  
  Up to 5 pics at the time  
  Introducing employees, national festivals, diversity in the company, empowering women, history, family, non-profit, value for loyalty program members, partnerships | 4 videos totally  
  Up to 3 pics at the time  
  Introducing their theme and slogan “sweet welcome” in different locations with funny texts and cookies. Turning dreams into reality, joy, easy packing, warm welcome and warm cookies. | No videos during Jan-April 2019  
  Mostly 1 pic at the time, sometimes more  
  Introducing different destinations with interesting info about them, vacation mood, national festivals, exploring, new perspective, ocean views, forget phone |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Most popular destinations presented in the bio</th>
<th>Recipes, food and wine festivals in the bio</th>
<th>Cookies as a warm welcome and a couple of destinations in the bio.</th>
<th>paradise, summer getaway, happy hour</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Slogan</strong></td>
<td>“Where the world comes together”</td>
<td>“We have warm cookies, and 560+ hotels ready to welcome you”</td>
<td>“Show us the world is #RightHere when you travel”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Engagement</strong></td>
<td>Weak reaction to users’ comments, sometimes liking the comments but never replaying – even when a comment is about a customer trying to reach the customer service for days, or a complaint/bad review</td>
<td>Weak reaction to user’s comments, a few responses only, no likes on comments. No call to actions</td>
<td>Very good reaction to users’ comments: liking and answering to several comments under each post. No call to actions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------</td>
<td>-------------</td>
<td>---------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shares by users</td>
<td>25 posts shared by users from Sheraton during the latest 24 hours</td>
<td>23 posts shared from Marriott by users during the latest 24 hours</td>
<td>0 posts shared from DoubleTree by users during the latest 24 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Influencer Marketing</td>
<td>3-5 user/influencer posts per month – 30-50% of the posts</td>
<td>Not using user/influencer posts</td>
<td>Not using user/influencer posts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hastags</td>
<td>#CitizensofSheraton</td>
<td>#MarriottIntl</td>
<td>#Marriott #hotel</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Brand message & Sharing space with friends and family is one of employees shines Different photos and video clips of the cookies and Seeing the world unfiltered by sharing info and
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Personality</th>
<th>the main themes in the picture texts: gathering place, connection point, community roots etc.</th>
<th>through the posts. Disclosing the business side and careers of the hotel industry.</th>
<th>mentioning the warm welcome often supports the #SweetWelcome campaign.</th>
<th>tips of different destinations support the #RightHere campaign.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>➔ Strong &amp; clear message</td>
<td>➔ Strong &amp; clear message</td>
<td>➔ Very strong &amp; clear message</td>
<td>➔ Quite strong and clear message</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
