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Social media and the Irish tourism and hospitality industry: the customer experience

In order to ascertain who the tourists are using social media outlets when searching for information on holidaying in Ireland and how this affected their purchase behaviour, a questionnaire was designed. The questionnaire was developed through an online survey tool and ran over a five month period in association with a number of tourism businesses. As part of the consumer survey, tourists were asked if the information they acquired through social networking sites impacted their purchase decision. The results showed how participants were using social media to research their trip in Ireland, the sites they were utilising most and the impact the information obtained had on their purchase decision.

Keywords: Social media marketing, Ireland, tourism, hospitality, questionnaires

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Introduction

Michaelidou, Siamagka and Christodoulides (2011), Berthon, Pitt, Plangger and Shapiro (2012), Laroche, Habibi, Berthon, Richard and Sankaranarayanan (2012a) each state that the development of Web 2.0 facilitated the creation of social media. Researchers such as Weinberg (2009) and Lai (2010) identify that a formal definition of social media does not exist as the technology it is based upon, is always developing. Social media are built on the foundations of facilitating users to generate and share content and interact with one another on line (Bruhn, Schoenmueller & Schäfer, 2012; Berthon et al., 2012). Therefore, a general understanding can be generated that social media are internet applications that facilitate User Generated Content (UGC) and social interaction online (Lai, 2010; Kirtis & Karahan, 2011; Hanna, Rohm, and Crittenden, 2011; Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014) and takes a number of different forms such as blogs, micro blogs and social networking sites (Lai, 2010; Torres-Salinas, Cabezas-Clavijo, Ruiz-Pere & López-Cózar, 2011; Freeman and Brett, 2012). Nusair, Bilgihan, Okumus, & Cobanoglu (2013) note that the feeling of being socially connected is a central element of social media sites. Consequently, sites such as Facebook, Instagram, TripAdvisor and Twitter were built on foundations of real life social interactions.

Key Social Networking Sites

Many researchers such as Heidemann, Klier and Probst (2012) identify that the term social networking originates from the creation of links between individuals. Social media technology is supporting the creation of communities through social networking sites (Laroche et al., 2012a). It is clear that the significance of specific social networking sites is constantly changing as new technologies emerge (Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014). However, Ebizima (2014) confirmed that the most popular sites among users (Facebook and Twitter) have remained the same from March 2013 to March 2014.

Social Media Marketing

Social media sites such as Facebook have perfected their analytical tools to identify specific demographics of a user which facilitate a business to effectively reach their target audience through social media adverts (Lillington, 2013). Some academics believe that social media are a powerful marketing tool as they can potentially empower, engage and educate consumers about a product, service or tourism destination. Many tourism businesses have acknowledged this and invested in social media marketing in order to reach and engage with consumers in *'real time'*. This is also prevalent where tourism authorities such as Tourism Ireland (2014) and Tourism New Zealand (2014) among others have, in recent years, invested in growing their social media platforms and engaging with potential customers to sell their countries as attractive tourism destinations.

It is apparent that social media technologies have had a massive impact on the way businesses are promoting themselves. Findings have shown that because of the development of new technology, social media sites are continuously being developed. Businesses should, therefore, monitor new trends and identify how they can impact their marketing efforts. Social media marketing is seen as an important information source and for that reason it is imperative that tourism businesses have a strategy in place to successfully use it as a promotional tool. Literature highlighted the importance for businesses especially in the tourism domain to create an effective social media strategy (Smith, Fischer & Yongjian, 2012; Laroche et al., 2012a; Fáilte Ireland, 2012). Fáilte Ireland (2012) explain the significance for tourism businesses to have a social media strategy, stating that businesses tend to waste time and money using social media as a marketing tool incorrectly when they do not have a strategy in place.

The main objective for this research paper is to support social media strategy development by profiling how the typical tourist holidaying in Ireland uses social media sites to plan their trip and the effect the information obtained has on their decision. The results

showed how participants were using social media to research their trip in Ireland, the sites they were utilising most and the impact the information obtained had on their purchase decision.

METHOD

In order to ascertain who the tourists are using social media outlets when searching for information on holidaying in Ireland and how this affected their purchase behaviour, a questionnaire was designed. In 2013, the questionnaire was developed through an online survey tool (Survey Expression) and ran over a five month period in association with Fáilte Ireland and a number of tourism businesses.

Online Questionnaire

For the purpose of this investigation a respondent completion questionnaire was designed and distributed. This format was selected due to the nature of the study which aims to identify how social media is being used. An online questionnaire was selected as the target market of participants where active on social media sites. In order to answer the research question, a number of objectives were first established. The questionnaire was designed to identify who the tourists are, how they currently use social media, how they generally used social media, how they used social media to plan their trip in Ireland and the impact the information they found had on their purchase behaviour. Establishing who the tourists are and the power social media has can potentially help tourism businesses utilise social media platforms more effectively.

To ensure the instructions given to respondents were clear, the authors conducted a number of pilot surveys and incorporated text boxes explaining any further steps required. Low response rate was also seen by Evan and Maher (2005) as a significant problem when conducting an online questionnaire. In order to minimise the risk of this happening, the authors as suggested by Lee (2010), promoted the questionnaire over a number of different

channels in order to effectively reach the target markets. The questionnaire was advertised across the national tourism authority and a number of tourism stakeholders and attractions' social media pages. This allowed the authors to effectively reach its target markets.

A number of different sampling techniques may be used in order to effectively identify a sample (Blaikie, 2010). Both probability based and non-probability based sample techniques may be employed (Blaikie, 2010). This study used a convenience sample. Fáilte Ireland (2013) recorded a total of 14,582,000 domestic and international tourists to Ireland in 2012, a further 11,647,280 used the internet to plan their holiday in Ireland. Based on visitor statistics, a representative sample would be 49 percent Irish, 19 percent British, 15 percent mainland Europe, eight percent Northern Irish, six percent North American and three percent from the rest of the world. Although the sample obtained differs it is still largely representative of the main tourist markets to Ireland. Sixty five percent of tourists surveyed were from Ireland, 11 percent were from North America, eight percent were from mainland Europe, six percent were from Northern Ireland, a further five percent of participants were British and finally, two percent were from the rest of the world. Findings could not be generalised to all Irish tourists due to the small sample size (276), instead the information gathered was used to reinforce findings from the literature review.

Limitations of the Online Questionnaire

There were a number of weaknesses associated with conducting an online questionnaire such as the link been perceived as a suspicious URL with a consequent low response rate. Steps were taken to avoid these; however, even with solutions in place to limit the problems associated with conducting an online survey, a number of factors restricted its success. The questionnaire was launched on the Tourist Attraction's Twitter page in the middle of May (2013) and was later promoted on the Tourism Authorities Facebook page, reaching a total potential global audience of 32,760 (2,872 Tourist Attraction's followers and

29,888 Discover Ireland Facebook fans). The survey link failed to make a substantial impression on its audience and after six weeks had only attracted sixty participants. The Tourist Attraction and the Tourism Authority actively shared the link on their social media with a view to increasing traction.

Another factor limiting the questionnaire which was not predetermined by the authors was the viral nature of social media. Some ‘friends’ and ‘followers’ of the investigator picked up on the link being shared and took it upon themselves to also share the questionnaire link and encourage participation. Although this proved to be unsuccessful, the authors asked each ‘friends’ and ‘follower’ who re-posted or re-tweeted, to delete the link to ensure the validity of the study.

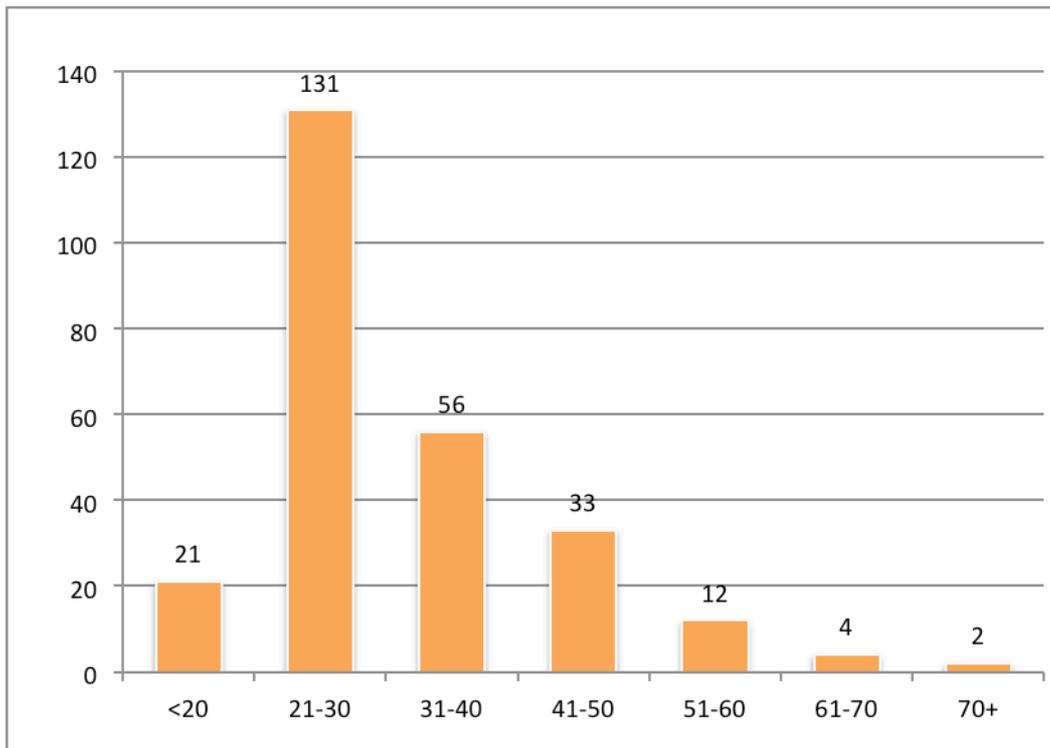
RESULTS

This questionnaire was completed online by a total of 276 (sample size) participants worldwide. The aim of the questionnaire was to develop a profile of the typical tourist using social media when researching their trip in Ireland. It was also important to gain an understanding of how these tourists use social media in their day to day life and to identify how they used social media when researching their holiday in Ireland.

Demographic Profile of Respondents

Of the tourists who participated in the survey, 168 were Irish tourists, 16 were from Northern Ireland, 30 were from North America, 15 were British, 23 were from mainland Europe and a further seven were from the rest of the world. Fáilte Ireland 2012 Tourism Facts (Fáilte Ireland, 2013) identifies that the main tourist markets to Ireland are Northern Ireland, Britain, Europe and North America. Therefore, the findings analysed are representative of the main Irish tourist market. Tourists who took part in the survey were then asked to identify their age bracket. **Figure 1** shows that the age demographics of participants varied greatly.

Figure 1 Age Profile



As shown in **Figure 1**, each age group identified was represented. The largest age group was 21-30 with 131 participants, followed by the 31-40 group with 56, the 41-50 group with 33, the <20 with 21, the 51-60 group with 12, the 61-70 with four and finally the 70+ with two participants. This can be related to findings from Duggan and Brenner (2013) which show that most social media users are aged between 18-29 years of age.

The final question in the tourist profiling section was asked only of non-Irish participants and identified how many international tourists using social media sites to plan their trip were first time visitors to Ireland. **Figure 2** illustrates that the majority of participants had not previously visited Ireland.

Figure 2 International Tourists' Previous Visits to Ireland

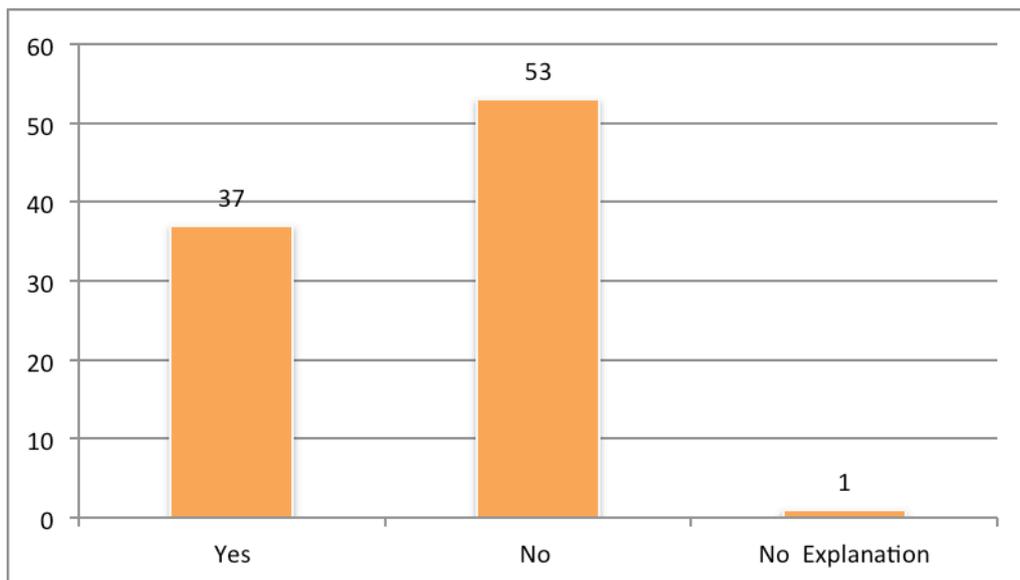
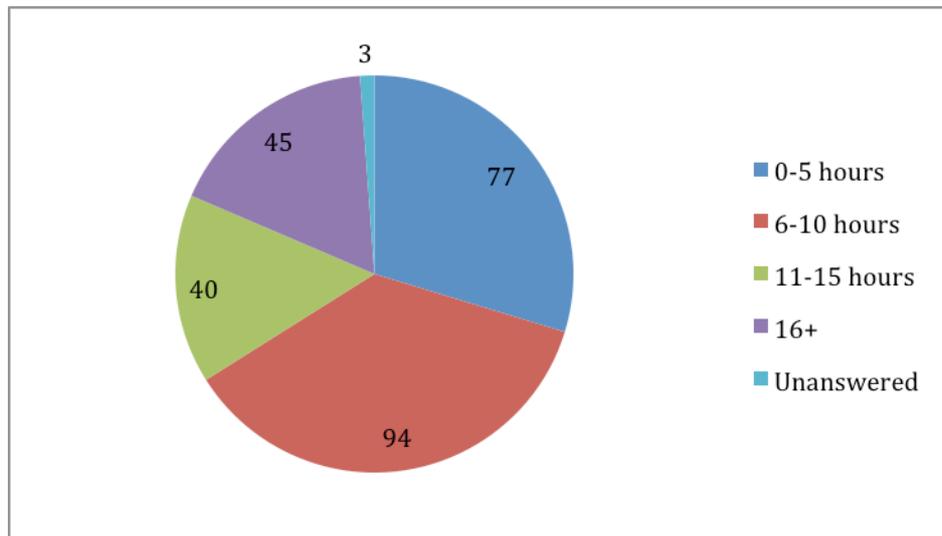


Figure 2 shows that out of the 90 non Irish tourists who completed the survey, 37 participants had previously visited Ireland while 53 had not. Researchers such as Munar (2012) and Sparks, Perkins and Buckley (2013) describe the difficulty that tourists face when purchasing a holiday. Munar (2012) identifies that when a tourist is unfamiliar with a region they wish to visit, such as the international tourist holidaying for the first time in a foreign country, the risk associated with purchasing a holiday is greater. As a result, they try to reduce the risk associated by conducting extensive research on the destination through social media sites.

Use of Social Media

This section of the questionnaire examined how the tourists surveyed used social media sites in general. The participants were asked two questions in order to establish how social media were used in their life beginning with how many hours per week they spend on social media, followed but why they use social media. **Figure 3** shows the number of hours respondents generally spend on networking sites.

Figure 3 Hours Spent on Social Media Sites

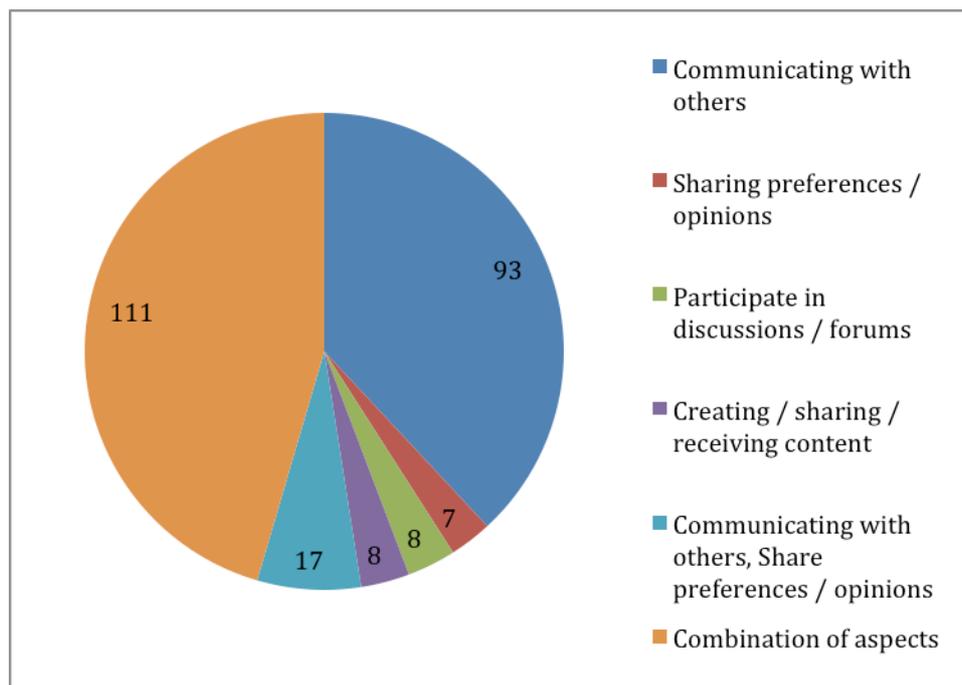


As can be seen from **Figure 3**, the amount of time participants spent on social media sites varied. The majority of tourists (94) indicated that they spent between 6-10 hours on social media. A further 77 candidates spent 0-5 hours on social media, 40 spend 11-15 hours on social networking sites while 45 are active on social media sites for 16 hours or longer per week. It is clear from **Figure 3** above that the majority of participants spent between 0-10 hours on social networking sites. This was further examined by cross tabulating the amount of hours tourists generally spent on social media sites with tourists' nationalities. Findings between Irish and international tourists were similar, with 19 international tourists spending between 0-5 hours on social media. Twenty four respondents were active for 6-10 hours, 16 spent 11-15 hours online and a further 16 international tourists were active for 16 or more hours. The majority of these tourists were American (eight). The results collected relate to conclusions found in similar studies by Lebo (2013) and Vincenzini (2013). Lebo (2013) identified that the average internet user is active online for approximately 20.4 hours per week. Furthermore, Vincenzini (2013) establishes that for every hour a person is active on the internet, 14 minutes out of the hour is spent on social networking sites. Therefore, relating to

survey findings shared, the average social media user spends approximately 4.666 hours per week on social media sites (Lebo, 2013; Vincenzini, 2013).

Participants were then asked what they would normally use social media sites for. A number of responses were predetermined in the questionnaire from the literature (Din, Yahy & Kassim, 2012). The uses identified were: to communicate with others, share preferences and opinions, participate in discussion / forums and to create, share and receive content. Respondents were allowed to select as many options as they felt were of relevance to them. **Figure 4** shows that the majority of participants indicated that they generally used social media for a combination of reasons.

Figure 4 Types of Social Media Usage



As seen in **Figure 4**, the most popular use of social media (93) was to communicate with others. One hundred and eleven respondents indicated that they used social media for a variety of the reasons identified. The most popular combination appears to be communication with others and to create, share and receive content, with 47 respondents indicating this.

Thirty two participants stated that they used social media for all aspects identified. A further 29 respondents highlighted that they used social media channels to communicate with others, share preferences / opinions and to create share and receive content. When cross tabulated against tourist nationality, the majority of international tourists (31) identified that they use a combination of the reasons. Twenty seven travellers selected that they generally use all aspects identified with a further 15 international tourists acknowledging that they used social media to communicate with others. These results can be linked back to findings from the literature review, where many authors (Din et al., 2012; Nusair et al., 2013) acknowledge that social media users participate on different social media sites to feel connected with their peers and interact online. Other researchers such as Kirtis and Karahan (2011), Hanna et al., (2012) and Heidemann et al., (2012) conclude that communicating with others and developing and sharing content were the fundamental reasons why people used social networking sites.

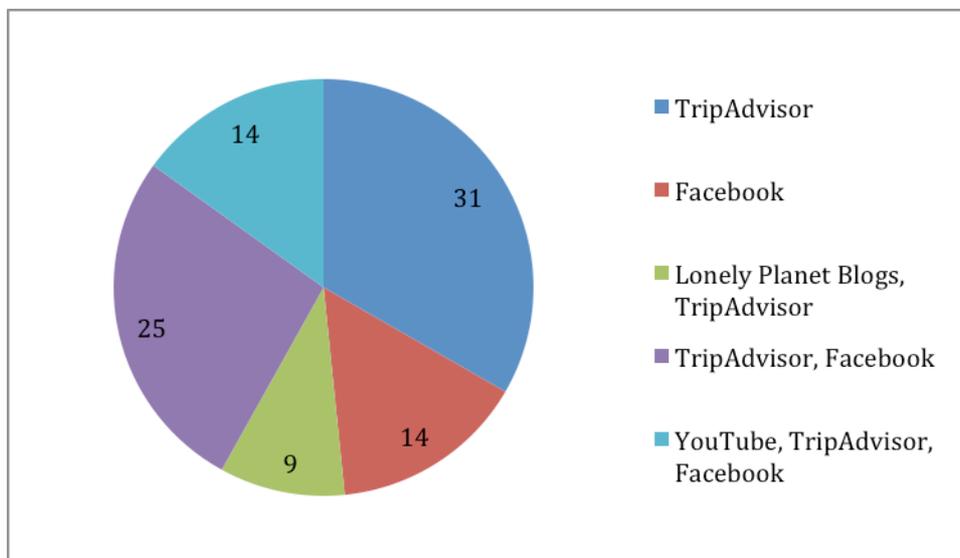
Using Social Media Sites to Plan Trip

The third section of the consumer questionnaire examined how the tourists used different social media sites when planning their trip in Ireland. In this segment, participants were asked four questions about how they were using social media when researching their trip in Ireland. The tourists were asked which social media sites they used and what information they searched for on the social media sites. The tourists were then asked how they searched for the information that they found on social media sites and finally, whether they would engage in conversations about their holiday plans with other tourists on these sites.

Participants were asked which social media sites they used to plan their trip to Ireland. Respondents were given a list of ten different social media sites (Blogger, Facebook, Flickr, Lonely Planet Blogs, Next Stop, Pheed, TripAdvisor, Twitter, Wiki Travel, and YouTube). The social media sites were selected by the authors because they were identified by Ebizima

(2013) as the top five social networking sites and the top five travel social networking sites by unique monthly visitors. Respondents were asked to select which platforms they used. They were also given an eleventh option to input a social media site which was not identified in the survey if they had searched alternative sites for information. Tourists identified that they used a wide variety of sites in different combinations when researching their holiday in Ireland. **Figure 5** gives an outline of the popular social media sites used by tourists to acquire information when planning their holiday in Ireland.

Figure 3 Popular Social media websites used



As can be seen clearly from **Figure 5**, the most popular social media site a tourist consulted when making their holiday plans in Ireland was TripAdvisor with 31 respondents indicating this. Participants were given the option to select as many platforms as they felt were relevant to their planning. Facebook and TripAdvisor combined were identified as the second most utilised social media sites. As shown in **Figure 5**, Lonely Planet Blogs and TripAdvisor also rated highly within groups as popular platforms used to research holidaying in Ireland. Fourteen participants confirmed that they used Facebook, TripAdvisor and YouTube collectively to research and nine indicated that they used Lonely Planet Blogs and

TripAdvisor while investigating what Ireland has to offer. It was found that 87% of tourists who researched their holiday plans online used internet review sites such as TripAdvisor to find real unbiased information about the region they wish to visit and to be confident in their purchase decision. Fotis et al., (2012) noted that tourists generally turn to review sites such as TripAdvisor and Lonely Planet Blogs to research a region its amenities and its attraction. The sites help tourists to plan their holiday around the information they obtained.

When the origin of the participant was cross tabulated against the social media sites utilised, it was clear that the findings were similar to the overall results. International tourists had used a multitude of different sites in a variety of combinations to plan their trip. However, international tourists highlighted that TripAdvisor was a predominant site with 23 indicating that they used the site alongside other sites while researching their holiday in Ireland. Chen, Fay and Wang (2011) noted that tourists generally search a number of different social media sites while researching their holiday plans. However, they turn to review sites such as TripAdvisor in order to be confident in their purchase decision. Questionnaire results analysed from the domestic tourists identified that the majority of respondents used a specific social media site when researching their holiday in Ireland. Twenty six participants from Ireland and Northern Ireland indicated that they use TripAdvisor as the only platform. All 256 respondents showed that they used a wide variety of the social media platforms but in different combinations while planning their trip to Ireland. It is clear from findings analysed that Facebook, Lonely Planet Blogs, TripAdvisor and YouTube were among the most utilised social media platforms for participants planning to holiday in Ireland (Chen et al., 2011; Fotis et al., 2012).

Participants were then asked what information they searched social media for regarding their holiday in Ireland. Respondents were given a list of four predetermined answers – Ireland in general, reviews, other tourists' recommendations and pictures / videos from which they were asked to select as many as they felt were of relevance to them. **Figure**

6 shows that the majority of tourists searched for a combination of the options given when researching their holiday in Ireland.

Figure 6 Information Acquired

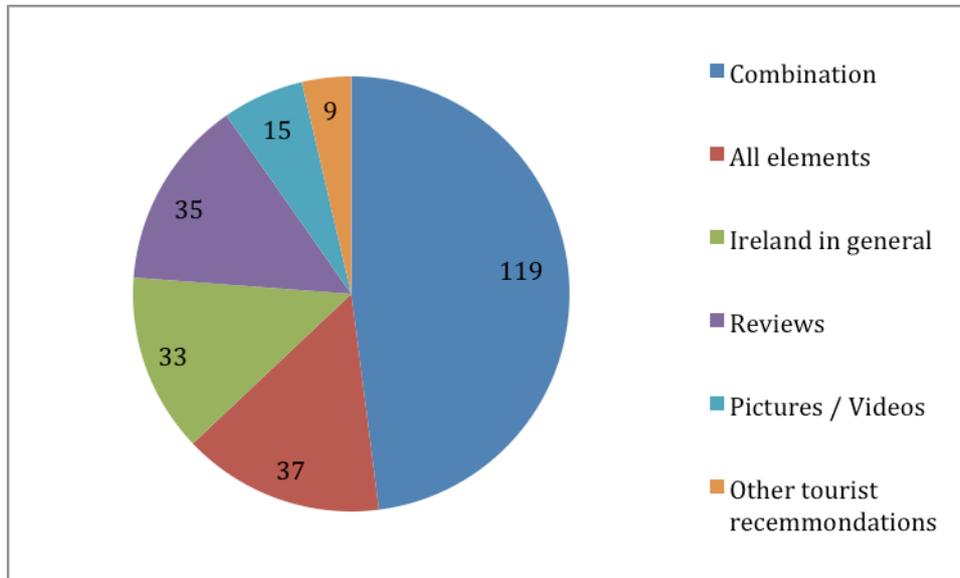
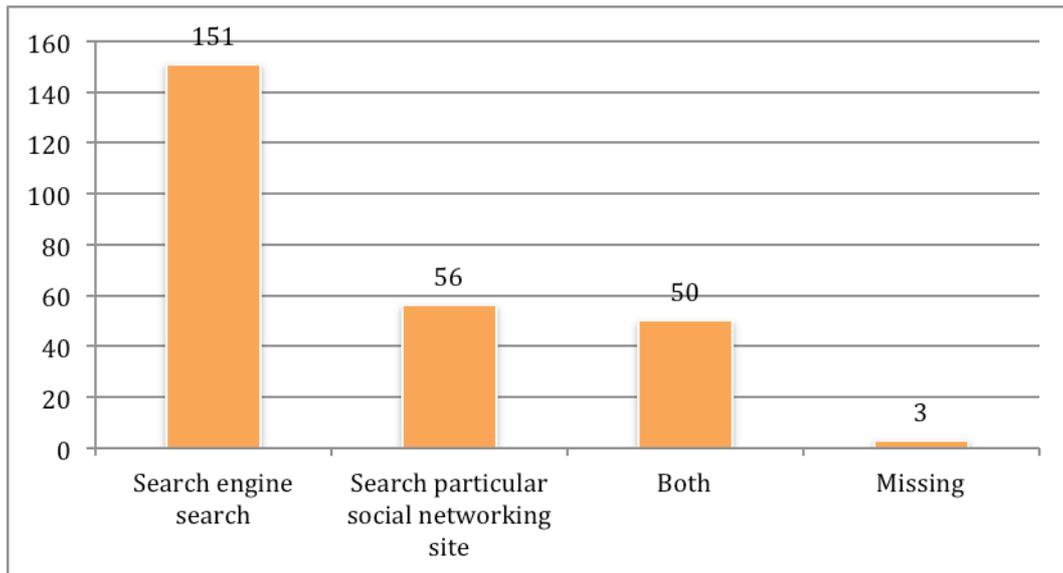


Figure 6 illustrates that 119 tourists searched for a combination of options when researching their holiday in Ireland, 37 searched for all of the choices, 35 searched for reviews only, 33 for Ireland in general, 15 for pictures and videos and nine for things other tourists recommended. The results were then cross tabulated against tourists nationalities in order to identify the difference between national and international tourists. Findings from international tourists corresponded to the overall findings with the majority (26) identifying that they searched for all elements. Twenty three indicated that they searched for a combination and a further eight acknowledged that they searched for Ireland in general., Fotis et al., (2012) and Berg, Arentze and Timmermans (2013) identify that tourists search social media for information about their holiday plans for a variety of reasons such as information about the region, reviews, pictures and recommendations to decrease uncertainty about buying an intangible experience. Participants were then asked how they searched for the

information they required to plan their holiday in Ireland. Two choices were given – a search engine and a particular social media site. As shown in **Figure 7** the majority of tourists used a search engine to find the information on social media sites.

Figure 7 Searching for Information

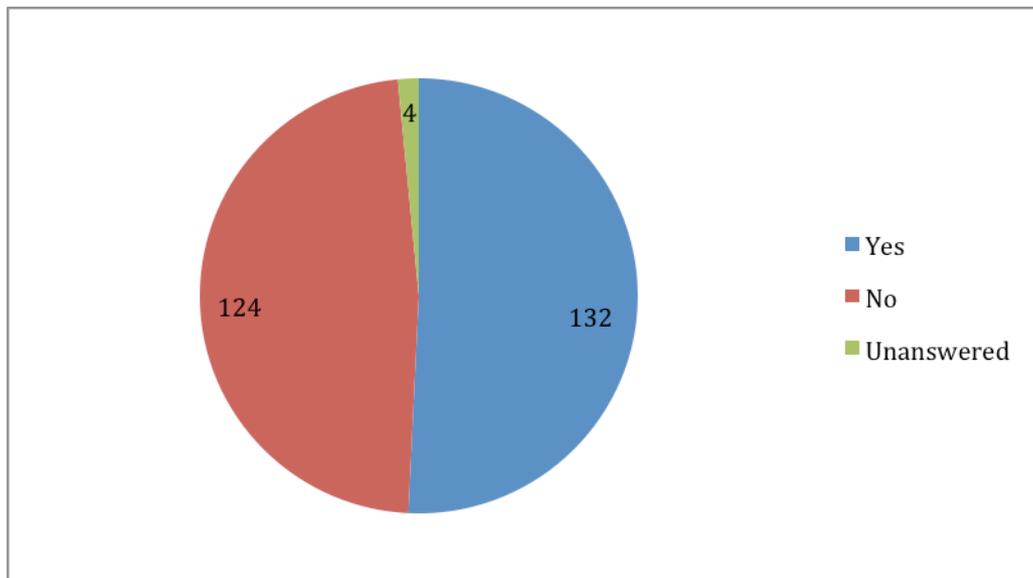


Of the tourists who responded, 151 used a search engine to find the information while a further 56 respondents searched a particular social media site for the information they required. When analysed further, alongside the results of the social media sites tourists referred to when planning their holiday in Ireland, the survey findings showed that the majority of tourists (22) who used TripAdvisor and Facebook (seven) to plan their trip used a search engine to find the information. Results were then examined further to establish how international tourists who participated searched for information regarding their holiday in Ireland with 37 respondents indicating they used a search engine, 20 highlighting that they searched a particular social media site and a further 17 identifying that they used both methods. This supports Xiang and Gretzel's (2010) findings regarding the growing importance of social media in the online tourism domain. The authors determined that search engines such as Google facilitate travellers to acquire information on social media sites. They

explained that with the large amount of information available online pertaining to travel, consumers can become overwhelmed. Therefore, many turn to search engines and type in a particular destination or a question about a region which in turn leads them to information from social networking sites. Search engines are seen by many tourists as the ‘gateways’ to travel related information and social media channels (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010, p. 179).

Respondents were then asked if they were going to engage in conversation about their holiday plans through social media sites. **Figure 8** shows that a large proportion of tourists will talk about their holiday plans through social networking sites.

Figure 8 Engaging in Conversation about Holiday Plans



The above **Figure 8** shows that 132 participants indicated that they will engage in conversation with other tourists about their holiday plans through social networking sites. When examined further, to identify the difference between domestic and international tourists, results were similar to the overall findings with 47 international tourists acknowledging they would engage in conversations about their holiday plans online. This result can be linked back to literature previously examined where authors such as Yoo and Gretzel (2011) and Casaló, Flavian and Guinaliu (2012) found that travellers perceive a holiday as a high risk purchase. Therefore, they try to minimise the risk associated with

purchasing a holiday by engaging in conversations about their plans through social networking sites with online users who had previously visited the destination. Wu, Zhang and Chikaraishi (2012) ascertain that communicating and engaging in conversations with other tourists through social networking sites enhances the quality of travel and allows the tourist to feel that they are conforming to social norms. A further 124 respondents indicated (27 international tourists) that they would not engage in conversations regarding their holiday in Ireland through social media channels. No clear explanation could be found for this.

Impact on Tourists' Behaviour

The final section of the survey focused on identifying the effect the information acquired by the tourists from different social networking sites was having on their purchase behaviour. Fischer and Reuber (2011) note that information obtained through social media channels affects consumers' perceptions and in turn, their purchase behaviour. A considerable amount of research has been conducted on social media (Jenkins, 2010). However, a gap is apparent pertaining to the impact that social media has on tourists' purchase behaviour (Ahey, Au & Law, 2013). As a result, in this segment of the questionnaire, consumers were asked three questions regarding the impact the information obtained would have. Firstly they were asked if the information they acquired would impact their decision and to explain how? Participants were also asked to rank on a scale of 1-5 how trustworthy they perceived information obtained on social media channels. In order to gain a greater understanding of how trustworthy consumers felt the information they found through social media sites was, participants were asked whether they would be more likely to trust information obtained on a social media site or from a friend / family member. Finally, tourists who participated in the survey were asked if they would upload and share pictures, videos and reviews on social media channels about their trip in Ireland.

In this section of the survey, participants were asked if the information they found on the social networking site affected their purchase decision. **Figure 9** indicates that the majority of tourists feel the information they obtained on holidaying in Ireland through social media sites affected their purchase decisions.

Figure 9 Effects on Consumer Behaviour

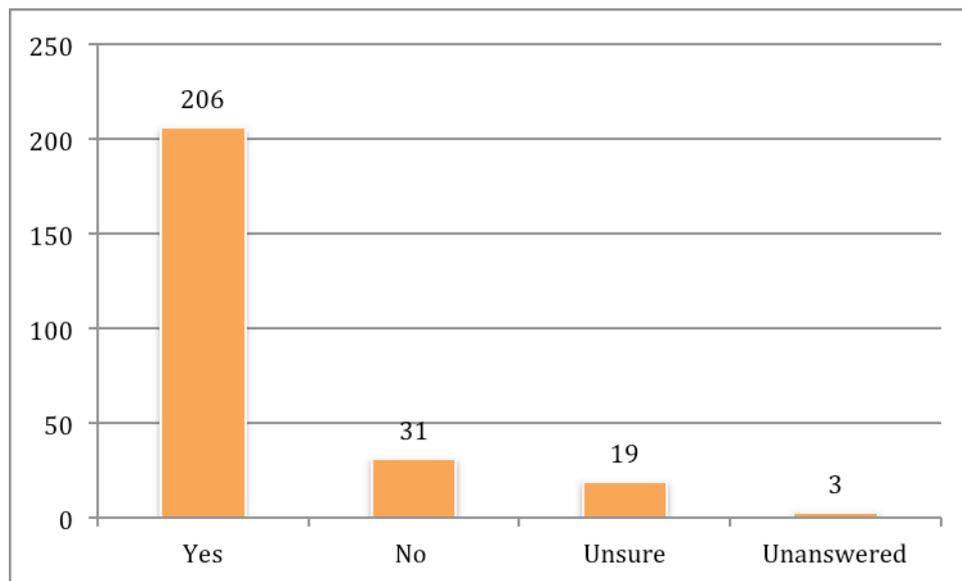


Figure 9 shows that 206 participants acknowledged that the information obtained impacted their purchase decision in some way while 31 respondents said the information they obtained did not affect their behaviour in any way. A further 19 participants were unsure if the information had any effect. Tourists are increasingly turning to social media in the pre purchase stage and looking for information regarding a destination which they can use as a basis for making their final decision. Results were, again, cross tabulated in order to identify how the information obtained on social media impacted the international tourists' purchase decision. Findings showed that the majority of tourists' (53) decisions were impacted in some way while 16 were not affected. Ahey et al., (2013) identify that information obtained on social networking sites about a destination by tourists often affected their decision making

process. Banyai and Potwarka (2012) share a similar opinion and acknowledge that material found on discussion posts and review sites such as Virtual Tourist about a region affects a traveller’s purchase decision.

Participants were then asked to rank on a scale of one to five (one being very trustworthy and five being very untrustworthy) how trustworthy they perceived the information they obtained about holidaying in Ireland on social media sites. **Figure 10** shows how trustworthy the tourists felt the information they found on the different social media channels was.

Figure 10 Trustworthiness of Information Acquired on Social Media Sites

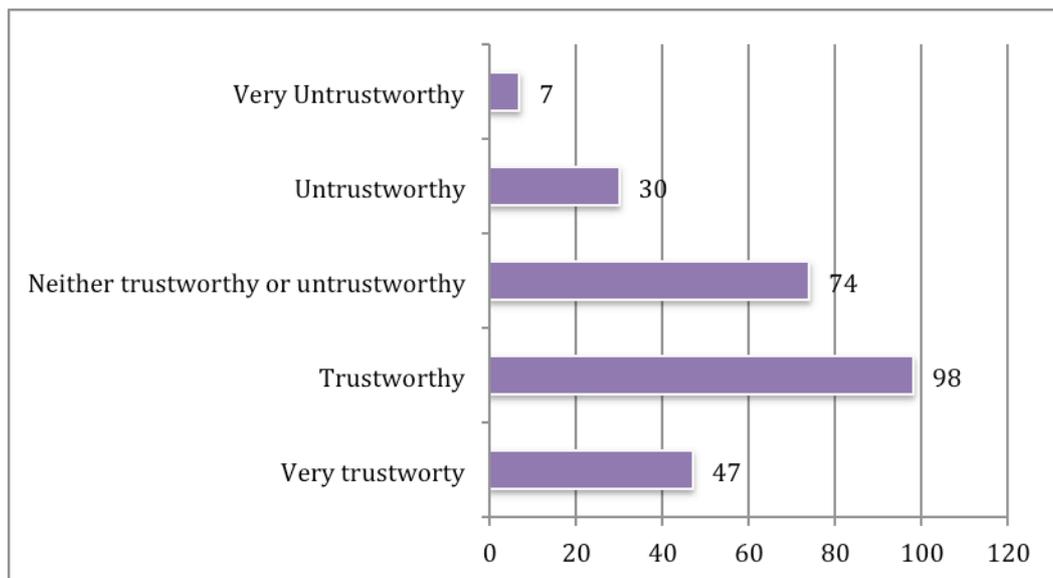


Figure 10 illustrates how trustworthy tourists who participated in the survey perceived the information they obtained on social media sites. The majority (98) indicated that they found the information to be trustworthy, 74 found it neither trustworthy nor untrustworthy, 47 showed they believed the information to be extremely trustworthy, 30 indicated that they found the information untrustworthy and a further seven believed it was very untrustworthy. When cross tabulated against tourist nationalities, results showed that

international tourists who participated found the information to be trustworthy (23), 19 found it neither trustworthy nor untrustworthy, 14 indicated it was very trustworthy, 12 found it untrustworthy while a further six found it very untrustworthy.

Figure 10 shows that the majority of those surveyed believe the information they obtained on Ireland through social networking sites to be trustworthy. This can be linked to a similar study conducted by Ho, Lin and Chen (2012) who identify that UGC shared on social media sites has become a powerful form of word of mouth. Tourists are increasingly searching social media sites for information they require. Ahey et al., (2013) share a similar view and highlight that tourists perceive the information they acquire on these platforms to be extremely trustworthy. Fotis et al., (2012) agrees with this and notes that, in recent years, social media review sites such as TripAdvisor have taken steps to ensure the credibility of reviews so as to give consumers ‘24/7’ access to unbiased stories, reviews and experiences.

Respondents were then asked if they were more likely to trust information they received from family and friends over information which they found online. **Figure 11** shows that the majority of tourists who participated in the survey were more likely to trust information they received from family and friends.

Figure 11 More likely to trust Family or Friends

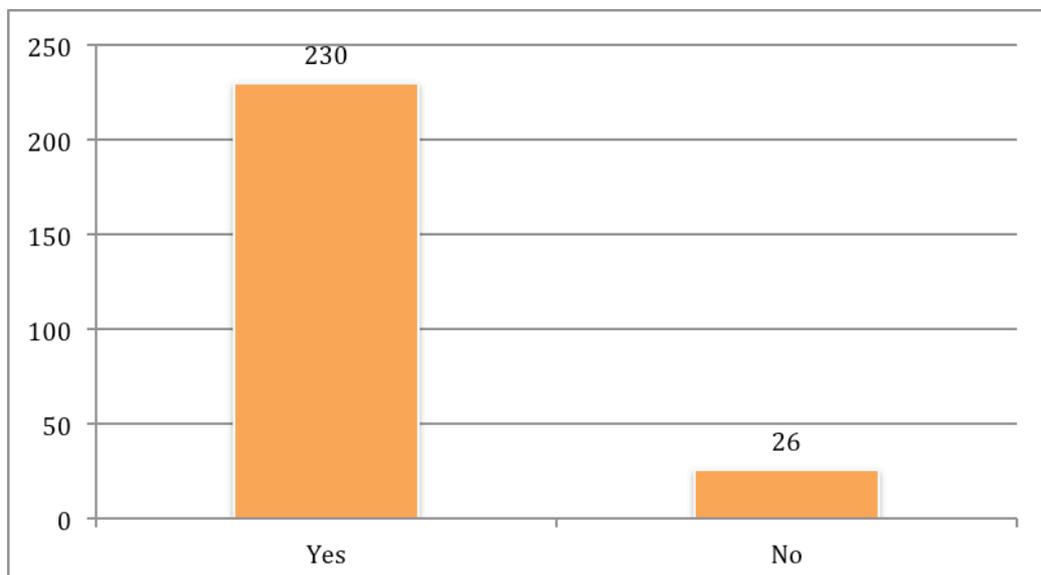


Figure 11 illustrates that, of the tourists who participated, 230 are more likely to trust information acquired from their friends or family. Twenty six participants indicated that they do not trust information obtained from friends and family more than information found online. Findings were, again, similar for international tourists with 58 indicating they were more likely to trust information acquired from their friends or family and 16 acknowledging that they do not trust family and friends more.

These results can be clearly related to a study conducted by Choi and Han (2013) study which highlights that, although tourists are increasingly turning to social media sites for guidance, they are more likely to trust information obtained from known sources such as family and friends. However, McGreevy (2013) disagrees with this point and notes that tourist review sites such as TripAdvisor have taken a ‘zero tolerance’ approach to fraudulent or misrepresented reviews to ensure the information shared on the sites is trustworthy. As a result, they are becoming a more trustworthy information source for tourists planning trips. Finally, participants were asked if they would upload pictures or reviews on social media sites relating to their holiday in Ireland when they have returned. **Figure 20** shows that a large proportion of tourists will upload pictures, videos and reviews about their experience once returning from their holidays.

Figure 12 Uploading Pictures / Videos and Reviews After Trip

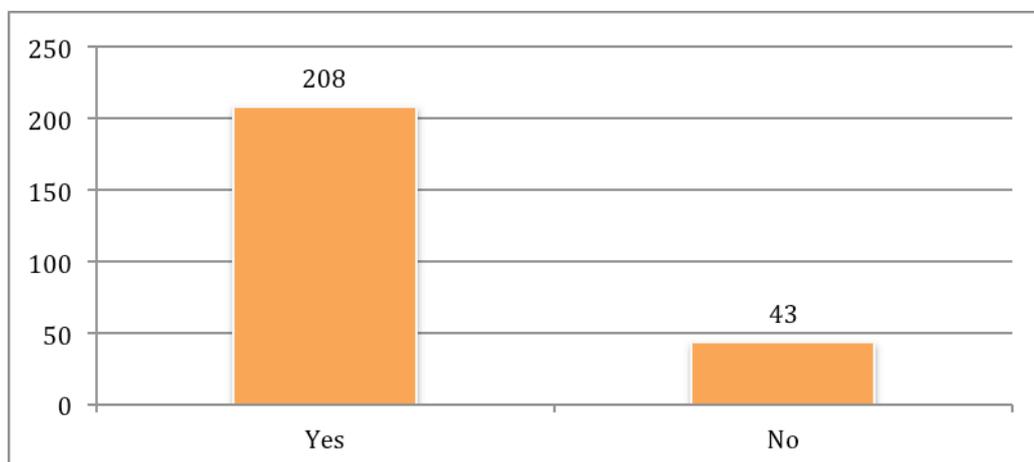


Figure 12 shows that 208 participants agreed that they will upload pictures / videos and reviews about their holiday in Ireland on different social media sites. A further 43 responded that they would not share information about their holiday on different social media sites. Fifty nine international tourists indicated that they would and 15 indicated that they would not.

This finding could be related to similar studies. Xu, Guo, Li, Lau and Liao (2012) consider that because of the advances in technology such as social media platforms, which facilitate tourists to share information, online users are increasingly creating and expressing their own UGC through different social media sites. Vries, Gensler and Leeflang (2012) believe that these technologies allow users to share their experiences, enthusiasm or dislike of a product, service or tourism destination through electronic word of mouth. Xu et al., (2012) and Vries et al., (2012) determine that many tourists will share their own experiences upon returning from a holiday in order to guide other tourists planning their holiday and give them a first-hand account of what a particular region is like.

Summary of Results

The majority of respondents surveyed were Irish, Northern Irish, British, North American and European. Tourists surveyed were generally between the ages of 20 and 30, but all age brackets identified were represented. As previously examined, these findings on the tourist profile fit in with results from similar studies (Fáilte Ireland, 2013; Duggan & Brenner, 2012). The majority of international tourists using social media to research their trip have not previously holidayed in Ireland.

The survey also identified how these tourists generally used social media in their day to day lives. Respondents used social media on average 0-10 hours per week, tying in with results from similar studies (Lebo, 2013; Vincenzini, 2013) which found tourists generally spend 4.6 hours per week on social media sites. When probed further to gauge an

understanding of what they use social media for, participants acknowledged that they use social media for a variety of reasons, the most popular being to communicate with others. This is consistent with findings from Kirtis and Karahan (2011), Hanna et al., (2012) and Heidemann et al., (2012) which showed that social media are generally used to communicate with others and to create and share content.

The next section of the questionnaire identified how the tourist used social media channels to plan their holiday in Ireland. Results showed that the majority of tourists surveyed use review sites such as TripAdvisor when researching their holiday. This could be linked to results shared by the European Travel Commission (2014) which established that a large proportion of tourists search review sites when making their holiday plans. The respondents highlighted that they searched for a combination of information. The most popular knowledge being sought related to reviews of accommodation, restaurants and attractions. This explains the popularity of TripAdvisor. Furthermore, tourists surveyed highlighted that they used a search engine to find the information they required from social networking sites. This relates to research by Xiang and Gretzel (2010) which notes that, as tourists are faced with a mass of information online, a search engine assists them to search for the information they require. This often leads them to social network and review sites such as TripAdvisor and VirtualTourist. The final question in the section focused on identifying if the tourist would engage in conversations with other tourists regarding their holiday plans. Results showed that the majority of respondents would discuss their holiday plans. This could again be linked back to findings from Munar (2012) which found that tourists engage in discussions about their holiday plans as they are buying an unfamiliar intangible experience. Tourists feel that they must reduce the risk associated with such a purchase by communicating with tourists who have previously experienced the region.

The final and most fundamental element of the survey identified how tourists' purchase behaviour was affected by the information they found on social media sites about

holidaying in Ireland. A large amount of tourists who participated in the survey were affected by information they found. Tourists indicated that they used the information they acquired to guide their holiday plans such as where and when to go, where to stay and what activities to participate in. Information and reviews shared through social media channels guided their purchase decision. If reviews on a particular place were negative, the tourist would be persuaded not to visit. Alternatively, if the reviews were positive, the information would have the opposite affect and tourists would build it into their holiday itinerary. The majority of the tourists indicated that they would trust information they received from family and friends over information obtained through social media sites. Again, this can be related back to Choi and Han (2013) who found that tourists mainly use social media for guidance when it comes to planning a holiday while information obtained from family and friends is perceived as more reliable. Finally, a large proportion of tourists who participated indicated that they would upload and share pictures, videos and reviews on their holiday in Ireland. This finding could again be linked to a similar study by Ahey et al., (2013) which identified that tourists will often review and share their experiences of a region in order to guide another's holiday planning.

It is clear that social media are a powerful communication tool. Results have shown that tourists are increasingly turning to the platform to become familiar with a holiday destination (Jenkins, 2010; Fotis et al., 2012). Social media technologies have changed the way a tourist researches their trip (Yoo & Gretzel, 2011). This can be clearly seen in the survey results which showed that tourists are progressively referring to social media review sites and engaging in conversations with other tourists regarding their holiday plans.

Conclusions

The evolution of marketing has been particularly important to the tourism industry (Fotis et al, 2012; Laroche et al, 2012b). The internet has changed the way information is disseminated. Travellers are more aware of their needs and as a result carrying out extensive searches through social media sites about destinations and the attractions and amenities within them (Wu et al, 2012). Tourists actively seek to engage in conversations through social media sites with travellers who have previously visited a region (Munar, 2012).

This paper is useful in that it gives tourism businesses an insight into the general tourist researching their holiday in Ireland and how they use social media to plan their trip. Results from the survey also highlighted that the majority of tourists were affected by information obtained on social media sites regarding their holiday in Ireland. The findings showed that social media are an important information source. Social media have revolutionised the way businesses communicate and market themselves to consumers (Laroche et al, 2012a). Social media have changed the way tourists search for information regarding a destination and the amenities and attractions within it (Casaló et al, 2010). Tourists are now interactive and seek to engage with other tourists regarding their holiday plans (Munar and Jacobsen, 2014). Therefore, it is imperative for tourism businesses to be active on review sites such as TripAdvisor but also to monitor their digital shadow. This will ensure that businesses can keep up to date with what tourists are sharing about their business online and actively build their reputation.

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