

Social Media: An innovative marketing tool in the Irish tourism industry?

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Introduction

Xiang and Gretzel (2010) argue a formal definition for social media does not exist, offering instead a general explanation that social media is an internet application which facilitates users to create and share new content through social media sites. Ahey, Leung, Au and Law (2012) note that social media is in fact an internet application which allows users upload and share User Generated Content (UGC)¹ and facilitates social exchanges.

The tourism industry in particular, has been greatly affected by the development of social media technologies (Xiang and Gretzel, 2010; Ahey et al, 2012; Ahey, Au and Law 2013). The progression of the internet which has resulted in the development of social media platforms has changed the way information is shared (Lai, 2010). Recently many authors have acknowledged that social media has become a significant promotional instrument for the tourism industry (Park and Oh, 2012; Ahey et al 2012; Ahey et al, 2013; Cowhey, O'Leary and O'Connor 2013). Social media marketing nowadays is seen as a survival tool; businesses can easily reach, connect and persuade tourists to visit a destination through a number of social media outlets (Jenkins, 2010; Cowhey et al 2013). Xiang and Gretzel (2010) highlight how these new social media technologies are playing an important role in the tourism industry; travellers are becoming increasingly aware of their needs and now search for unbiased information about a tourism destination. Ahey et al (2012) discuss how social media sites are facilitating tourists search for information and need to interact with other tourists regarding a destination and its amenities and attractions. The past decade has seen a massive growth in the usage and popularity of social media, therefore businesses especially in the tourism industry have dramatically changed the way they market themselves to potential travellers (Ahey et al, 2012). Tourists are now interactive and able to engage openly with suppliers thus enabling them to spread information via social networking sites and facilitating social media marketing (Michaelidou, Siamagka and Christodoulides, 2011; Cowhey et al 2013).

Many tourism authorities are starting to recognise the significance social media has as a promotional tool. Tourism Ireland prides itself on its level of social media activity and its ability to tap into different social media platforms worldwide such as Sina Weibo (Tourism Ireland, 2012a). What remains unclear however, is the role social media is playing as an innovative marketing tool within the Irish tourism industry (Tourism Ireland, 2012b). This conceptual paper will investigate how social media is currently being used as marketing tool in the Irish tourism industry in comparison to its international counterparts. Content uploaded online and through a range of different

¹ User Generated Content (UGC) is the means by which customers express themselves and converse with each other online (Smith et al, 2012).

social media platforms by both Irish and international tourism stakeholders such as Tourism Ireland, Fáilte Ireland, Visit Britain and Tourism Australia among others, will be examined and compared.

This paper aims to identify how social media is being used as an innovative marketing tool within the Irish tourism industry compared to international tourism authorities. Investigating how international tourism stakeholders' are using social media marketing has the potential to guide Irish tourism businesses to use social media marketing in a more effective and efficient manner in order to reach and engage with key international markets.

Irish tourism marketing authorities

Social media is a powerful advertising tool particularly in the tourism industry (Xiang and Gretzel 2010; Ahey et al 2012; Ahey et al 2013; Cowhey et al, 2013). Tourism Ireland (2013a) recognise the power that social media has as a promotional tool within the Irish tourism industry. The 2010 'Visitor Attitude Survey' conducted on behalf of Fáilte Ireland found that thirty seven percent of international tourists to Ireland used UGC found on sites such as TripAdvisor when researching their trip, while a further forty two percent of international tourists to Ireland used UGC from internet sources to plan their holidays in Ireland (Tourism Ireland, 2011). Tourism Ireland's 2013 marketing strategy therefore emphasises how the internet and social media sites are important information sources for tourists when planning a trip (Tourism Ireland, 2013a). Tourism Ireland's (2013a) marketing plan aims to take advantage of the growing importance of social media sites in order to interact and engage with potential tourists making Ireland more appealing as a tourism destination.

Tourism Ireland's previous marketing strategy, 'Competing to win, 2012' implemented a plan to enhance communication with potential visitors to Ireland through harnessing the power of social media more effectively (Tourism Ireland, 2012b). Currently Tourism Ireland promotes Ireland across a number of social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and Sina Weibo among others (**See Figure 1**) (Tourism Ireland, 2012b, c). Tourism Ireland (2013) to date have been successfully using social media marketing, which has not gone unnoticed, the tourism authority scooped the 'Best Use of Social Media' award at the prestigious Travel Marketing Awards in 2012.

Figure 1 Tourism Ireland Social Media Platforms



Source: Adapted from Tourism Ireland (2012a, c)

Tourism Ireland prides itself on the level of social media activity conducted tapping into different social media platforms worldwide (**See Table 1**) (Tourism Ireland, 2013; Tourism Ireland, 2012a, c). The Irish tourism authority runs eighteen different Facebook pages with 886,734 fans with the potential reach of an astonishing 180 million tourists, meaning that Tourism Ireland is the third biggest national tourist board on Facebook (Tourism Ireland, 2012a). As can be clearly seen in **Table 1** Tourism Ireland also has eight different international Twitter pages with 54,147 followers, making the tourism authority the second largest tourism board in the world on Twitter (Tourism Ireland, 2012a). Tourism Ireland also run number of multi-lingual blogs, meaning potential tourists from all over the world have a chance to read, understand and engage with online stories about different activities available in Ireland (Tourism Ireland, 2012c). Tourism Ireland also promotes Ireland as a tourism destination on four different YouTube channels, Tourism Ireland, Discover Ireland, Fáilte Ireland and ITIC (Tourism Ireland, 2012a).

Table 1 Tourism Ireland Social Networking Activity

Social Networking Site	Number of International Pages	Number of Followers
Facebook	18	886,734
Twitter	8	54,147
YouTube Channels	4	
Tencent Weibo, Sina Weibo and Kaixin 001	3	160,000

Source: Adapted from Tourism Ireland (2012c)

Word of mouth is seen as an important information source particularly in the tourism industry (Xiang and Gretzel, 2010; Lanz et al, 2010; Choi and Han, 2012; Ahey et al 2012; Cowhey et al, 2013). Tourists are progressively turning to social media outlets such as TripAdvisor and Lonely Planet searching for UGC on destinations they wish to visit, information acquired on these outlets is having a intense effect on tourists' purchase behaviours (Xiang and Gretzel, 2010; Park and Oh, 2012; Ahey et al 2012; Fáilte Ireland 2012b; Cowhey et al, 2013). Social media has increased the power of word of mouth, with tourists searching online for real life first hand experiences of a destination (Ahey et al 2012; Fáilte Ireland, 2012b; Cowhey et al, 2013). Tourism Ireland have recognised this as within the 2012 marketing strategy 'Competing to Win' the tourism authority laid out 'integrated interactive and engaging communication' which exploited the power of word of mouth through increasing online presence on social networking sites (Tourism Ireland, 2012b). Marketing through social media outlets and harnessing the power of word of mouth therefore plays a central element in Tourism Ireland's latest marketing strategy (See Table 2) (Tourism Ireland, 2013a). Tourism Ireland's (2013a) marketing strategy aims to reach their key target markets (Great Britain, North America, Europe and Australia) through utilising the power of word of mouth by increasing their engagement and harnessing customer satisfaction on social media sites (See Table 2).

Table 2 Social Media Marketing 2013

Market	Social Media Strategy
Great Britain	Integrate social media into customer's activity; develop a word of mouth strategy through social media.
North America	Carefully select online and offline mix. Generate positive word of mouth from high customer satisfaction levels. Launch 'Make Ireland Jump Out' strategy for growth 2013-2015.
Europe	Build social media activities, increase engagement and generation of word of mouth through social media.
Australia and developing markets	Use online and social media sites as key channels to communicate and engage potential visitors.

Source: Adapted from Tourism Ireland (2013a)

Although Fáilte Ireland market themselves and Ireland as a 'staycation'² destination across a number of different social media outlets such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube among others, they also encourage, train and support tourism businesses to actively use social media in their marketing strategies (Fáilte Ireland 2012a, b). Fáilte Ireland (2012a, b) highlight the importance for tourism businesses to incorporate social media into their marketing strategies, arguing that the use of social media promotions is crucial in reaching and engaging with key target markets and therefore an integral element in the marketing strategy. In a bid to accelerate social media marketing in Ireland, Fáilte Ireland (2012a) teamed up with 'Pretty Little Liar' actor Shay Mitchell and set up an adventure tourism blog. The star travelled around Ireland blogging through Fáilte Ireland social media platforms about different activities (Fáilte Ireland, 2012a; Tourism Matters, 2012). Fáilte Ireland's (2012a) main aim was to show smaller

² A staycation is a tourist holidaying within their own country (Fáilte Ireland, 2013).

tourism businesses within Ireland how powerful social media is as a marketing tool, this was achieved by showing the businesses the results of the blog (See **Figure 2**) with an incredible 49,431 readers. Fáilte Ireland (2012b) emphasise how important social media marketing is for smaller tourism business, the authority offers support in building social media marketing campaigns through training events and workshops.

Figure 2 Fáilte Ireland Pilot Project Results

<p>Twitter: 25.8 million Twitter impressions 487,462 Twitter followers 53 Tweets sent by Shay</p>
<p>Facebook: 1.4 million effective reach impressions 1 million effective reach from Pretty Little Liar posts 51,824 Facebook likes around Irish content 7,500 effective reach from Just Jared³</p>
<p>www.ShayMitchell.com 49,431 total unique readers of Shay’s travel blog</p>

Source: Fáilte Ireland (2012a)

Tourism Ireland and Fáilte Ireland are extremely active in their use of social media marketing (Tourism Ireland 2012a,c; Fáilte Ireland 2012b,c). The tourism authorities are aware of the benefits of using social media such as minimal cost and potential global reach (Fáilte Ireland, 2012b). Tourism Ireland’s main concern is reaching and engaging with potential customers via social networking platforms, whereas Fáilte Ireland aims to encourage and train smaller tourism businesses to incorporate social media into their marketing strategies.

International tourism marketing authorities

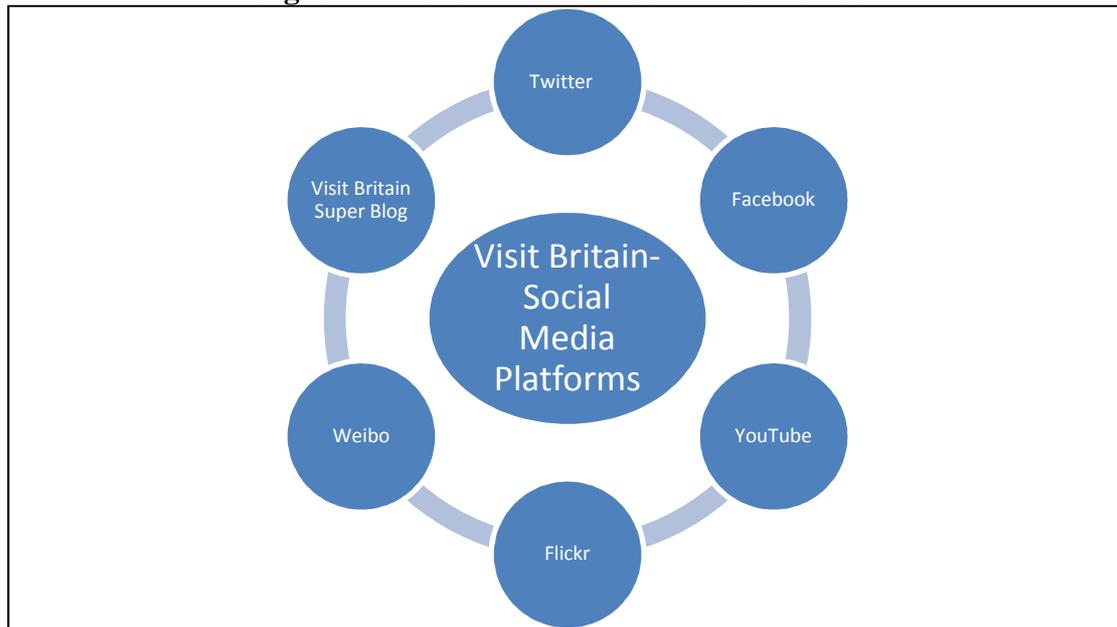
In order to examine how the Irish tourism authorities are effectively using social media platforms for marketing purposes a number of international tourism authorities were selected and their social media marketing efforts examined and compared to the Irish tourism authorities.

Visit Britain

Visit Britain is the British tourism authority responsible for marketing Britain worldwide (Visit Britain, 2013). Visit Britain claims to be one of the leading tourist boards in terms of social media presence with over one million Facebook and Weibo fans, the tourism authority highlights that social media is a vital component in their marketing strategy; they actively engage with potential tourists across a number of social media platforms (See **Figure 3**) (Visit Britain, 2013). In 2012 Visit Britain reached 1.4 billion people through social media activities and the tourism authority reported a sixty seven percent rise in engagement with potential visitors on social media sites; they credit this rise to the Olympic Games (Visit Britain, 2013).

³ Just Jared is an online news and celebrity gossip blog (JustJared.com, 2013).

Figure 3 Visit Britain Social Media Platforms



Source: Adapted from Visit Britain (2012a)

Visit Britain (2012a) is currently in year three of a four year marketing strategy, with plans in place to use a range of marketing approaches such as advertising and digital social media marketing. The focus of the marketing strategy for 2013 is ‘effective tactical marketing’ with the central theme of investing marketing efforts in the regions that offer the best prospects such as USA, Europe and Asia Pacific among others. One of the main aims in the third year of the strategy is to increase the number of social media followers and effectively engage with them in order to build social media capacities to launch an effective post-games programme and attract visitors to Britain after the focal points of last year, the Queens Diamond Jubilee and the Olympics (Visit Britain, 2013; Visit Britain, 2012a).

Visit Britain acknowledges the potential reach social media platforms possess, to further strengthen this they partnered with one of the world’s most visited homepages, Yahoo. The tourism authority made this move to ensure that the content available on their social media platforms was viewed at least five million times through Yahoo (Visit Britain, 2013). Visit Britain (2013) effectively utilises social media as a marketing tool, the authority launched an app in 2010 ‘Top 50 places UK’ which allowed users to research tourist attractions in Britain, find out what was near them and ‘check in’ at attractions to further promote tourism.

The tourism authority also claims to be one of the most influential tourist boards on Twitter. Visit Britain stress the vital role that social media plays as a marketing tool (Visit Britain, 2013). Visit Britain re-tweet smaller tourism businesses’ tweets to allow them to reach their 55,000 followers with promotional messages (Visit Britain, 2013). Like Fáilte Ireland the British tourism authority recognise that a number of tourism businesses are struggling to build their online presence and therefore visit Britain offer small British tourism businesses training and support to set up and utilise social media as part of their marketing strategy (Visit Britain, 2012a). Within Visit Britain lie a

number of regional tourism authorities concerned with promoting their region as a tourism destination (Visit England, Visit Scotland, Visit Wales, visit Northern Ireland) (Visit Britain, 2013).

Visit England

Visit England is a subsidiary of Visit Britain; it is the tourism authority responsible for the marketing of England as an attractive tourism destination (Visit England, 2013). Currently Visit England is in year three of a five year marketing strategy 'Visit England Marketing Plan 2011-15' (Visit England, 2011). Like Tourism Ireland and Visit Britain, Visit England also acknowledges the importance of using social media as a marketing tool; the tourism authority runs campaigns across a number of different social media platforms such as Blogger, Facebook and Twitter among others (**See Figure 4**). Visit England highlights how social media is a cost effective marketing strategy, the only cost in running their campaigns through social media is the time that employees invest in setting it up (Visit England, 2011). The tourism authority argues that different social media platforms play a key role in engaging and listening to audience members. Using different social media platforms such as Facebook as listening tools helps Visit England understand the tourists and the tourism authority will then use these findings to develop marketing opportunities and create a deeper relationship with the potential customer (Visit England, 2011).

Visit Scotland

Visit Scotland is another subsidiary of Visit England and is the national tourism authority for Scotland, its main aim is to promote Scotland as an attractive tourism destination globally and increase the tourism economy (Visit Scotland, 2013). Currently Visit Scotland is in the third year of a four year marketing strategy, this year the tourism authority plan to promote Scotland's natural assets through a range of promotional techniques (Visit Scotland, 2013). Like the previously discussed tourism authorities, Visit Scotland are aware that travel and planning is one of the most popular uses of the internet, the tourism authority highlight how over half their target market is now online (Visit Scotland, 2013). Like many social media and tourism researchers, Visit Scotland note in their marketing strategy, that nowadays people are leading busy lives, (Smith et al 2012; Laroche et al 2012; Ahey et al 2013; Visit Scotland, 2013), the tourism authority highlight how the use of social media in marketing means the consumers can keep control and easily compare alternatives. Therefore in the third year of the marketing strategy, Visit Scotland aims to move away from traditional print media marketing tools and focus on online activities (Visit Scotland, 2013). Visit Scotland (2013) is currently active across a number of social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Blogger among others (**See Figure 4**). Visit Scotland is presently using social media marketing to reach tourists planning holidays. Visit Scotland (2013) note that social media is seen as a means of research and sharing travel experiences among potential visitors and therefore an essential element of their marketing campaign. The tourism authority will continue to invest in the growing use of social media in reaching key international markets such as Germany, France and Spain.

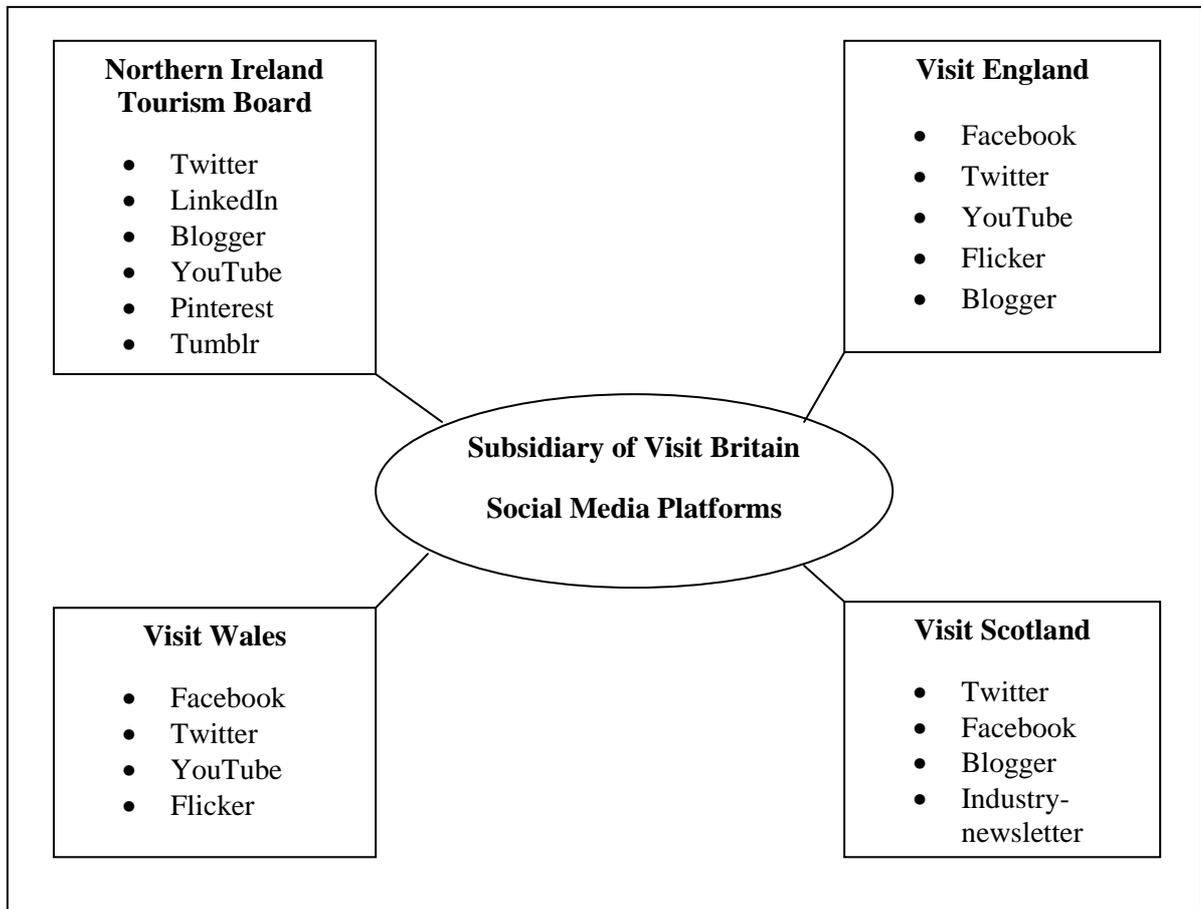
Visit Wales

Visit Wales is another subsidiary of Visit Britain, the tourism authority is responsible for the marketing of Wales as an attractive tourism destination globally (Visit Wales, 2013). Visit Wales is currently in the final year of a four year strategic marketing plan (Visit Wales Strategic Marketing Plan 2010-2013) (Visit Wales, 2013; Visit Wales, 2010). The focal point of the marketing plan is to attract new visitors to the region through optimising their search engine ranking results. Visit Wales are focusing on building their social media presence and increasing marketing efforts through different social media outlets in order to achieve this (Visit Wales, 2010). The tourism authority is currently promoting themselves through a variety of social media outlets such as Facebook, Twitter and Blog RSS (**See Figure 4**) (Visit Wales, 2013).

Visit Northern Ireland

Northern Ireland tourism board (NITB) is responsible for marketing the north of Ireland as an attractive short break destination to both the republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland's domestic market (Northern Ireland Tourism Board, 2013). The tourism authority recognises the importance of digital and social media marketing as an important information source, (Northern Ireland Tourism Board, 2012a). Like many tourism and social media authors) the tourism authority note that tourists search social media sites such as TripAdvisor before they travel (Xiang and Gretzel, 2010; Ahey et al, 2012; Ahey et al 2013; Northern Ireland Tourism Board, 2013); findings from their 2011 attitudes survey show an astonishing twenty five percent of tourists who holidayed in Northern Ireland consulted TripAdvisor for information on the region (Northern Ireland Tourism Board, 2012b). The tourism authority note how tourists then engage with social media sites such as Twitter and LiveJournal during travel and after travel they turn to social media sites Flickr and YouTube in order content such as pictures and videos about their experiences (Northern Ireland tourism Board, 2012a). Therefore actively engaging in social media marketing is an essential element in their marketing strategy. Currently Northern Ireland Tourism Board is active across a number of different social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and MySpace among others (**See Figure 4**) (Northern Ireland Tourism Board, 2013). The tourism authority is presently in the third year of a ten year tourism strategy which aims to grow the number of visitors to the region through a range of traditional and digital marketing efforts (Northern Ireland Tourism Board, 2012a). Through the use of social media platforms such as YouTube, the tourism authority aims to attract more traffic to the website and online resources (Northern Ireland tourism Board, 2012a). NITB are therefore investing heavily in social media content development in order to catch up with other destinations using social media marketing to attract potential tourists to the region (Northern Ireland tourism Board, 2012a).

Figure 4 Subsidiary of Visit Britain Social Media Platforms



Source: Adapted from Visit England, 2013; Visit Scotland, 2013; Visit Wales, 2013; Northern Ireland Tourism Board 2013

As shown in **Figure 4** Visit England, Visit Wales, Visit Scotland and The NITB are actively engaging in social media to market the United Kingdom as an attractive tourism destination.

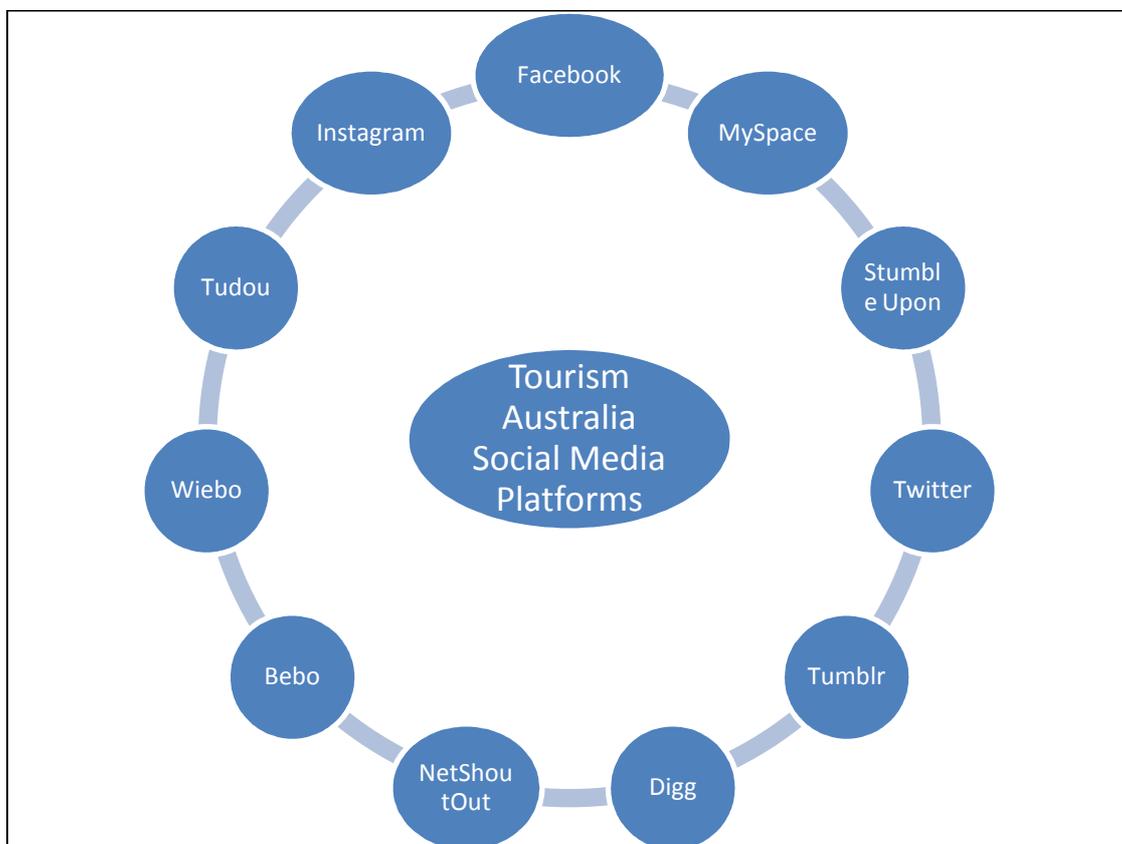
Tourism Australia

Tourism Australia is the agency responsible for the marketing of Australia as an attractive tourism destination worldwide and to the domestic market (Tourism Australia, 2013). In May 2010 Tourism Australia launched a global marketing campaign 'There is nothing like Australia' which will run in a number of different phases until 2020 (Tourism Australia, 2012a). Like the previously discussed tourism authorities Tourism Australia is aware of the crucial role that social media is playing as a marketing tool, supporting previously discussed research, the tourism authority highlight how the internet and UGC have become important information sources for travellers planning a trip (Xiang and Gretzel, 2010; Ahey et al 2012; Tourism Australia, 2012a). Therefore social media is an integral element of Tourism Australia's marketing strategy (Tourism Australia, 2012a).

The first phase of the marketing strategy which was launched in 2010 placed a huge emphasis on building social media channels and actively using them to engage with potential visitors (Tourism Australia, 2012b). Social media played an important role throughout the first phase of the marketing campaign; Australian citizens were invited to share their pictures, videos, experiences and stories on a number of social media platforms (Tourism Australia, 2012, b). To date Tourism Australia is active across a number of different social media platforms such as MySpace, Twitter and Facebook among others (See **Figure 5**) (Tourism Australia, 2013).

The second phase of the strategy kicked off in June 2012, like the first phase a huge emphasis was again put on building social media platforms and utilising them effectively as marketing tools (Tourism Australia, 2012a). Like other tourism authorities discussed in this paper Tourism Australia (2012b) note how social media has changed the power of word of mouth. Tourism Australia note how social media has facilitated instant information exchange on a destination, potential tourists can actively engage with other travellers worldwide (Xiang and Gretzel 2010; Park and Oh 2012; Ahey et al 2012; Tourism Australia, 2012b). Therefore the second phase of the ten year marketing plan aims to grow Tourism Australia's presence and engagement level to generate word of mouth about what Australia has to offer as a tourism destination through social networking sites (Tourism Australia 2010a, b).

Figure 5 Tourism Australia Social Media Platforms

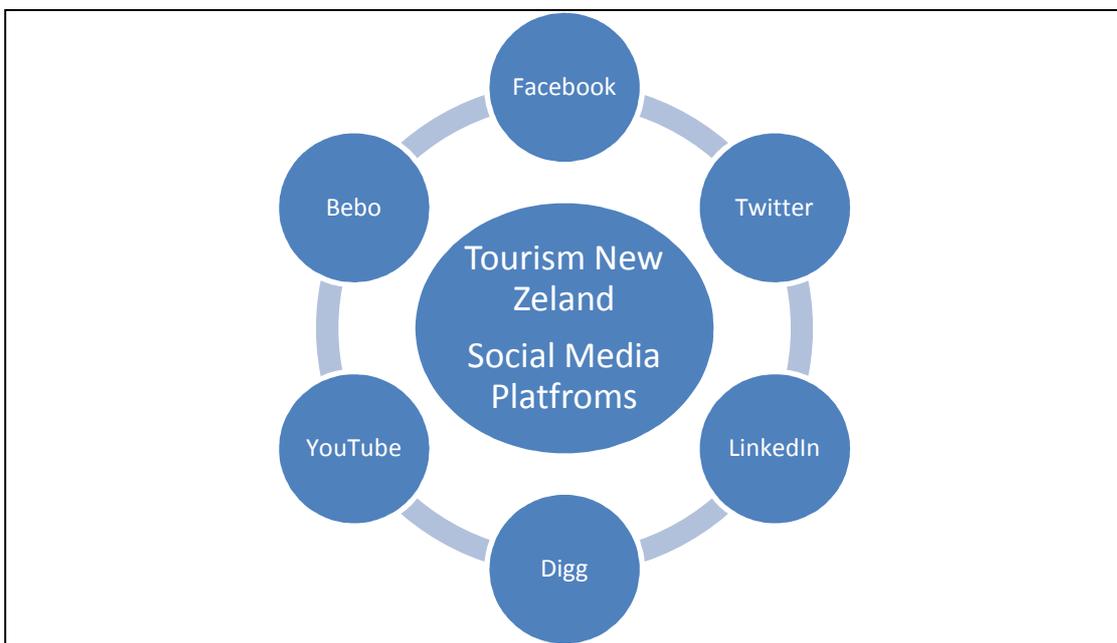


Source: Adapted from Tourism Australia (2013)

Tourism New Zealand

Tourism New Zealand is the national authority with the responsibility of marketing New Zealand as a striking tourism destination worldwide (Tourism New Zealand, 2013). Tourism New Zealand recognise the important role that digital media like social networks are playing as a marketing tool, the tourism authority not only promotes themselves over a number of social media platforms (See Figure 6) they also support and train small tourism businesses in New Zealand to effectively utilise social media marketing (Tourism New Zealand, 2013).

Figure 6 Tourism New Zealand Social Media Platforms



Source: Adapted From Tourism New Zealand (2013)

Like the other tourism authorities Tourism New Zealand has recognised the power social media has as a listening channel and to engage with potential visitors, using the information gathered the tourism authority effectively promotes New Zealand to their target markets (Tourism New Zealand, 2011). Tourism New Zealand is currently in the final year of a three year marketing strategy. The aim of the marketing strategy is to keep the '100% pure New Zealand' campaign but emphasise more about the holiday experience (Tourism New Zealand, 2011). Tourism New Zealand set up the campaign 'The Stories Beat' which invited participants to share their experiences of New Zealand offering a chance to win a once in a lifetime trip as a reward (New Zealand, 2010). The campaign was advertised purely on social media outlets. Participants uploaded their experiences, pictures and video on social media sharing platforms. Tourism New Zealand note that sharing this information through blogs allowed them reach their young potential audience showing how inviting New Zealand can be; it also allowed the tourism authority to build up a wealth of visual material and establish strong social media platforms (New Zealand, 2010). Tourism New Zealand (2010) expects to raise

their rate of audience desire to travel into actual travel through harnessing the power of social media marketing.

A comparison: Irish and international tourism authorities

The Irish and international tourism authorities all recognise the power of social media and are effectively using it as a marketing tool (Tourism Ireland, 2013; Fáilte Ireland, 2012a; Visit Britain, 2013; Visit England, 2013; Visit Scotland, 2013; Visit Wales, 2013; Northern Ireland Tourism Board, 2013; Tourism Australia, 2013; Tourism New Zealand, 2013). All of the tourism authorities discussed are actively marketing their countries and engaging with potential tourists across a number of social media sites, the most popular sites being Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, MySpace and Blogger among others (See **Figure 7**) (Tourism Ireland, 2013; Fáilte Ireland, 2012a; Visit Britain, 2013; Visit England, 2013; Visit Scotland, 2013; Visit Wales, 2013; Northern Ireland Tourism Board, 2013; Tourism Australia, 2013; Tourism New Zealand, 2013). Visit Britain however, is by far the leading tourism authority utilising social media to its full potential reaching on average 1.4 billion people with every promotional message transmitted through their social media outlets compared with Tourism Ireland's 180 million (Visit Britain, 2013; Tourism Ireland, 2013). Visit Britain (2013) actively ensures that that each promotional message sent through their social media platforms has maximum reach, having joined forces with Yahoo to ensure this.

Figure 7 Tourism Authorities Most Popular Social Media Sites



Source: Adapted From Tourism Ireland, 2013; Fáilte Ireland, 2012a; Visit Britain, 2013; Visit England, 2013; Visit Scotland, 2013; Visit Wales, 2013; Northern Ireland Tourism Board, 2013; Tourism Australia, 2013; Tourism New Zealand, 2013

Word of mouth is seen as an important information source especially in the tourism industry (Xiang and Gretzel, 2010; Park and Oh, 2012; Ahey et al, 2012; Cowhey et al, 2013). A number of tourism authorities have recognised how social media is facilitating the spread and of word of mouth and the effect this information is having on potential visitors (Tourism Ireland, 2013; Tourism Australia, 2013; Fáilte Ireland,

2012a; Cowhey et al, 2013). Tourism Ireland (2013) and Tourism Australia (2013) are therefore implementing strategies in their marketing campaigns to harness the power of word of mouth through their social media outlets.

It is clear that marketing through social media is a vital survival tool particularly in the tourism industry, tourism businesses can contact and convince their target market to visit them efficiently (Xiang and Gretzel, 2010; Lanz et al, 2010; Jenkins, 2010; Cowhey et al, 2013; Tourism Ireland, 2013; Fáilte Ireland, 2012a; Visit Britain, 2013; Tourism New Zealand, 2013). Fáilte Ireland like Visit Britain and Tourism New Zealand are therefore concerned with actively supporting and training smaller tourism businesses to engage with social media marketing (Tourism Ireland, 2013; Fáilte Ireland, 2012a; Visit Britain, 2013; Tourism New Zealand, 2013).

Conclusion

The tourism industry has been greatly affected by the development of social media technologies (Xiang and Gretzel, 2010; Ahey et al, 2012; Ahey et al, 2013). These new technologies have changed the way tourists search for and share information (Xiang and Gretzel, 2010). Travellers have therefore become more aware of their choices and are conducting extensive online searches looking for information on a destination (Ahey et al, 2012). Social media has had one of the greatest impacts on the tourism industry, therefore businesses have had engage in social media platforms to actively reach and engage with potential tourists (Park and Oh, 2012).

It is clear that Irish and international tourism authorities are effectively using social media as a marketing tool. Each of the tourism authorities discussed recognises the power of social media marketing and is actively implementing it into their marketing strategies. The Irish tourism authorities are using social media as a marketing tool to market Ireland as an attractive tourism destination. Using celebrities such as Shay Mitchell not only helped the tourism authority engage with potential visitors (with 51,824 Facebook likes around content relating to Shays experience of Ireland) it also proves how effective social media can be as a marketing tool. Tourism Ireland has laid out an integral and interactive communication plan in their 2013 marketing strategy to actively ensure that they grow their online activity and harness the power of social media to reach and persuade tourists to visit Ireland.

The aim of this paper was to identify how social media is being used as being used as an innovative marketing tool by the Irish tourism authorities. As previously noted Tourism Ireland and Fáilte Ireland are on par with their international counterparts when it comes to social media marketing. However a gap is apparent in the research regarding how tourism and hospitality businesses within Ireland are using social media, and whether it is an innovative marketing tool for Irish tourism and hospitality businesses. To date Fáilte Ireland offers a range of training such as workshops and support, for example *'how to guides'*, in order to assist tourism businesses to actively market themselves online. Further investigation has the potential to identify how social media is being used as a marketing tool in Irish tourism businesses, the results gathered may then be analysed and an action plan developed to ensure social media becomes an innovative marketing tool in the Irish tourism and hospitality industry.

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