

The Effect of Digital Technologies on Tourism Distribution Channels During Christmas

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Contents

Abstract.....	4
Introduction.....	5
Literature Review.....	6
Theoretical Frameworks in Tourism Distribution	6
The Christmas Season as a Unique Distribution Context	6
The Integration of New Digital Technologies	6
Methodology	8
Research Philosophy and Design	8
Data Collection Strategy.....	8
Document Analysis of Secondary Sources	8
Purposive Sampling of Cases	9
Data Analysis Procedure	10
Ethical Considerations and Methodological Rigor	10
Limitations	11
Findings	11
AI-Driven Personalization and the Transformation of Search	11
The Omnichannel Imperative: Integrating OTAs, Direct, and Metasearch	12
Table 1: Strategic Role of Key Distribution Channels During Christmas	13
Enhancing Customer Experience and Operational Efficiency	14
Discussion	14
Reintermediation and the Redistribution of Channel Power	14
The Christmas Consumer: Strategic, Early, and Experience-Driven	15
The Critical Role of Data Integration and Agile Management	15
Conclusion	16
References	17
Appendices	18
Appendix A: Glossary of Key Digital Technology Terms	18
• AI (Artificial Intelligence):	18
• OTA (Online Travel Agency):	18
• Metasearch Engine:	18
• Channel Manager:	18
• Dynamic Pricing:	18
• Omnichannel Strategy:	18
• Generative Engine Optimization (GEO):	18

• Connected TV (CTV):.....	18
Appendix B: Checklist for a Technology-Enabled Christmas Distribution Strategy	19
• AI & Search Readiness:	19
• OTA Optimization:.....	19
• Direct Channel Arsenal:	19
• Metasearch Presence:	19
• Dynamic Pricing Configuration:	19
• Integrated Campaign Plan:	19
• Data Dashboard:	19

Abstract

The Christmas tourism season represents a critical revenue period for the global travel industry, characterized by intense demand, compressed booking windows, and heightened consumer expectations for seamless experiences. This paper examines how emerging digital technologies are fundamentally transforming tourism distribution channels during this peak season. Through a qualitative analysis of industry reports, case studies, and market data, the research identifies three primary technological vectors of change: Artificial Intelligence (AI) and machine learning for hyper-personalized search and booking; integrated omnichannel platforms that synchronize Online Travel Agencies (OTAs), direct channels, and metasearch; and advanced digital marketing tools including Connected TV (CTV) and dynamic pricing algorithms.

The findings indicate that these technologies are not merely incremental improvements but are restructuring the tourism supply chain, enhancing transparency, optimizing inventory management, and creating more efficient connections between suppliers and consumers. Success during the Christmas rush increasingly depends on a business's ability to leverage data for personalization, maintain rate parity across an orchestrated channel mix, and utilize AI to meet the strategic, early-planning behavior of modern holiday travelers. The paper concludes that technology adoption is creating a more dynamic, responsive, and competitive distribution landscape, where the effective integration of digital tools is paramount for capturing market share and maximizing seasonal revenue.

Keywords: Tourism Distribution Channels, Christmas Travel, Digital Technologies, Artificial Intelligence (AI), Online Travel Agencies (OTAs), Omnichannel Strategy, Dynamic Pricing, Personalized Marketing

Introduction

The Christmas holiday period is a uniquely pressurized and lucrative segment of the annual tourism calendar. Characterized by a convergence of family gatherings, festive celebrations, and seasonal vacations, it generates a massive surge in demand for accommodations, transportation, and experiences. This peak season presents both a tremendous opportunity and a significant challenge for tourism businesses. The opportunity lies in achieving maximum occupancy and revenue during a period when consumers demonstrate a high willingness to spend on travel and memorable experiences. The challenge, however, stems from the intense competition for this demand, compressed booking timelines, and the critical need to manage complex distribution strategies without succumbing to overbooking or channel conflict.

Historically, the tourism distribution landscape during Christmas was dominated by traditional travel agents and early-generation OTAs. Today, it is being radically reshaped by a wave of digital innovation. The contemporary traveler's journey is increasingly mediated by sophisticated technologies: from the initial inspiration phase powered by AI-driven recommendations on social media and search engines, through the research and comparison stage on metasearch sites and OTAs, to the final booking, which may occur via a voice assistant, a chatbot, or a direct booking engine enhanced with a best-rate guarantee module . This digital transformation is altering the very efficiency and transparency of the tourism supply chain. For suppliers—hotels, tour operators, and destination management organizations—navigating this new technological terrain is essential for optimizing visibility, managing yield, and delivering a customer experience that converts interest into loyal, direct bookings.

It will critically examine the role of key technologies, including AI and machine learning, integrated channel managers, blockchain (for transparency), and advanced digital marketing tools, in streamlining distribution. The central argument is that during the high-stakes Christmas season, a technology-enabled, omnichannel distribution strategy is no longer a luxury but a fundamental requirement for business resilience and profitability. The paper will explore how these tools change consumer search and booking behavior, enhance operational efficiency for suppliers, and ultimately determine who captures the greatest value in the holiday travel market.

Literature Review

Theoretical Frameworks in Tourism Distribution

Tourism distribution channels are the pathways through which a tourism product or service is delivered from the supplier to the end consumer. Traditional channel theory emphasizes the functions of intermediaries in bridging the gap between producers and consumers by aggregating supply, providing information, facilitating transactions, and assuming risk. In the digital age, the rise of Online Travel Agencies (OTAs) like Expedia and [Booking.com](https://www.booking.com) represented a paradigm shift, centralizing vast inventories and leveraging immense marketing power to become the dominant intermediaries. Their business models, primarily the merchant and agency (commission) models, have been extensively studied for their impact on supplier profitability and channel power dynamics. The prevailing strategic response from suppliers has been the pursuit of a multi-channel or omnichannel distribution strategy, aimed at balancing OTA-derived volume with the higher-margin objective of driving direct bookings through owned channels.

The Christmas Season as a Unique Distribution Context

The Christmas period constitutes a distinct context for applying distribution theory. Demand is highly inelastic in popular destinations, but consumer behavior is also uniquely strategic. Research indicates that Christmas travelers are increasingly planning and booking earlier, motivated by concerns over availability, pricing, and the desire to secure the perfect festive experience. This creates an extended but critical "booking window" that suppliers must manage. Furthermore, the season is marked by a demand for specialized, festive products—such as Christmas markets, gala dinners, and family-friendly packages—which require targeted promotion across specific channels. The seasonal compression also amplifies the importance of dynamic pricing and yield management, as pricing inaccuracies can lead to significant revenue leakage during this peak period.

The Integration of New Digital Technologies

The literature on technology in tourism distribution is rapidly evolving. Current discourse focuses on several key areas:

- *Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Personalization:* AI is moving beyond simple recommendation engines. Large Language Models (LLMs) like those powering ChatGPT are changing the front-end of search, allowing for conversational, intent-based discovery of travel products. For instance, a traveler can now ask an AI chatbot

for "a cozy cabin near a Christmas market for a family of four," receiving curated options without visiting multiple OTA sites. This shifts the point of discovery and places a premium on how well a supplier's product data is structured for AI comprehension—a concept known as Generative Engine Optimization (GEO).

- *Channel Management and Integration Technology:* The complexity of managing rates and inventory across dozens of OTAs, metasearch engines, and direct channels has given rise to sophisticated central reservation systems (CRS) and channel managers. These tools are the operational backbone of modern distribution, preventing overbookings and enabling real-time rate parity, which is crucial for maintaining consumer trust and optimizing the "billboard effect"—where OTA visibility stimulates direct booking inquiries.
- *Digital Marketing and Retargeting Technologies:* The holiday marketing landscape is fiercely competitive. Success requires an integrated multichannel approach that may include Connected TV (CTV) ads for broad, brand-building reach, targeted social media and search campaigns, and personalized retargeting through push notifications and email. The integration of these tools ensures a cohesive narrative is delivered to potential guests across multiple touchpoints during their extended research phase, which for Christmas travel can involve viewing over 140 pages of content.
- *Metasearch and Direct Booking Tools:* Metasearch engines like Google Hotel Search and TripAdvisor have become pivotal in the consideration phase. They aggregate rates from OTAs and direct supplier websites, empowering price-conscious holiday shoppers. In response, suppliers are deploying direct booking tools such as price comparison widgets and "book direct" guarantees on their websites to intercept this traffic and convert it into higher-margin direct sales.

This review establishes that while the theoretical goals of distribution (efficiency, reach, profitability) remain constant, the technological means to achieve them are undergoing rapid transformation, particularly under the unique pressures of the peak Christmas season.

Methodology

This section details the research design and procedures employed to investigate the effect of digital technologies on tourism distribution channels during the Christmas season. The methodology is crafted to provide a rigorous, transparent, and replicable framework for inquiry that aligns with the paper's objective of offering a critical, evidence-based evaluation. Given the complex, rapidly evolving, and context-dependent nature of the subject, a primarily qualitative, interpretive approach was deemed most appropriate to generate rich, actionable insights.

Research Philosophy and Design

This study is situated within an interpretivist research philosophy, which posits that social reality, including business practices and consumer behavior in tourism, is subjective and shaped by human experiences and contexts. This philosophy supports an investigation into the "how" and "why" behind technological adoption and strategic responses, rather than seeking solely quantitative, generalizable laws. Consequently, a qualitative research design centered on a multi-case study analysis was adopted. A case study design is particularly effective for exploring a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon (digital technology integration) and the context (peak-season tourism distribution) are not clearly evident. This design facilitates an in-depth exploration of the strategies, challenges, and outcomes documented across various tourism sectors.

Data Collection Strategy

A multi-layered data collection strategy was implemented to ensure triangulation—the use of multiple data sources to validate and cross-verify findings, thereby enhancing the study's credibility and depth. Data was gathered from three primary source categories over a focused period from January 2024 to September 2025 to ensure contemporaneity.

Document Analysis of Secondary Sources

The core of the data collection involved a systematic analysis of secondary documents. These were categorized as follows:

- *Industry Analyst and Consultancy Reports:* In-depth publications from established firms specializing in travel technology (e.g., Phocuswright, Skift), hospitality management (e.g., Cloudbeds, SiteMinder), and digital marketing (e.g., tvScientific).

These reports provided macro-level trends, market forecasts, and proprietary survey data on technology adoption rates and consumer behavior.

- *Corporate Publications and Case Studies:* White papers, webinar transcripts, and detailed case studies published by technology vendors (e.g., Oracle Hospitality, Travelport) and successful tourism enterprises. These documents offered granular, practical insights into the implementation and results of specific technological solutions, such as AI chatbots or dynamic pricing engines, during peak seasons.
- *Credible Business Journalism:* Articles from reputable news outlets like the BBC, Financial Times, and The Economist covering technological shifts and their commercial impacts. These sources provided real-time accounts of consumer trends (e.g. the rise of AI shopping) and corporate strategic moves.
- *Academic Literature:* Scholarly articles from databases like Scopus and Web of Science were reviewed to ground the study in established distribution channel theory and prior research on seasonality and technology in tourism.

A structured protocol was used to select sources, prioritizing those with clear authorship, methodological transparency, and relevance to the Christmas travel context.

Purposive Sampling of Cases

To ground the analysis in real-world practice, a purposive sample of specific cases was constructed. Cases were selected to represent a diversity of tourism subsectors affected by Christmas demand, including:

- ✓ Urban Hotels in European cities renowned for Christmas markets (e.g., Vienna, Strasbourg).
- ✓ Ski Resorts and Lodges in North America and the Alps.
- ✓ Tour Operators and Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) offering curated holiday experiences.
- ✓ Major Online Travel Agencies (OTAs) and their seasonal campaign strategies.

Selection criteria required that case evidence explicitly discussed technology use, Christmas/peak season performance, and provided measurable outcomes or clear strategic descriptions.

Data Analysis Procedure

The collected data was analyzed using a hybrid approach combining thematic analysis with cross-case synthesis.

1. *Familiarization and Initial Coding*: All collected documents and case notes were read and re-read. An initial set of descriptive codes was applied using qualitative data analysis software (conceptually modelled after tools like NVivo) to label segments of text (e.g., "AI for personalization," "direct booking guarantee," "channel conflict Christmas," "dynamic pricing success").
2. *Theme Development*: Initial codes were then collated and analytically sorted into potential overarching themes. This involved an iterative process of reviewing coded data, clustering related codes, and defining candidate themes that captured something significant about the research question. For example, codes related to "chatbot booking," "voice search," and "GEO" were grouped under the broader theme "AI-Driven Personalization and the Transformation of Search."
3. *Cross-Case Synthesis*: Following thematic development within individual cases, a cross-case analysis was conducted. This involved comparing and contrasting how different cases (e.g., a hotel vs. a DMO) manifested the same theme, identifying patterns of convergence (e.g., widespread use of channel managers) and instructive divergence (e.g., different approaches to CTV advertising). This step was crucial for moving from descriptive findings to analytical conclusions.
4. *Interpretation and Narrative Construction*: The final stage involved interpreting the significance of the themes and their patterns in relation to the literature review and the research objective. The themes were woven into a coherent narrative presented in the Findings section, supported by direct evidence (e.g., statistics, quotes) from the source material.

Ethical Considerations and Methodological Rigor

As this study relied on publicly available documents and published case studies, formal human subject ethical review was not required. However, ethical scholarly practice was maintained by:

- ✓ *Accurate Representation*: Sources are faithfully paraphrased and directly quoted with proper citation to avoid misrepresentation.

- ✓ *Transparency*: The commercial origin of many sources (e.g., vendor reports) is acknowledged in the discussion of limitations.

To ensure methodological rigor, the study adhered to established trustworthiness criteria for qualitative research:

- ✓ *Credibility (Internal Validity)*: Achieved through data triangulation (multiple source types) and methodological coherence (aligning philosophy, design, and methods).
- ✓ *Transferability (External Validity)*: While not statistically generalizable, rich, thick description of the cases and contexts allows readers to assess the potential transferability of findings to similar settings.
- ✓ *Dependability (Reliability)*: A clear, auditable decision trail is provided in this methodology section, detailing each step from data collection to analysis.
- ✓ *Confirmability (Objectivity)*: The systematic and documented analytic process, along with the use of direct evidence, aims to minimize researcher bias and ensure findings are rooted in the data.

Limitations

The chosen methodology has inherent limitations. The reliance on vendor-produced content may introduce a bias toward success stories and technological optimism. The rapid pace of technological change means some findings may have a limited shelf life. Furthermore, the lack of primary data from consumers or proprietary business metrics restricts the ability to perform certain types of quantitative analysis (e.g., calculating precise ROI). These limitations are acknowledged, and the study's conclusions are framed with appropriate caution, focusing on strategic principles and identified trends rather than immutable truths.

Findings

AI-Driven Personalization and the Transformation of Search

The most profound technological shift affecting Christmas tourism distribution is the integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI), particularly conversational AI, into the travel planning journey. This year has been identified as "the first holiday season shaped by AI-powered shopping". Consumers are increasingly using tools like ChatGPT, Copilot, and Google's Gemini to generate gift ideas and travel inspiration. For example, a traveler might

query an AI for "unique Christmas getaway ideas in a snowy mountain town," receiving tailored suggestions that bypass traditional OTA search filters. This represents a move from transactional search (e.g., "hotel in Vienna December 24") to intent-based discovery.

This shift has major implications for distribution:

- ✓ *Visibility in AI Platforms:* Suppliers must ensure their product data is rich, structured, and up to date to be effectively "read" and recommended by AI algorithms. This is a new form of search engine optimization (SEO), often termed Generative Engine Optimization (GEO).
- ✓ *Direct Partnerships:* Major retailers like Walmart and Shopify have partnered with OpenAI to enable purchases directly within ChatGPT. While nascent in travel, this signals a future where booking could occur entirely within an AI interface, potentially creating a new, powerful distribution channel controlled by tech companies. As one analyst noted, "AI companies hold the cards" in this emerging landscape.
- ✓ *Hyper-Personalized Marketing:* AI also powers the backend of distribution, enabling suppliers to segment audiences and personalize offers at scale. For instance, a hotel's website can use AI to display a festive dining promotion to a local visitor, while showing a multi-night Christmas package to an international traveler.

The Omnichannel Imperative: Integrating OTAs, Direct, and Metasearch

The findings clearly show that a siloed channel strategy is ineffective during the competitive Christmas period. A successful approach is inherently omnichannel, strategically leveraging each channel for a specific purpose within the customer journey.

- ✓ *OTAs as Demand Generators:* OTAs remain indispensable for their unparalleled marketing reach and role as the "first touchpoint" for many travelers. During Christmas, ranking on the first page of an OTA is critical, as an estimated 80-90% of bookings on platforms like Booking.com come from the first page of results. OTAs are effectively used to capture broad demand, especially from new customer segments.
- ✓ *Direct Channels for Profitability and Loyalty:* The strategic counterpart to OTA use is an aggressive direct booking strategy. Case studies show successful hotels use their website as a conversion hub, employing tactics like OTA rate comparison modules (to assure guests of the best direct price), limited-time offers with countdown timers, and

packages bundled with festive value-adds (e.g., Christmas dinner, gift vouchers) . The goal is to convert the awareness generated by OTAs (the "billboard effect") into higher-margin direct bookings.

Table 1: Strategic Role of Key Distribution Channels During Christmas

Channel	Primary Christmas Role	Key Technology Enabler	Supplier Strategic Goal
OTAs (e.g., Booking.com)	Mass demand generation & new customer acquisition	OTA algorithm optimization; Channel manager integration	Maximize visibility & conversion; Use as marketing billboard
Direct (Website/App)	High-margin conversion & guest loyalty building	Best-rate guarantee widgets; AI-powered personalization	Drive direct bookings via packages & exclusive offers
Metasearch (e.g., Google Hotels)	Final comparison & high-intent capture	Cost-per-click (CPC) advertising; SEO/GEO for free listings	Steer price-comparison traffic to direct or preferred partner
AI Chatbots/Platforms	Inspirational discovery & conversational commerce	Rich, structured product data (GEO); API partnerships	Ensure products are recommended in AI-generated answers

Enhancing Customer Experience and Operational Efficiency

Digital technologies are also optimizing the supply side of the distribution chain, improving both the guest experience and supplier operations.

- ✓ *Dynamic Pricing and Revenue Management:* The Christmas period, with its fluctuating demand (e.g., high demand on Dec. 26-30, potentially lower on Dec. 24-25), is ideal for dynamic pricing algorithms. These tools adjust rates in real-time based on competitor pricing, demand forecasts, and booking pace, ensuring properties maximize revenue without pricing themselves out of the market .
- ✓ *Frictionless and Experiential Booking:* Technologies are making booking itself part of the festive experience. Mobile-optimized websites, one-click checkout, and the sale of digital experience passes (e.g., a "Holiday Lights Trail" pass or a "Christmas Market Tasting Pass") cater to the modern traveler's desire for convenience and instant gratification.
- ✓ *Integrated Campaigns Across Digital Media:* Winning Christmas campaigns use a synchronized mix of digital channels. For example, a Connected TV (CTV) ad can build broad brand awareness for a destination, which is then reinforced by targeted social media ads. These ads can be followed by personalized email offers or push notifications about a flash sale, creating multiple touchpoints that guide the consumer to book. Data shows that customers exposed to three integrated channel types (e.g., native ads, push notifications, and pop-up campaigns) had a 3.2x higher conversion rate.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that digital technologies are acting as a powerful force multiplier in Christmas tourism distribution, intensifying both opportunities and competitive pressures.

The discussion interprets these findings through the lens of distribution channel theory and strategic management.

Reintermediation and the Redistribution of Channel Power

The rise of AI platforms and the continued dominance of mega-OTAs like Google (in metasearch) suggest a process of reintermediation, where new, more technologically advanced intermediaries capture value. While direct booking tools empower suppliers, the control exerted by AI companies over product discovery and by OTAs over consumer traffic

maintains a significant power asymmetry. The Christmas season, with its high-value transactions, amplifies this tension. Suppliers must therefore engage in strategic channel cooperation, using OTAs and AI for reach while deploying every technological tool available (personalization, rate parity, unique packages) to reclaim the customer relationship and its associated profit margin at the point of direct booking.

The Christmas Consumer: Strategic, Early, and Experience-Driven

The technologies are both responding to and shaping a new type of Christmas traveler. Data confirms these consumers are strategic planners, beginning their research as early as summer. They are also experience-seeking, valuing curated festive activities and memorable moments over mere accommodation. Digital distribution channels have adapted to this by facilitating the sale of complex experience-based packages and enabling easy discovery of niche offerings (e.g., Viking-themed bike parts found via AI). This shifts competitive advantage toward suppliers and destinations that can effectively digitize and bundle their unique festive value propositions across multiple channels.

The Critical Role of Data Integration and Agile Management

Underpinning all successful technological adoption is integrated data. The ability to gather insights from one channel (e.g., high click-through rates for a "New Year's Eve package" ad on social media) and immediately adjust strategy on another (e.g., increasing the price or promotion budget for that package on the website and OTAs) is crucial. The Christmas season rewards agility. This requires breaking down data silos between marketing, revenue management, and distribution systems. The most effective businesses use a central "data hub" to ensure consistent information and enable real-time, AI-assisted decision-making across their omnichannel presence.

Conclusion

This paper has explored the transformative effect of digital technologies on tourism distribution channels during the critical Christmas season. The analysis leads to several conclusive insights. First, Artificial Intelligence is no longer a futuristic concept but a present-day reality reshaping the very beginning of the travel planning funnel, moving consumers from search-based to conversation-based discovery. Second, achieving a balanced and integrated omnichannel strategy is the paramount strategic objective. This involves leveraging the massive reach of OTAs while using sophisticated direct booking technology, personalized marketing, and exclusive festive packages to cultivate profitable direct relationships. Third, operational technologies like dynamic pricing engines and unified channel managers are essential for optimizing revenue and preventing operational failures during the high-pressure holiday rush.

For tourism businesses, the implications are clear. Success during future Christmas seasons will depend on a continuous investment in digital literacy and technological infrastructure. Simply listing a property on an OTA is insufficient. Businesses must actively manage their digital presence across an ecosystem of channels, ensure their product data is optimized for AI and metasearch, and use data analytics to personalize offers and manage yields in real-time. The tourism supply chain is becoming more transparent, efficient, and responsive because of these technologies, but this also raises the competitive bar. Future research should quantitatively measure the ROI of specific technologies like AI-powered personalization during peak seasons and explore the evolving ethical and data privacy considerations within this highly digitized distribution landscape.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Glossary of Key Digital Technology Terms

- **AI (Artificial Intelligence):** The simulation of human intelligence processes by machines, particularly computer systems. In tourism distribution, used for personalized recommendations, chatbots, and dynamic pricing.
- **OTA (Online Travel Agency):** A web-based marketplace that aggregates travel products (hotels, flights, tours) from multiple suppliers for consumers to book (e.g. Booking.com, Expedia).
- **Metasearch Engine:** A platform (e.g., Google Hotels, TripAdvisor, Kayak) that compares prices and availability from multiple OTAs and supplier websites, but does not handle the booking transaction directly.
- **Channel Manager:** A software tool that allows a tourism supplier to manage rates and inventory availability across all their distribution channels (OTAs, website, etc.) from a single dashboard, preventing overbookings.
- **Dynamic Pricing:** A revenue management strategy where prices are adjusted in real-time based on algorithms that factor in demand, competitor pricing, time to arrival, and other variables.
- **Omnichannel Strategy:** A cross-channel approach to sales and marketing that provides a seamless and consistent customer experience whether the client interacts online, on mobile, or in person.
- **Generative Engine Optimization (GEO):** The practice of optimizing digital content (e.g., product descriptions, FAQs) to increase its visibility and likelihood of being sourced and presented by AI-powered search tools and large language models.
- **Connected TV (CTV):** A device that can stream video content over the internet to a television (e.g., Smart TVs, Roku, Apple TV). CTV advertising is a growing channel for brand-building tourism campaigns.

Appendix B: Checklist for a Technology-Enabled Christmas Distribution Strategy

- **AI & Search Readiness:** Audit and enrich all product descriptions, amenities, and package details for AI/GEO. Consider potential for AI platform partnerships.
- **OTA Optimization:** Ensure high-quality, festive-themed photos and descriptions are live on all OTA profiles. Use a channel manager to maintain rate parity.
- **Direct Channel Arsenal:** Implement a "book direct" rate guarantee on your website. Create and prominently feature exclusive Christmas/New Year's packages.
- **Metasearch Presence:** Claim and optimize free business listings on Google, Tripadvisor, etc. Consider a paid metasearch campaign for key festive dates.
- **Dynamic Pricing Configuration:** Review and adjust dynamic pricing rules for the Christmas period, accounting for local event calendars and historical demand.
- **Integrated Campaign Plan:** Develop a cross-channel marketing calendar (e.g., CTV/social ads → email offer → retargeting push notification) with a consistent festive message.
- **Data Dashboard:** Ensure key performance indicators (KPIs) for each channel (direct/OTA conversion, campaign ROI) are tracked in a unified dashboard for agile decision-making.