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## **ATTRACTING THE NORTH AMERICAN HOLIDAYMAKER TO IRELAND USING SOCIAL MEDIA CHANNELS: AN IRISH MARKETING STRATEGY**

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# **Attracting the North American Holidaymaker to Ireland Using Social Media Channels: an Irish marketing strategy**

## **Introduction**

Tourism Ireland was created in 1998 under the auspices of the Good Friday agreement (TI 2018). The objective was to promote the island of Ireland (both north and south) as a destination for holidaymakers. As Wright (2008) documents this would change the Irish approach to destination marketing dramatically. Barcoe and Barcoe (2017) highlight that the DMO uses both traditional and digital market strategies when promoting Ireland as a destination for US and Canadian tourists. The content procurement is often related to the cultural link that exists between Ireland and North America. This paper illustrates the innovative approach that has been used by Tourism Ireland in their approach for US and Canadian market using social media platforms. This study will provide insights into the activities of the DMO that has developed Ireland as a brand, establishing a foothold in the North American market that is far beyond that achieved by most small countries. In tourism, brand engagement has become a requirement and online content has become king (Chaffey 2017). Mae-Kim (2016) asserts that social media permits the marketer to connect with the consumer through agile strategies intensifying relationship marketing (CRM) using digital channels. Tourism Ireland engages the North American holidaymaker using these channels by diversifying the messages broadcasted across a range of social media (2018). This is type of strategy has been successful for the Irish DMO since 2013 (TI 2018). Analysis of the strategy used by Tourism Ireland reveals that it is a combination of previously suggested methods of best practices of destination marketing as advocated by Pike and Page (2014), Harrigan, Evers, Daly and Myles (2017) and Felix and Rauschnabel (2016). This paper highlights that the core approach of Tourism Ireland is firmly rooted in the principles of traditional CRM. The DMO in this case exhibits an understanding of traditional marketing strategies that are enhanced using social media as an intermediary when creating both brand awareness and consumer engagement online. Chaffey (2017) suggests that when creating a digital strategy there must be a service differentiation. Regarding the target market under investigation here, it was found that the strategy was based on the unique cultural link between Ireland and North America. Fotis (2015) analysed the decision making process of the social media user in relation to destination marketing and found that there is a requirement for the DMO to affect the target audience in four trip phases: the dreaming; the pre-trip; the during trip; and the post trip phase. In relation to Ireland as a destination, the dreaming phase is driven by the desire of the North American that longs to connect with their Irish origins.

The goal of this research is to explore the activities of the DMO when creating a strategy for a demographic that are predisposed to visit the destination through a cultural link. The findings are based on empirical data obtained through three different sources and used to analyse both the impact and role of social media when marketing Ireland as a brand to North Americans. While other authors like Wright (2008) and O' Sullivan (1997) highlighted the opportunity to exploit this cultural link in an emotional context, this study outlines the use of digital channels and examines how they can be adapted for CRM purposes. The paper provides insights into the innovative approach of the Irish DMO when creating new and emergent strategies that use

content adapted through alliances with TV shows like *Game of Thrones* and movies such as *Star Wars*. Based on survey findings, the study also reveals the attitudes of the North American holidaymaker to Ireland in three trip phases (pre, during, and post), and how content specific messaging across social media affects each demographic. The semi-structured interviews with those responsible for the creation of these strategies were coded and analysed to identify relevant variables that can be used to establish correlations with further analysis of quantitative data. This will provide insights into the reasons why Tourism Ireland have been so successful in their aim of obtaining a significant market share in North America using social media as a digital marketing channel. A Netnographic analysis using Nvivo 11+ revealed the role social media plays in engaging the North American holidaymaker and the geographical reach that is achieved when using various media to launch ancillary campaigns. The final section of the paper will analyse the importance of cultural links as an antecedent to customer engagement and the individualisation of content that attracts the culturally curious North American to Ireland using social media channels.

## Literature Review

At the beginning of the research it was important to establish the attraction of Ireland as a destination to North America. In order to achieve this objective, a review of other literary contributions was necessary. The secondary research begins with the cultural links between the two civilisations and progresses toward the use of social media as a digital marketing channel as part of a CRM strategy. Hout and Goldstein (1994) document the history of emigration between Ireland and North America beginning in the 1600s and culminating in the 1980s North American census that revealed the depth of Irish ancestry amongst North American residents. O’ Sullivan (1997) explores the link between the two civilisations and how the Irish emigrant has affected the industrial development of North America. Wright (2008) culminates her research in this field by presenting a case for the exploitation of the cultural link through CRM using an emotional context in the decade preceding social media. Barcoe and Barcoe (2017) highlight the development of the cultural link as it pertains to the use of social media as a marketing channel when attracting the North American Holidaymaker (NAH) to Ireland:

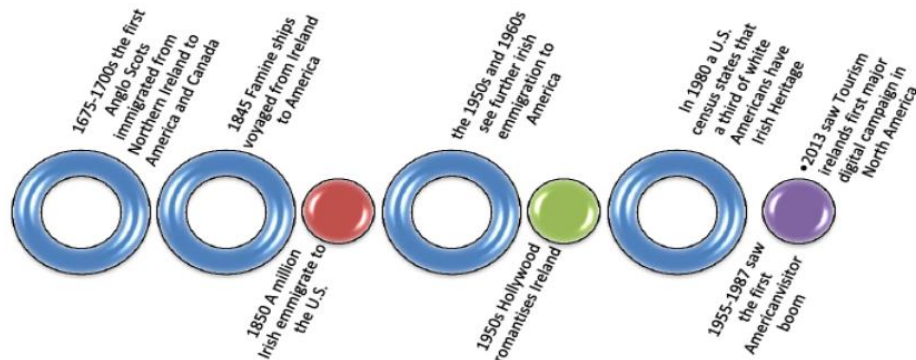


Figure 1: A developmental timeline highlighting the cultural link between Ireland and North (Barcoe and Barcoe 2017)

Figure 1 is a timeline from Barcoe and Barcoe (2017); this chronicles the development of the relationship between Ireland and North America that leads to the use of social media as a CRM channel through digital marketing. Tourism Ireland was established in 1998 and their remit is to promote the island of Ireland internationally including North America (TI 2018). Barcoe and Whelan (2018) highlight the effectiveness of Tourism Ireland and their digital strategies when capitalising on the cultural link using social media channels to engage the NAH. Fauver (2017) believes that a DMO must invest in digital marketing as part of a destination marketing campaign to remain relevant now and in the future. Chaffey [4] constantly analyses the approach to digital strategies for the past decade linking social media with marketing sustainability. Pike and Page (2014) posit that product identity and development are cornerstones of destination marketing.

While the literature highlights the role of social media in relation to CRM and destination marketing, the majority of the academics adapt traditional marketing models to explain the influence that social media has on consumer engagement. Minazzi (2015) uses Buckner's (1963) rumour transfer theory to establish the contribution that social media has made to word of mouth (eWOM) in relation to brand awareness, Van Looy (2016) uses the CAP model to analyse DMO activity through digital marketing channels. Chaffey (2017) however, develops the traditional marketing funnel AIDA to describe the effectiveness of social media when discussing CRM and consumer engagement:



Figure 3: Chaffey's (2017) depiction of the AIDA marketing funnel

Figure 3 is an example of a traditional marketing funnel that Chaffey (2017) believes is still applicable when monitoring social media activities of marketers using CRM. Barcoe and Whelan (2018) highlight how Tourism Ireland use this model as part of their digital strategy to attract engagement of the NAH using social media platforms such as Twitter. Fotis (2015) posits that the phases of the decision making process are the most important stage of this funnel as the decision progresses the engagement (interest) to the action of destination purchase. Tourism Ireland believe that using social media to influence the decision making process is the core ethos of attracting the North American holidaymaker to visit Ireland as part of their digital marketing campaign.

## **Methodology**

This study extends the work of Wright (2008) and Barcoe and Barcoe (2017) by using both quantitative and qualitative methods of research to investigate the approach of the Irish DMO, Tourism Ireland Choe, Fessenmaier and Vogt (2017). The data were obtained through semi-structured interviews with 20 tourism professionals responsible for the implementation of destination marketing strategies and in particular, content procurement for social media (Fotis 2015). Nvivo 11+ was used to code the interviews and develop the themes that occurred during the qualitative process. Surveys of 250 North Americans were used to achieve correlation between the perceptions of the DMO and the North American Holidaymaker (Creevey 2015) The surveys were separated over three trip phases in June 2017, the first was the during trip phase where the NAH was surveyed while on holiday in Ireland, these results were analysed using SPSS. Secondly, Survey monkey was used to survey those in the pre and post trip phases about their Irish experience (Barcoe and Barcoe 2017)

The final part of the analysis was conducted using the Nvivo 11+ (Ncapture) to monitor the activities of the social media after the content had been broadcast using Twitter and Facebook (Ge and Gretzel 2017) This would provide insights into the reach of social media with regard to geographical engagement across North America. This method is in accordance with Chaffey's [4] RACE model that begins with using the reach of social media to both create consumer awareness and engagement.

There were three areas of interest. First was the emotional connection that exists between Ireland and North America and how CRM can be used to exploit this as part of a destination marketing campaign and this was achieved by surveying the North American Holidaymaker in three separate trip phases to ascertain how these emotional broadcasts across social media affect their decision making process in relation to Ireland as a brand. The respondents totalled 250 and these were divided into three segments of pre, during and post trip to monitor the effect of social media in three trip phases and how this relates to CRM in destination marketing (Fauver 2017). The idea was to analyse the effects of CRM using social media and how this translates to organic influencers that may become brand advocates for Ireland through eWOM. The other contributing factor to this was the empirical evidence that was obtained through the semi-structured interviews that provided further insight of how content is procured and used to engage the North American demographic using social media.

**Table 1**

<b>Regions of Survey participants</b>	
New England	South Atlantic
Pacific	Middle Atlantic
Mountain	West North Central
West South Central	East North Central
Middle South Central	

**Table 2**

<b>Age profile of Survey participants</b>	
18-25	12.24 %
25-40	34.69%
40-65	40.92%
65 plus	12.24%

Tables 1 and 2 outline both the locality and age demographic of the survey participants across the three trip phases. In terms of location there was even share of participants across North American, the majority of those surveyed were US nationals. The interesting point of note about the during trip phase is that there was a younger age demographic that participated than the other trip phases with 62% of the sample attributed to the 18-25 sector or millennials. 72% of the respondents earned over 60,000 per household. However, as Tourism Ireland confirm the average age of the NAH that visits Ireland is between the ages of 40-65 at 40.92%. This demographic was found to have the most disposable of all age brackets:

**Table 3**

<b>List of Interviewees by profession</b>	
Chefs	Genealogists
Hotel Mangers	Government Officials
Social Media Managers	Restaurant Owners
DMO CEO	Professional Researchers
Airline Executives	PR Executives
Tour Operators	

Table 3 outlines the list of professions of the interviewees that contributed to this study and offered their knowledge of the uses of social media when engaging a North American Holidaymaker in all three trip phases (Fotis, Buhalis et al 2012). While the majority of this sample was larger organisations operating in the hospitality sector in Ireland each contributor used social media in different ways while capitalising upon the strategy implemented by the DMO.

## **Results**

The objective of this study was to achieve 250 responses from a variation of North American age demographics. Table 2 highlights the variability of age amongst those surveyed. The average income was 60,000 plus and the reason of travel was split between heritage and culturally curiosity. The interesting statistic in this case is the equal divide of 44 % between the culturally curious and those with ancestral origins in Ireland. The 12% who were influenced by social media imagery were between the ages of 18-45, however 63% of the 12% were millennials. When asked how they first became aware of Ireland the response of family heritage totalled 58.6% TV and Movies 18.4% and other channels like tour operators was 42.9%. Tourism Ireland campaigns scored 2% but the DMO would have influence in both the TV and Movie sector and the Tour Operator sector in relation to content produced as explained by those who were interviewed for this study. 38% of North Americans polled booked their holiday online and those who booked online used a PC and not a mobile phone to do so, this age group were predominantly over 40. However, the majority of North Americans (46%) booked their holiday in Ireland through a tour operator. 6% of those who used a tour operator used an online facility. An additional 6% booked directly with a hotel through their website. The interviewees confirmed that most North Americans (61%) will book a hotel when they arrive in Ireland in the during trip phase. 83.7% admitted to using social media while they were in Ireland to share their holiday with their family and friends who remained at home. The most popular social media platform of use in the pre- trip phase is Facebook (53%) and this is holds for those who engage with the brand in the post trip phase (51%). The platform of choice in the during trip phase is Instagram:

The most popular social media channel amongst NAHs visiting Ireland in 2017 was Instagram. Another interesting statistic in this case was the 81% that engaged with social media through their handheld devices as opposed to those to the 38% who booked their holiday using their PC. This example represents the responses across all age categories and of those who used Snapchat (11%) all were under the age of 25. The interesting percentage to be analysed in this finding is the 87% of the pre- trip respondents who thought they would use Facebook while they were on holiday in Ireland. The final and most relevant statistics from the point of view of this study is the 68% who used social media when they were in Ireland, the 93% who used social media in the pre- trip phase and the 81% that shared their holiday experience in the post- trip phase., This in relation to CRM and destination marketing is a large audience for the DMO to target

#### 4.1 Procuring the resonating content to target the North American Holidaymaker

Having analysed the potential audience base that tourism Ireland have available to target in each trip phase, the focus of the study became the analysis of content procurement in relation to CRM in this sector. This involved three steps, 1. Analyse how content is procured 2. Explore the DMO’s activities in relation to recommended best practices and 3. Analyse the reach of social media when designing a destination marketing strategies. When analysing content procurement and user generated content (UGC) to create brand advocates the interviewees spoke about the importance of TV and Movies that feature Ireland and the sweeping landscapes and how the importance of this cannot be under-estimated. This being the case, the DMOs activities in this area were studied using Nvivo 11+ to analyse the importance of this type of UGC when promoting Ireland to North America. This began with aligning the Game of Doors campaign with social media strategy suggested by Chaffey (2017) to understand the processes of content procurement on the part of the DMO:

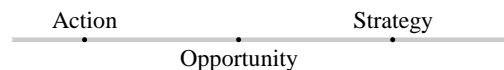


Figure 6: Chaffey’s (2017) three part strategy to social media content procurement

Figure 6 is Chaffey’s (2017) model that best describes the *Game of Thrones* campaign created by the Irish DMO in 2016. Due to adverse weather conditions trees fell on the set of *Game of Thrones*. Tourism Ireland saw this opportunity to assist the show’s producers in returning to filming. The strategy then became about using the occurrence to connect with the North American audience and engage with the viewer through social media. The action was the construction of 10 doors containing Celtic imagery that were unveiled during season 6 of the show premiering on US television. The audience engagement was such that a new attract was organically created by North American visitors called the Game of Doors.



## **Conclusion and Discussion**

This research contributes to tourism research, first, by extending the work of Wright (2008) in relation to CRM using a cultural link through social media channels. This study highlights how social media has enhanced the engagement of the North American Holidaymaker with Ireland as a brand. The original researchers in this area have focused on the emotional context of CRM in relation to destination marketing, this research contributes to this area by highlighting the use of culture as an antecedent to online customer engagement, this had yet to be a factor when Dowling [24], Wright and Linehan (2014), O'Sullivan (1997) and Davis and Smith (1994) explored the cultural link between Ireland and North America. While this area of research is vast, the use of social media to achieve engagement through digital marketing strategies is not. Nisar and Whitehead (2016) highlight the link between customer loyalty and engagement using social media content. Tourism Ireland in this study implements these strategies and achieves a market share in North America that grows exponentially. This research highlights the traditional CRM approach that is taken by the DMO in relation to their digital marketing strategy and how this is responsible for the growth of market share. The study uses three different methodologies that have been used before when analysing social media activity of both eWOM and UGC, however, to fully assess the impact of social media in relation to the North American holidaymaker and their relationship with Ireland, multiple methods of research are required. This type of approach to destination marketing may become more common in the future as technologies advance. The survey results of this paper confirm that the cultural link between Ireland and North America still exists. This correlated with the in-depth interviews and Netnographic audits using the Nvivo 11+ software reveals the relevant activities of the DMO through social media channels that achieves the highest levels of consumer engagement.

Another important finding of this investigation is the way in which content is procured by the DMO to engage this audience. This highlights the core ethos of CRM when the DMO uses North American pop culture (TV and Movies) to engage the NAH in all trip phases (TI 2018). Bolan and Davidson (2008), Bolan, O' Connor, Crossan (2011) explore how film induced tourism can assist Ireland to develop their destination marketing strategy and this is now achieved by using social media channels as the intermediary. The individualisation of this process engages the North American and enhances their desire to visit Ireland through the engagement achieved by the DMO when implementing the CRM strategy using social media as a digital marketing channel.

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