An examination of social media as a customer engagement tool for visitor attractions

Arya Presanna Mohan

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Institute of Technology Carlow

Supervised by: Ms. Julie Mulligan

Dr. Tomás Dwyer

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Abstract

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By Arya Presanna Mohan

Since its development, social media has been a constantly changing phenomenon. Social media, in simple terms can be defined as an online platform that facilitates online communication, networking, and/or collaboration. The recognition by marketers that they should regain some control over the customer-controlled social media space has prompted many businesses to invest in their social media presence. Social media has an immense significance in an 'information-intensive' industry such as tourism as it allows for the revision and implementation of their business models and operations. Social media could be used as a powerful marketing tool when it comes to customer engagement in tourism, given the opportunities presented by these media to facilitate close relationships with tourists.

By adopting a customer engagement model proposed by Sashi (2011) and applying it to social media marketing within the tourism industry, this paper seeks to evaluate how social media could be a marketing tool for Irish tourism providers. By doing so, ultimately this research hopes to create a clear understanding of the degree and nature of interaction between Irish tourism providers and customers in social media platforms.

This study adopts an inductive approach seeking to explore the nature and degree of the usage of social media among a selected sample of Irish tourist providers. The research utilises the concurrent triangulation method under mixed methodology to examine in what ways, and for what purposes, Irish tourist providers are employing social media as a marketing tool in their customer engagement process. The research approach of this study is qualitative in the form of semi-structured interview and analysis of social media content and quantitative in the form of content analysis including social media analytics. An appropriate sampling frame for the study was identified and a small purposeful sample of five tourism providers from visitors' attraction points were selected.

The research findings supported the research objective of this study, that social media can be utilised as a customer engagement tool for visitor attractions. This study also showed that visitor attractions have made significant progress towards understanding the existing social media features and are evolving their customer engagement activities alongside new technological developments.

Drawing on these research findings, clear and practical guidance is offered to Irish tourist providers that are seeking to actively incorporate social media in their customer engagement activities. This study has undertaken an in-depth analysis of each stage of the customer engagement cycle in order to establish a clear indication of the role of social media in the customer engagement activities of Irish tourist providers. Thus, this research could play a crucial role in filling the existing research gap and educating tourist providers in how they can reap the benefits of social media to further facilitate the sectors growth and improve customer engagement.

Acknowledgements and Dedication

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1. Introduction

1.1. Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a general introduction to this particular piece of research. This chapter begins by providing the background to this study, which ultimately leads to the identification of the specific research gap under investigation. The relevant research questions are then presented. The chapter subsequently proceeds to provide justifications for this study, as well as present an outline of the structure of this thesis. Finally, the chapter concludes by outlining the boundaries that apply to the overall scope of this research.

1.2. Background to the research

The purpose of this study is to examine the role of social media in the customer engagement activities of Irish visitor attractions.

Tourism is an information intensive industry where tourists are actively seeking personal recommendations to assist them in their decision-making process (Chung & Buhalis, 2008; Ruzic & Bilos, 2010; Thevenot, 2007; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). These personal recommendations are very important in this decision-making process because a tourist experience cannot be evaluated prior to consumption due to their intangible nature (Gretzel et al., 2000; Litvin et al., 2008). Social media provides a platform for tourists to connect, interact and share their views on tourist experiences (Ayeh et al., 2013; Gretzel & Yoo, 2013). For this reason, social media as an interactive platform has gained the attention of the tourism industry (Benckendorff et al., 2014; Law et al., 2014). Thus, social media has become a vital marketing and communication tool for organisations in the tourism industry (Gretzel et al., 2006; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010; Kiralova et al., 2015).

Tourism organisations that do not adopt social media in their marketing strategies will lack a competitive advantage (Schegg et al., 2008; Stankov et al., 2010; Wang et al., 2002). Hence, a clear understanding of the role of social media in the customer communication process is vital to tourism marketing (Hays et al., 2013). However,

little research has been conducted to study how tourism entities are evolving with the internet and using social media to market destinations and engage with potential consumers (Leung et al., 2013; Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014).

Most of the research studies in the tourism industry are consumer-centric, examining the influence of social media on consumer behaviour and the decision-making process (Guillet et al., 2016). On the other hand, very few researchers have focused on the perspective of organisations in the tourism industry thus leaving little knowledge about the ways in which they utilise social media in their consumer engagement activities (Dwivedi et al., 2011; Hays et al., 2013; Mariani et al., 2016; Uşaklı et al., 2017).

The focus of past studies are either too broad in the domain of online marketing (Chung & Law, 2003; Law & Ngai, 2005), or too narrow focusing on particular types of social media platforms such as blogs and user reviews (Chan, 2008; Ye et al., 2009). These studies only aimed at finding customers' perceptions or the impact of using these tools for marketing (Chu, 2001; Chan, 2008; Rong et al., 2009; Ye et al., 2009). There is a lack of research that examines organisations' utilisation of social media in customer engagement activities.

Some of the previous studies indicate that tourism organisations generally perform poorly in developing interaction and communication with tourists on social media (Chan & Guillet, 2011; Guillet et al., 2016; Hsu, 2012; Phelan et al., 2013; Kim et al., 2015). The previous studies primarily concentrated on customer interaction through social media. However, interaction is just one step of an interconnected customer engagement cycle. Thus, there is a lack of extensive research to understand the role of social media at various stages of customer engagement activities of visitor attractions. It is this research gap that this particular study aims to address. This research attempts to delve further into the role of social media usage in the customer engagement activities by visitor attractions.

This study adopts the customer engagement cycle proposed by Sashi (2012) which consists of 6 steps namely, Connection, Interaction, Satisfaction, Retention, Commitment and Advocacy. By studying the customer engagement activities of Irish

visitor attractions through this cycle, this study aims to gain an overview of the role that social media plays at each stage involved.

1.3. Research aim and research questions

In light of the identified research gap, one key research objective emerged:

To understand the role of social media in the customer engagement activities of Irish visitor attractions.

In order to examine this objective, six relevant sub-questions were posed applying Sashi's Customer Engagement Model (2012). They are:

a) To examine how Irish visitor attractions utilise social media to create a connection with their targeted audiences.

b) To examine how Irish visitor attractions utilise social media to interact with their targeted audiences.

c) To examine how Irish visitor attractions utilise social media to understand and create customer satisfaction.

d) To examine how Irish visitor attractions utilise social media to retain their customers.

e) To examine how Irish visitor attractions utilise social media to understand and promote commitment amongst customers.

f) To examine how Irish visitor attractions utilise social media to promote online advocacy amongst targeted audiences.

1.4. Justification of the research

The present study aims to fill a gap in the literature and extends previous studies. This study contributes to social media research in the tourism industry by extending the scope of the customer engagement cycle proposed by Sashi (2012). The broad purpose

of this study is to understand the role of social media in the customer engagement activities of Irish visitor attractions.

Social media provides a platform for tourists to share their experiences, collaborate and contribute to developing, extending, rating and commenting on tourism experiences (Sigala et al., 2012; Ayeh et al., 2013; Gretzel & Yoo, 2013; Leung et al., 2013). Thus, it is crucial for visitor attractions to utilise this opportunity to engage with tourists on social media platforms. However, many tourist organisations simply transfer their existing marketing activities onto social media platforms, rather than exploiting the transformational potential of social media (Uşakli et al., 2017). This indicates that tourism organisations, regardless of their type, are still in the experimental stage of utilising social media as a marketing tool.

Alongside its use as a marketing tool, social media also has significant potential as a communication tool as it facilitates interaction and engagement between visitor attractions and tourists (e.g. Thevenot, 2007; Schmallegger & Carson, 2008; Kim et al., 2015). The interaction and engagement with tourists is a critical issue for visitor attractions since a late or non-response to issues or complaints raised on social media indicates that a supplier demonstrates low responsiveness to its customers (Chan & Guillet, 2011). Whilst some visitor attractions realised the potential of social media for their organisation, there are still a large number of organisations lagging behind. In order to help these tourist organisations to incorporate social media into their communication efforts effectively, it is necessary for them to review their current performance as compared to their counterparts. In addition, failure to obtain such information may result in the ineffective use of company resources and undermine the value of social media in the customer engagement activities of the firms.

Furthermore, the importance of adopting social media in the marketing activities of Irish visitor attractions was emphasised in a research study published by Fáilte Ireland (2017). Fáilte Ireland encourages visitor attractions to formulate social media marketing strategies and communicate their social media presence to visiting tourists.

Thus, the findings of this study may serve as a valuable source for visitor attractions to formulate their social media approaches and to fully reap the benefits of social

media usage as both an effective marketing and communication tool. Overall, this research seeks to help visitor attractions in Ireland as well as their counterparts in other parts of the world to improve their social media efforts and enhance their competitiveness within the global market. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to investigate the role of social media in the customer engagement activities of Irish visitor attractions.

1.5. Outline of the thesis

Subsequent to presenting the current chapter, this thesis progresses as follows:

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter allows for the development of an understanding of the research conducted to date, in the areas of social media marketing and customer engagement in tourism. Conducting a review of the relevant literature, ultimately, enables this chapter to advance to the formulation of the study's research hypotheses.

Chapter 3: Methodology

The third chapter begins by outlining the philosophical stance adopted in this particular piece of research. It then goes on to fully document and justify the methodological procedures used to examine the research problem, which has been outlined in Section 1.3 above.

Chapter 4: Presentation of Findings

Having analysed the data, Chapter 4 presents the key findings relating to each research question.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Implications

The fifth chapter discusses the research findings in light of the associated literature, ultimately tying Chapters 2 and 4 together. A discussion of each individual research question is provided, prior to presenting a discussion of the overall research objective.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

The sixth and final chapter highlights the conclusions drawn from each research questions and the main objective. The chapter then procceds to explain the various practical and theoretical contributions that this study has made to the associated fields. The limitations of this study and suggestions for future research are outlined before, finally, bringing the thesis to a close.

1.6. Delimitations of scope

As is the case when undertaking any piece of research, there are particular boundaries that apply to the overall scope of this study, according to which the generalisability of its findings are limited (Perry, 1998).

These boundaries were first defined by the research problem at hand. Social media has significant potential and a wide application in the marketing efforts of an organisation (Kozinets et al., 2010). Resultantly, the six aforementioned research questions were used to guide the overall research enquiry in order to limit the scope of this research to the exploration of its objective. In short, for the purpose of this research, social media was examined as a tool for customer engagement only.

The examination of the study's key concepts were strongly influenced by the reviewed literature. Based on that factor, the researcher attempted to paint as complete a picture of social media as a customer engagement tool as possible, in the context of the research problem under investigation.

The research problem of interest also determined the research methodology to be employed for the purpose of this investigation. A mixed methodological strategy was adopted. This strategy has been fully justified throughout Chapter 3. Consequently, both a qualitative and quantitative approach was undertaken by the researcher.

The overall scope of this study was finally bound by its chosen sample of the tourist attractions in south-east Ireland. Based on the nature of this sample, it can be concluded that the results of this study are intended to be generalised to tourist attractions operating in Ireland.

1.7. Conclusion

The purpose of this introductory chapter was to lay the foundations for this particular thesis. Thus, the chapter began by introducing the research gap of interest, along with its associated research objective and sub questions. Some of the justifications for the need to conduct this study were then highlighted. The structure of this thesis was subsequently outlined. Finally, the chapter concluded by identifying the boundaries that apply to the overall scope of this piece of research. Having laid these foundations, this thesis proceeds to present the Literature Review, from which this study's research objective is subsequently deduced and developed.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Introduction

The literature review provides a basis for answering the overall research objective and its related research questions. The literature review begins with defining social media and the relevance of user generated content. This is followed by the applicability of social media in a marketing realm and the importance of social media in the development of relationships and customer engagement. Th importance of customer engagement is detailed with respect to the tourism industry. The customer engagement model proposed by Sashi (2012) is adopted to evaluate how Irish visitor attractions are utilising social media to enhance their customer engagement activities.

2.2. Introduction to social media

This section of the literature review is focused on the evolution of social media from web 2.0 and detailed analysis of the definition of social media by different authors and User Generated Content (UGC). By the end of this section, basic concepts relating to social media will be made clear so that the relevance of social media in marketing can be explored in the subsequent sections.

In order to adequately theorise the processes of social media and the resulting effects of its use, one must first clearly understand and define social media. Social media, in simple terms can be defined as an online platform that facilitate online communication, networking, and/or collaboration (Russo et.al, 2008). Considering the fact that Web 2.0 is the interactive online platform (DiNucci, 1999), it can be deduced that it is this platform that has paved the way for the development and growth of social media. Therefore, it is crucial to understand Web 2.0 as it would essentially result in a better understanding of the concept of social media.

2.2.1. Defining Web 2.0.

The term Web 2.0 was coined by DiNucci (1999) who defined it as the second generation of technology development and web design. The fact that Web 2.0 is a continuously evolving and growing concept, has resulted in lack of extensive literature

on the topic. Still there has been a gradual and constant evolution in defining the concept of Web 2.0. Turban et al., (2008, p. 808) refer to Web 2.0 as "a popular term for advanced internet technology and applications including blogs, wikis and social references". Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) suggest a more feature-oriented definition by stating that Web 2.0 is a concept as well as a platform for harnessing collective intelligence. Following on from this Campbell et al (2011) stated

> It [Web 2.0] is much more to do with what people are doing with the technology than the technology itself, for rather than merely retrieving information, users are now creating and consuming it, and hence adding value to the websites that permit them to do so.(p.87)

In addition some basic traits of Web 2.0 like interactivity, interoperability, and collaboration (Campbell et al., 2011) have also been proposed.   Such features that have laid the foundation for the creation of online social media or social networking sites.

2.2.2. Defining social media

The concept of social media has been discussed and defined from different perspectives throughout the reviewed articles and research papers. In this section various definitions of social media given by different academicians will be discussed in order to develop the understanding behind the concept of social media.

Defining the term social media usually revolves around the common concept where it refers to digital technologies emphasising user-generated content or interaction. For example, some authors such as Terry (2009) and Kent (2010) define social media by mentioning channel characteristics to exemplify modes of interaction. By focusing on the importance of user generated content, Terry (2009) loosely defines social media as user-generated content utilising internet-based publishing technologies, distinct from traditional print and broadcast media". Kent (2010) broadly defines social media as "any interactive communication channel that allows for two-way interaction and feedback" further specifying that modern social media are characterised by their "potential for real-time interaction, reduced anonymity, a sense of propinquity, short

response times, and the ability to 'time shift,' or engage the social network whenever suits each particular member" (p. 645).

Both definitions by Kent (2010) and Terry (2009) partially define social media by differentiating between social and traditional (either print or online) media but do not clearly exclude other "new media," such as e-mail and text messaging, which are not included in typological lists of social media. Thus, it can be argued that both these definitions fail to cover the whole concept of social media and thus cannot be considered as a fully evolved one.

Some other definitions which were reviewed are relatively simple, focusing on the nature of message construction in social media. For example, Russo et.al (2008) defined social media as "those that facilitate online communication, networking, and/or collaboration" (p. 22).

Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) define social media in a broader way as "a group of internet based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and allow the creation and exchange of user generated content" (p.61). Even less precise, Lewis (2010) noted "social media" simply serve as a "label for digital technologies that allow people to connect, interact, produce and share content" (p.2). These definitions, on a detailed evaluation, can be applied to communication technologies like e-mail and omit the unique technological and social affordance that differentiate social media.

It is also noted that the words 'social media' and 'social networking sites' are used interchangeably in many articles or studies. According to Boyd and Ellison (2007), an online social network can be defined as

> a web-based service that allows users: i) to define a personal profile, ii) to relate these profiles to a list of other profiles belonging to individuals with whom they have some type of social relationship, and iii) to view the profiles linked to their connections, recursively. (p. 211)

To be more precise, "social networking is considered as the use of 'social media tools' to interact and communicate directly with people you are already connected to or with whom you wish to be connected with" (Wells, 2011).

Carr and Hayes (2015) proffered a more complex definition of social media as

> Social media are Internet-based channels that allow users to opportunistically interact and selectively self-present, either in real-time or asynchronously, with both broad and narrow audiences who derive value from user-generated content and the perception of interaction with others.. (p. 50)

This definition aims to address all the deficiencies which has been pointed out above in this section and be precise enough to embody existing technologies yet robust enough to remain applicable in future as well.

Social media provides three conditions or mediums that encourage consumer/user socialisation among peers online. First, blogs, instant messaging, and social networking sites all provide communication tools that make the socialisation process easy and convenient (Muratore, 2008). For example, in virtual communities Ahuja and Galvin (2003) find that new members can be socialised easily into virtual groups through electronic communication and quickly learn task-related knowledge and skills through their interactions with other members. Second, increasing numbers of consumers visit social media websites to communicate with others and find information to help them make various consumption- related decisions (Lueg et al., 2006). Third, social media facilitate education and information because they feature multitudes of friends or peers who act as socialisation agents and provide vast product information and evaluations quickly (Gershoff & Johar 2006; Taylor et al., 2011). In short, we can see that the existence of social media is through the user generated content. Thus, the definition and relevance of user generated content in the tourism industry will be discussed in the next section.

2.2.3. User generated content

The term user generated content (UGC) has an immense significance in the concept of social media as "social media is a broad term that describes software tools that create user generated content that can be shared" (O'Reilly, 2005). Thus, this section starts with the definition of UGC and then explains the importance of UGC in marketing. By the end of this section it is expected that the relevance of UGC in consumer engagement especially in the tourism industry will be evident.

The term user generated content was first mentioned in 2005 to explain and summarise the variety of media content that has been created and is available to the people. In order to be considered and confirmed as such, the user generated content must fulfil couple of requirements. The first requirement is about the content. It needs to be published on a publicly available website or on a social networking site accessible to a definite group of people. Second, it must show use of creativity, and third it must be created outside of the professional routines (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2009).

When UGC is considered in a marketing context, it is often compared to the term word of mouth (WOM) and electronic word of mouth or e-WOM. UGC and e-WOM are two closely related concepts. UGC can be simply defined as internet content that is generated and published by everyday consumers, not media or communications professionals. In turn, e-WOM is characterised as "any positive or negative statements made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the internet" (Thurau et al., 2004). From the definitions it is evident that, e-WOM is a specific type of UGC relating to products and services.

Consumers tend to ask for the opinions of their peers and other consumers in relation to brands, products or services and this is known as word of mouth in marketing world. Word of mouth has been acknowledged for many years as a major influence on what people know, feel and do (Buttle, 1998). It has been described as an informal communication directed at other consumers about the ownership, usage, or characteristics of particular goods and services or their sellers (Berger, 2014). When the scenario changed with the advent of social media, somebody who has an opinion about a product or service could share their views, beliefs, and experiences with other people through an online media (Ahuja et al., 2007). UGC is widely used by consumers of hospitality and tourism services both for information sharing and as an information source for making decisions: online consumer accounts are perceived as more likely to contain up-to-date, informative and reliable information that is rich in detail and highly relevant (Gretzel & Yoo, 2008)

Fernando (2007) suggests a notable difference between UGC and traditional marketing strategies. He contends that UGC is the opposite to traditional forms of

media and marketing since content is generated by the consumer rather than by the marketer. Tools such as blogs and social networking sites (such as Facebook) have meant that consumers are better informed than ever before – not only being able to add their own comments, but also being able to find other information and articles and 'tag' them with their own keywords for search purposes (Buhler, 2006). Therefore, it can be deduced that social networking sites typically operate by inviting people to join and contribute to a network. As this process snowballs the networks can grow. These communities rely upon UGC for their ongoing operation (Trusov et al., 2008).

Furthermore, as Chatterjee (2001) has pointed out, there is typically far more information available to the consumer in the online environment from e-WOM than from traditional WOM. Park et al. (2007) found that the purchasing intentions of consumers increase in line with the number of reviews that indicate that the product or service was popular. As an important form of electronic word of-mouth (e-WOM), online reviews provided by e-commerce websites have played an important role in helping consumers make decisions (Cheung & Thadani, 2012; Davis & Khazanchi, 2008; Duan et al., 2008). e-WOM refers to comments about a product or service provided by customers via networks (Thurau et al., 2003). According to a survey conducted by Cheung and Thadani (2012), 91% of participants said they use online reviews, blogs and other forms of UGC before purchasing a new product or service, and 46% of participants indicated that these comments influenced their decision. This is also supported by Yan et al., (2014) who reinforce the point that online social media tools like Facebook or Twitter are used by the consumers to evaluate product and services prior a purchase. e-WOM has a direct impact on consumers' trust and purchasing behaviour (Dellarocas et al., 2007; Duan et al., 2008). Online reviews can reduce the risks perceived by consumers (Cheung et al., 2009; Park & Kim, 2009) and improve their degree of satisfaction (Liang et al., 2007), as well as their efficiency in making decisions (Cheung et al., 2009). High credibility is often placed on word-of-mouth (WOM) information as it is believed that the person providing the WOM information has nothing to lose and is therefore more likely to offer honest advice (Chatterjee, 2001).

Furthermore, well-reasoned, logical and persuasive reviews can positively influence the likelihood of purchase by people who read them (Park et al., 2007). The volumes

of both positive and negative reviews impact the consumer's decisions (Chatterjee, 2001; Cheung et al., 2009; Berger et al., 2010), while negative reviews have a greater impact than positive reviews (Park & Lee, 2009). However, when negative word-of-mouth is provided with the specific goal to vent frustration or anger, its influence on the receiver tends to be reduced, as the information is not perceived to be constructive or useful (Wetzer et al., 2007).

Previous research consistently has shown that peer communication has a strong impact on attitudes toward advertising (De Gregorio and Sung 2010), shopping orientations (Lueg et al., 2006; Mangleburg et al., 2004), and consumer decision-making (Smith et al., 2005). For example, Senecal & Nantel (2004) note that product recommendations from other consumers have more importance in the decision-making process when it comes to an experiential product such as tourism.

It has been proven that the volume of online reviews is significantly related to sales. However, e-WOM not only entices new customers (Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006; Hinz et al., 2011) but also affects the patterns of consumption of existing customers, through repeat purchases, or additional purchases through up- or cross-selling (Kumar et al., 2010; Armelini et al., 2015). Peer ownership of a certain product or service constitutes a modelling process; to be like peers, the consumer can buy the same brand or avoid other brands (Lueg & Finney 2007). In a current global tourism scenario, destination branding is a new trend where countries project their destinations as a brand to the world. Due to the intangible nature of tourism and hospitality, a prospective traveller who has never been to a destination before, embraces the information supplied by peers through UGC and social networking sites on the internet (Saranow, 2004; Ricci & Wietsma, 2006).

When examining the use of social media in the tourism industry, it is essential to view social media through a marketing lens. In this way, we can utilise the aforementioned-definition of social media and tailor it to a marketing perspective. Now by adding "marketing" along with key words such as "user generated content" and "interactivity", it is possible to re-define social media as internet-based applications that carry consumer-generated content which encompasses media impressions created by consumers, typically informed by relevant experience, and archived or shared

online for easy access by other impressionable consumers (Blackshaw, 2006). Having examined some of the key definitions and foundations of social media the next section will examine the relevance of social media in marketing.

2.3. Social media marketing

The literature reviewed for the study highlights that the recognition by marketers that they should regain some control over the customer-controlled social media space has prompted many businesses to invest in a social media presence (Barwise & Styler 2003). These social media enable customer socialisation and such communal (WOM) alters the way in which consumers process information. This has resulted in firms having to change their marketing strategies (Casteleyn et al., 2009; Kozinets et al., 2010), moving away from the traditional way of generating company-based media content through integrating offline and online branding techniques (Hede & Kellet 2012) such as billboards or online advertisements (Mansson 2011), towards a strategy more oriented towards customer engagement through online platforms or social medias.

Social media usage has exponentially grown and hundreds of different platforms, aiming to attract users have entered the internet since 2003. From that year on popular social platforms such as Twitter, Facebook or LinkedIn were developed and the rise of (micro-) blogs further facilitated communication between business professionals, friends or family members (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). This immense switch from traditional towards online communication and online customer relationships has gained much attention in business. Even the smallest local retailer, café or shop now tries to promote and engage with customers since for many individuals social media has become their primary source of information and communication (Coleman, 2013). On the one hand social platforms have become one of the primary marketing tools to target customers, but they also aim to extract shared content from them on the other hand (Culnan et al., 2010).

Companies can use social media as an additional customer service and communication tool to gain insight into consumers' needs, wants, concerns and behaviours in order to serve them better (He et al., 2013). This is particularly valuable in the tourism sector where visitor attractions need to interact with the customers on a global platform.

Wang and Fesenmaier (2004) note that by providing consumers with the opportunity to interact with one another through online travel communities, travel providers can enhance and maximise the strength of their relationship with consumers which will probably result in influencing the traveller's decision-making process. Two types of approaches emerged as marketers started to utilise social media in their marketing activities. These approaches are detailed in the following section.

2.3.1. Passive and active approach

Field evidence and an increasing number of studies provide already a good picture on the basic patterns of engaging social media as part of the marketing strategy (Chesbrough, 2006; Bernhoff & Li, 2008; Prahalad & Krishnan, 2008; Deighton & Kornfeld, 2009). Two main approaches seem to emerge:

The passive approach is based on utilising the social media public domain as a potential source of customer voice (Anderson, 2007; Parise & Guinan, 2008). The marketing objective is to provide marketers with information about market needs, customer experiences, competitive movements and trends. The social media domain has turned into an easy yet powerful data source providing information on what is going on in the marketplace at any given time. Such information can help marketers to track issues and market opportunities. Blogs or online forums were regularly the first to report product or service issues or malfunctions and also corporate wrong practices. Organisations can spare a great deal of money and save reputational damage if action is taken before such news go to predominant media and wind up noticeably unmanageable (Gillin 2007, 2009).

In the tourism context, the Internet is an important source of information for travellers. As with other forms of online information, UGC related to travel can be posted on specific travel-related websites or on more generic social networking websites. This content reflects the experiences of the tourist at specific destinations (Pan et al., 2007) or with other travel products. Tracking and monitoring such information shared in the social media space (blogs, podcasts, forums and online communities) will help visitor attractions to listen to the customer voice.

The active approach is utilising the social media as tools of communication, direct

sales, customer acquisition and customer retention (McKinsey, 2007). Introducing corporate blogs, web site forums and company-sponsored communities as part of the corporate online presence is an option that allows corporate executives to attract the dialog in their own quarters, moderate comments and most importantly directly react to customers' concerns or questions (Singh et al., 2008). The reviewed literature highlights the interaction that happen through social media is considered as an advantage by marketers and they are already using social media as an effective marketing instrument for building brand awareness, image and loyalty (Baldoni, 2009; Libert & Faulk, 2009).

A close analysis of literature has shown that there are many methods under the active approach that a marketer can use to influence and shape the consumer discussion in a way that it is consistent with the organisation's mission and performance goals. Three methods of the active approach that have been consistently mentioned in reviewed literature are:

a) Socialisation Platforms

b) Social Customer Relationship Management

c) Consumer Engagement

a) Socialisation platforms: Online socialisation platforms are one of the major methods under the active approach. Consumer socialisation refers to the process by which individual consumers learn skills, knowledge, and attitudes from others through communication, which then assist them in functioning as consumers in the marketplace (Ward, 1974). Conventional socialisation occurs among consumers who know one another, such as parents and children, colleagues, relatives, friends, and neighbours (Kim et al., 2009; Mukhopadhyay & Yeung, 2010). However, online social media enable socialisation through virtual communities among both people who know one another and strangers (Lueg et al., 2006; Muratore, 2008; Okazaki, 2009). Social media websites provide a public forum that gives individual consumers their own voices, as well as access to product information that facilitates their purchase decisions (Kozinets et al., 2010).

There are some evident benefits for socialisation through virtual media. Firstly, in

virtual communities Ahuja and Galvin (2003) find that new members can be socialised easily into virtual groups through electronic communication and quickly learn task-related knowledge and skills through their interactions with other members. Second, increasing numbers of consumers visit social media websites to communicate with others and find information to help them make various consumption- related decisions (Lueg et al., 2006). Third, social media facilitate education and information because they feature multitudes of friends or peers who act as socialization agents and provide vast product information and evaluations quickly (Gershoff & Johar, 2006; Taylor et al., 2011). Lueg and Finney (2007) further reveal that peer communications online can influence consumers so strongly that they convert others into Internet shoppers. They suggest marketers should encourage such communication by setting up tell- a-friend functions on websites.

b) Social Customer Relationship Management (SCRM) - Another important technique under the active approach is Social Customer Relationship Management (SCRM) which is considered to be a holistic concept which is still in its infancy and also in scholarly research the focus is limited (Lehmkuhl & Jung, 2013). The term "Social CRM" is a relatively new and was first proposed by Mohan, who defines it as containing "the features of Web 2.0 and social networking with the current Customer Relationship Management (CRM) System" (Mohan et al., 2008). Therefore it is an integration of the "traditional" CRM models and systems with the new Web 2.0 and social media capabilities of the internet. It is a new company strategy that aims to build and create stronger customer relationships (Faase, 2011).

SCRM, which is the combination of social media and CRM, is described as the business strategy of engaging customers through social media with the goal of building trust and brand loyalty (Woodcock et al., 2011).

According to Woodcock et al. (2011), SCRM is how:

> We (the marketer) help you engage with us, whenever you need to, wherever you are, in ways that are convenient to you; provide you with the personal experience you need to keep you engaged, informed, interested and maybe even entertained; transact with each other, or through third parties, in ways that are mutually valuable; to get to know each other over time so that we can tailor what we do with you in mind.(p.52)

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, a stage began where the prevailing

business orientation focused on customer relationship management (CRM), where each customer was treated individually and uniquely, depending on their preferences (Bose, 2002). The essence of CRM is to change the strategy of organisations, to move from a product-focused strategy to a customer-focused one. The aim is to create value for customers, understand their needs and offer value-added services (King & Burgess, 2008). However, while CRM focuses on developing and maintaining profitable, mutually beneficial customer relationships through the co-creation of value (Boulding et al., 2005; Ernst et al., 2011; Payne & Frow, 2005), the results of CRM initiatives have been mixed and marketers are increasingly paying attention to social media technologies as a means of overcoming the obstacles encountered in implementing effective CRM initiatives, thus extending CRM into a social CRM context.

Greenberg (2009) define Social CRM as ,

> A philosophy and a business strategy, supported by a technology platform, business rules, processes and social characteristics, designed to engage the customer in a collaborative conversation in order to provide mutually beneficial value in a trusted and transparent business environment. It's the company's response to the customer's ownership of the conversation. (p.52)

This definition includes the central principle of customer engagement, which was missing in earlier CRM models, and social media technologies facilitate this customer engagement (Olbrich & Holsing 2012). With the rapid advent of Web 2.0 technologies like Facebook, Linkedin, Instagram, blogs, wikis and other social networks, a new paradigm shift within CRM has evolved (Mohan et al., 2008). The two main tasks of Social CRM are to export valuable customer information from social networks and at the same time utilising that information to increase the customer engagement and at an optimum driving sales performance results.

It is noticeable that the costs and resources associated with the implementation of SCRM are quite high and it could be an extravagance for the SME's and service industries like tourism. However, maintaining a proper relationship with customers is crucial for all service entities as the survival of every business organisation depends on customer interaction. Engagement is created by the perceptions, attitudes, and behaviours of those with whom the different companies and organisations are communicating.

For example, the tourism sector, which requires large fixed investments, can only realise the return of these large investments with steady sales and this could happen only by attracting desired amount for the tourists in the targeted socio-economic level (Yavuz & Haseki, 2012). At this point it is important to ensure the efficient use of internet for tourism activities.

UGC and consumer-to-consumer communication instils trust towards a product or destination (Ye et al., 2011). More importantly, especially for tourism, it passes necessarily through the experience (direct or indirect) a customer gains (Weinberger, 2007). Senecal and Nantel (2004) note that product recommendations from other consumers are even more important to prospective purchasers when an experiential product (e.g. intangible services such as tourism) is concerned as opposed to a tangible product. Or we could say that the contents generated by users (UGCs) have an acknowledged importance in all fields, and in tourism in particular (Akehurst, 2009).

The proliferation of social media platforms has changed how organisations communicate with customers, thus allowing tourism service providers to pursue a variety of customer engagement strategies (Dholakia & Durham, 2010). Customer engagement is ''a psychological state, which occurs by virtue of interactive customer experiences with a focal agent/object within specific service relationships'' (Brodie et al., 2011, p. 258). So, to ensure a proper engagement with the customers (travellers), the tourism operators need to ensure proper utilisation of social media tools and ensure customer engagement as social media introduce new interactive channels between providers and tourists (Hjalager, 2010).

2.4. Customer engagement

Customer engagement is the primary objective of the active marketing approach. The information systems community contributes considerably to our understanding of the ways in which these new social media tools can revolutionize business practices (Aral et al., 2013) and create new ways to engage customers (Wagner & Majchrzak, 2007). Thus, it is necessary to understand the concept of customer engagement in detail. This literature develops by explaining different definitions of consumer engagement and then different types of consumer engagement related to tourism sector which ultimately leads to the adaption of Customer Engagement Cycle Model to the study.

2.4.1. Definitions of customer engagement

While reviewing the literature based on customer engagement, it has been noted that there are several agreements, as well as disagreements, as to the nature of customer engagement. It is intriguing to note that authors in the marketing field experience a dilemma while choosing what to call the concept and hold fluctuating perspectives of its nature. This section looks into the different definitions of customer engagement provided by marketing scholars inorder to gain a deep understanding about the topic.

Some practitioners look at customer engagement from the perspective of the organisation and define it as activities facilitating repeated interactions that strengthen the emotional, psychological or physical investment a customer has in a brand (Sedley, 2010). Hollebeek (2011), one among those, defined customer engagement as the level of a customer's motivational, brand-related and context-dependent state of mind characterised by specific levels of cognitive, emotional, and behavioural activity in brand interactions. Brodie et al., (2011, p.260) define consumer engagement as a "psychological state that occurs by virtue of interactive, co-creative experiences with a focal agent/object (i.e. a brand) in a focal service relationship". Taking a perspective of engagement as an overarching process, ultimately leading to loyalty, Bowden (2009) defines it as a:

> … psychological process that models the underlying mechanisms by which consumer loyalty forms for new consumers of a service brand, as well as the mechanisms by which loyalty may be maintained for repeat purchase consumers of a service brand.(p. 65)

When Sashi (2012) perceived it as a process by pointing out that it embodies interactive consumer experiences where social media act as tools that can enable and facilitate these experiences; some others address it from a different point of view by stating that customer engagement behaviours go beyond transactions and are defined as a customer's behavioural manifestations that have a brand or firm focus, beyond purchase, resulting from motivation drivers.

Some authors concentrate just on the online or media aspects of the concept and according to them customer-brand engagement appears as a multi-dimensional concept combining such elements as attention, dialogue, interaction, emotions, sensorial pleasure, and immediate activation aimed at creating a total brand experience

with consumers (Gambetti et al., 2012; Mollen & Wilson 2010). While others more extensively consider it to represent individuals' interactions and connections with a brand or even with an organisational offering or activity (Vivek et al., 2012).

The definitions and perspectives of the concept have some similarities across researchers. First, customer engagement appears to involve experiences, interactions, and/or connections between the subject (customer) and the object(s), such as brands, Web sites, activities, and other customers (Mollen & Wilson 2010), with several researchers focusing heavily on the experiential nature of the concept as the key (Calder et al., 2009; Sashi, 2012). Second, engagement appears to be primarily motivational for example, Brodie et al. (2011) idea of it being a psychological state or Higgins and Scholer's (2009) idea of it being a state of being occupied/involved/absorbed/engrossed.

It is fascinating to note that while most researchers talk about the beneficial outcomes of engagement, tending to how it delivers more greater loyalty, trust, and commitment (Grégoire et al., 2009; Hollebeek, 2011), others take note of the fact that engagement by definition require not be positive always - one can be contrarily engaged with a company or brand (Higgins & Scholer, 2009; Van Doorn et al., 2010). According to Van Doorn et al. (2010), customer engagement behaviours go beyond transactions, and may be specifically defined as a customer's behavioural manifestations that have a brand or firm focus, beyond purchase, resulting from motivational drivers. He pointed out that the behavioural manifestations, other than purchases, can be both positive (i.e. posting a positive brand message on a blog or other social networking sites) and negative (i.e. organising public actions against a firm or a negative word of mouth through an online platform).

By being engaged, consumers exhibit dispositions that go beyond traditional market-ascribed consumer behaviours, in accordance with the value co-creation logic (Vargo & Lusch, 2014). Until 2012, consumer engagement research suffered from a strong conceptual bend, and empirical work has only recently begun to emerge. The reviewed literature illustrates a lack of agreement over the conceptual domain of engagement, some authors coining "consumer engagement" (Brodie et al., 2011), others "brand engagement" (Sprott et al., 2009) and a majority of others "customer engagement" (Gummerus et al., 2012) and despite the fact that participation with a community of

like-minded consumers is an important factor contributing to the success of the brand, consumer engagement with other consumers, such as community members, has so far been under-investigated (Algesheimer et al., 2005; Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006; Fournier & Lee, 2009; Schau et al., 2009).

Unsurprisingly, the concept of online consumer engagement has attracted significant and growing attention from both academics (Brodie et al., 2013; Baldus et al., 2015), and practitioners of online marketing. Delivering compelling experiences for consumers is vital for online platforms and significant efforts concern enriching consumer engagement through the capture of relevant data (Dessart et al., 2016). Consumers can interact with brand posts in real-time using built-in response options, such as "likes" and "comments" (Kabadayi & Price, 2014). This tendency of a consumer to respond to and interact with brands in social media constitutes the notion of consumer engagement (Hollebeek et al., 2014)

2.4.2. Customer engagement in tourism sector

The advent of social media led to an explosion of interest in customer engagement in tourism, given the opportunities presented by these media to facilitate close relationships with tourists (Gorry & Westbrook, 2011; Hudson & Thal, 2013). Engagement includes: browsing and consuming consumer-generated media contents, content contribution, active participation (Yoo & Gretzel, 2011), levels of participation in online tourist communities (Hamilton & Alexander, 2013; Wang et al., 2002), user-generated hotel reviews as a particular type of customer engagement behaviour (Park & Allen, 2013; Wei et al., 2013), social media marketing (Chan & Guillet, 2011), and tourism blogs as elements of tourism destination strategy (Schmallegger & Carson, 2008).

After identifying the importance of social media in customer engagement of tourism sector, it is important to understand different types of engagement that is happening. A study conducted by Cabiddu et al., (2014) in relation with hospitality and tourism industry has pointed out three types of engagement that can happen and they are:

2.4.2.1. Persistent Engagement

Persistent engagement is the first type of engagement that has been identified in tourism industry by Cabiddu et al., (2014). Persistent engagement represents the

likelihood of keeping up an ongoing dialogue with customers, even when they are not physically at the property. The persistent engagement affordance addresses the immediacy of conversations, as well as their reach and scale, along these lines enabling a level of constant communication that was beforehand simply unattainable.

Persistent engagement relies on connectivity, content is created when customers comment on the firm's postings or react to fellow customers' contributions (Park & Allen, 2013). There is virtually no delay between an event occurrence and the time at which it is shared with interested customers. However, this technology is not neutral and unchanging. The degree of co-creation affects customer satisfaction, loyalty and spending (Grissemann & Stokburger-Sauer, 2012). Furthermore, through persistent engagement, the firm can foster a deeper knowledge about the product, location, and surroundings in customers. This knowledge development can occur in both the quantity and quality dimensions. In the first dimension, persistent engagement leads to the availability of significant amounts of multimedia content (e.g. recipes for local drinks). In the second dimension, given its crowdsourced nature, the guest- created content is generally considered to be less biased and more trustworthy (Sparks & Browning, 2011; Bronner & De Hoog, 2010).

While persistent engagement can be quite beneficial for organisations in the tourism industry, it might also prove detrimental. Persistent engagement is naturally a public action, and social media drastically limit the firm's control over the content, thus allowing virtually unlimited openness and message sharing (Ward & Ostrom, 2006; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Management under these conditions is a novel challenge for organisations and is tantamount to management in a state of constant, real-time media exposure, in which every customer is a potential reporter and every action is almost immediately visible to a wide audience (Treem & Leonardi, 2012). Thus, the detriment and challenges of managing negative comments or persistent negativity and the ability to balance both the openness of content and the speed at which it disseminates through the community is critical. The potential scrutiny and publicity, the lack of control in this context, and the lack of tested principles for persistent engagement in social media (Wei et al., 2013) might lead organisations to a sort of paralysis. However, it is still noteworthy that persistent engagement allows to create lively relationships with their customer bases and to become part of conversations that would otherwise occur outside of the firm's area of influence.

2.4.2.2. Customised Engagement

Customised engagement is the next type which represents the possibility of interacting with customers based on prior knowledge of individual-level information. This information includes the customer's preferences, past conversations, networks of relationships and influences. Customised engagement can have mixed effects on customer engagement. On the positive side, it may lead to achieving a high level of customisation by monitoring the personal information posted by social media members and may help to obtain an in-depth understanding of each customer's needs (Sigala, 2003). The value of customised engagement stems from the possibility to effectively personalise organisational communication and service, thus treating customers as individuals. The wealth of personal data shared by customers through social media could be instrumental to the provision of tailored messages and services. Moreover, through customised engagement, a firm can reinforce a customer's sense of identification with the firm's own social media communities (Qu & Lee, 2011). Liang et al. (2007) has pointed out that the customers are more satisfied when an organisation can better target its message through accurate recommendations and relevant content. The customised engagement affordance increased the level of interactions that the tourism industry has historically experienced with their guests, as well as enhancing the knowledge of their guests' individual interests and preferences. While customised engagement can be quite beneficial for tourism organisations, it may also prove detrimental. As Leung et al. (2013) pointed out the potential negative outcomes that stem from privacy concerns when organisations are perceived as overstepping their boundaries. So, we can say that the customised engagement in tourism will increase both the potential rewards and risks of customer engagement in social media.

2.4.2.3. Triggered Engagement

Triggered engagement represents the possibility of instigating customer encounters based on an external, customer-initiated event. Triggered engagement could have mixed effects on customer engagement. On the positive side, it might improve firms' abilities to interact with customers at crucial times during service encounters.

Organisations that recognise and successfully leverage triggered engagement can minimise their reaction times and limit expectation-delivery gaps, thereby improving service (Zeithaml et al., 2002). Triggered engagement may also help tourism organisations to increase their anticipation capabilities and become more proactive because managers can analyse the gathered data over time to uncover trends and systematic problems (Leung et al., 2013). This affordance can help firms to develop innovative practices and discover new value-creation opportunities that are prompted by customer initiatives or customer-initiated interactions. The social media functionalities that enable this affordance are social graphing instruments that support inter-user connectivity and permit activity tracking. Social media also allow visitor attractions to set thresholds for monitoring individual activity and to be notified when certain events take place. The triggered engagement affordance creates the opportunity for a degree of responsiveness that was previously simply unattainable by visitor attractions. With triggered engagement, they can spring into action immediately in response to a guest-initiated event.

Privacy concerns, such as those discussed for the customised engagement affordance, might also limit the effectiveness of triggered engagement. This concern is partially mitigated by the fact that triggered engagement might not always rely on personal information and would therefore limit the perceived sensitive nature of the transaction. However, pro- active responses to information that a traveller has not directly aimed at the firm might trigger a ''big brother'' effect and annoy (or enrage) customers.

In conclusion, three different types of customer engagement activities were noted in the tourism industry. They are persistent engagement, customised engagement and triggered engagement. When persistent engagement represents the likelihood of keeping up an ongoing dialogue with customers even when they are not physically at the property, customised engagement is the possibility of interacting with customers based on prior knowledge of individual-level information. Triggered engagement represents the possibility of instigating customer encounters based on an external, customer-initiated event. Now that we have analysed the different types of customer engagements with respect to tourism sector, a basic customer engagement cycle needs to be assessed to evaluate the customer engagement.

2.5. Consumer engagement models

To assess how efficiently social media is used in business (tourism), a basic understanding of customer engagement behaviours that go beyond customer-firm purchase transactions is necessary (Beckers et al., 2014). Customer engagement models facilitate the understanding of the rationale behind the use of social media in tourism businesses. These models examine the behaviours of engaged customers in their interaction with companies.

Being one of the first models pertaining to how companies can manage and respond to customer engagement, the work by Van Doorn et al. (2010) prompted more research to be carried out in the field. These authors propose a three-step procedure involving (1) identifying the occurrence of customer engagement behaviours, (2) evaluating these behaviours, and then (3) taking the correct actions to manage these behaviours. Verhoef et al. (2010) also present a conceptual model of customer engagement consistent with Van Doorn's et al. (2010) definition of the concept of customer engagement. This model positions the concept as a behavioural manifestation toward the brand or firm that goes beyond transactions. The two models are vast in scope and remain conceptual in nature, with customer engagement being just one aspect of their larger model. This makes the application of such a model, in an empirical sense, on a particular service industry challenging. Whilst both models evaluate the impact of customer engagement and the importance of it, neither seeks to conduct a critical breakdown of components that constitute customer engagement.

In 2014, Beckers et al. put forward a model which identifies three customer engagement behavioural classifications identified within the extant literature. The first is customer-to-customer interactions, defined as communications between consumers about a company and/or brand (e.g., word-of-mouth behaviours). The second is customer co-creation in new product development, which represents a collaborative new product development activity in which consumers actively contribute and select various elements of a new product offering. Finally, active customer feedback represents the voice of the customer. This model emphasises the behaviours involved in customer engagements, and whilst the examination of theses classifications may

prove useful in this research, the nature of this particular model appears more applicable to a product sector rather than a service sector.

Research has been conducted since, to apply the concepts of customer engagement within a service industry framework. Two of the important studies that has done in this area are done by researchers, So et al. (2014) and Bowden (2014).

So et al. (2014) assert that the study of customer engagement to date has largely been conceptual in nature, with little empirical support underlying the development of theory. So et al. (2014) present a model which was the first effort to offer empirical support for the behaviours to be measured to capture customer engagement in marketing practice specific to the hospitality and tourism industry.

Another important model was proposed in 2014 by Bowden that expands on McEwen's (2004) definition of engagement as relating to a combination of rational and emotional bonds, by investigating the mechanisms by which these bonds might potentially form for new versus repeat purchase customers of a specific service brand. The model aims to elucidate the mechanisms by which an enduring state of loyalty may develop among new versus repeat purchase customers of a service brand.

In order to understand the role of social media in the customer engagement process in a service industry like tourism, it is important to evaluate the studies undertaken in that area. However, considering the fact that social media in marketing, especially customer engagement, is a new phenomenon, there is a scarcity of studies on this topic. Two studies conducted by Hellebeek (2011) and Sashi (2012) are particularly relevant to the objectives of this research paper. These are discussed below.

 Hellebeek (2011) presents an argument that the three underlying themes of customer engagement behaviours include immersion (perception that time flies in brand interactions), passion (strong, positive affect), and activation (willingness to spend significant time and/or effort interacting with the brand). Hellebeek et al. (2014) extend this line of inquiry by developing and validating a measurement scale which purports to capture customer engagement behaviour in social media settings. These authors (1) define the construct as a consumer's positively valenced brand-related

cognitive, emotional, and behavioural activity during or related to focal consumers/brand interactions; (2) derive three major dimensions of the construct, including cognitive processing, affection, and activation; and (3) develop a purportedly reliable and valid 10-item survey-based scale to measure the concept.

The evaluation of customer engagement within this research hopes to integrate the works of So et al. (2014) and Bowden (2014) and Hellebeek et al. (2011). So et al. (2014) and Bowden (2014) identified the customer engagement in the service sector and its impact (i.e. through interactions such as repeat purchases) while Hellebeek et al. (2011) stressed on the application of customer engagement within a social media setting. This research seeks to combine these aspects, to analyse the behaviours involved in customer engagement, evaluate how this takes place through social media and finally apply this to the tourism and hospitality sector. Schegg et al. (2008) and Wang et al. (2002) pointed out that tourism organisations that do not adopt social media will lack a competitive advantage and this research is focused on understanding the ways in which social media is utilised in the customer engagement activities by the Irish visitor attractions.

In order to cater to this, this research will adopt the customer engagement model, proposed by Sashi (2012). The simple step-by-step approach utilised by Sashi (2012) to examine customer engagement, will create a platform through which to conduct a thorough analysis of behaviours involved in customer engagement and relate them back to the area of research. The simplicity of Sashi's model allows this research to address every stage of customer engagement within the time limit of this study. Sashi's model evaluates the different steps in the customer engagement model and how the utilisation of social media can affect these steps. In this research, the application of this model is extended to the tourism sector which is explained in detail in the following section:

2.5.1. Customer engagement cycle

The process of building customer engagement constitutes a customer engagement cycle. By adopting a basic customer engagement model, this research seeks to evaluate how Irish visitor attractions are utilising social media in order to enhance their

relationship management. By doing so, ultimately this research hopes to create a clear understanding of the degree and nature of interaction between Irish visitor attractions and customers, and to offer recommendations to attractions on how relationship management can further be developed using social media.

In this research, it has been decided to adopt the customer engagement cycle shown below which has been put forward by Sashi (2012). This model constitutes of connection, interaction, satisfaction, retention, commitment, advocacy, and engagement.
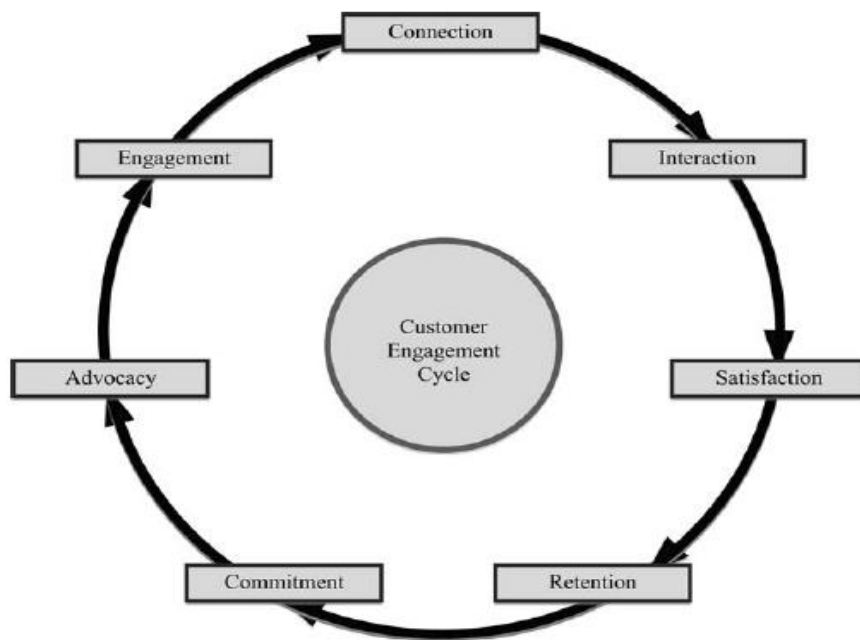
Figure 1. Customer engagement cycle

2.5.1.1. Connection

Connection is the first step of the adopted Customer Engagement Cycle model. A connection between a seller and buyer is the first and foremost step in creating an emotional bond with the customer. This connection can be established in many ways. Traditionally this was done using offline methods like one to one communication such as that from a salesperson to the customer. Whilst this sort of connection is still widely used, the development of technology, particularly that of Web 2.0, paved the way for individuals and companies to connect on an entirely new digital platform i.e. social media (Sashi, 2012).

When it comes to the service sector, businesses take into account the feedback or input from their customers while creating a service, and social media creates a platform that helps to gather this information which will aid them in formulating future strategies (Jonassen et al., 2003). Considering its immense potential, the internet should be used and managed in the most efficient way and as Kim and Hardin (2010) pointed out, virtual world technology provides an inexpensive means for collaboration and communication.

New communication and information technology is also closely related to the tourism sector. Many researchers like Pantelidis (2010) and Schmallegger & Carson (2008) pointed out that when it comes to tourism, social media provides an unprecedented opportunity for genuine interaction between visitor attractions and consumers or travellers. New technologies bring about a change in the activities, operation manners and communication methods of the tourism establishments (Karataş & Babür, 2013). Tourism marketing has now started to utilise the changing technology in order to better approach their target market.

If destination marketing cannot take place on the internet, it loses its connection to millions of people accessing the internet. Both the content provided and the way in which information is presented, play a key role in persuading potential tourists, towards a particular destination. The vast array of information available on the internet makes the comparison of destination websites inevitable and thus a differentiation must be made between them, potentially through comparisons based on the service and product experience provided by the destinations. As destination websites can be globally ranked by number of visits, regional and local establishments seek to not only join this ranking, but to maintain a high rank amongst it, in order to reach a larger mass and make benefit of the various other advantages of the internet. (Karakaş & Babür, 2013).

Thus, this research will investigate how Irish visitor attractions utilise social media to create a connection with their targeted audience. Once a (means for) connection between both parties is established then two-way communication can take place, and thus the next step of the cycle involves interaction.

2.5.1.2. Interaction

Customers are connected and that means they can now begin to interact with sellers or other customers. Consumers in the past used to ask for the opinions of the people around on a certain brand, product or establishment and this used to be known as Word of Mouth (WOM) in the marketing literature. The reach of such interaction was limited to a small circle of friends or family by different communication channels, such as letters or telephones. The development of computer-based communication has allowed for the sharing of personal comments and opinions on the internet with (Pollach, 2006). The internet also allows sellers to establish a continuing dialogue with customers, tap into knowledge shared among groups of customers with shared interests, and extend the reach and scope of customer interactions to reach competitors' or prospective customers (Sawhney et al., 2005).

Through social media, customers share not only knowledge, they typically also share experiences. With regard to the tourism sector, this type of interaction is particularly useful due to their intangible nature (Senecal & Nantel, 2004). The sharing of experiences includes not only knowledge-related aspects such as facts about holiday attributes (e.g. prices, weather conditions, beaches and other attractions) but may additionally include communicating emotions, imaginations and fantasies about features of a holiday, for example through photographs, emoticons and other linguistic markers in online communication (Baym, 2010). As the social media sites include comments and assessments, they influence the creation of the trademark of the tourism establishment, provide efficiency in the process of communication and marketing of the goods and services, increases the loyalty to the mark and the perceived (Wang & Hsieh, 2011).

This research seeks to understand the nature of interaction between Irish visitor attractions and targeted audience. This portal of communication derived from the connection and interaction with customers can not only feed into customer satisfaction but also allows for its feedback to reach the seller.

2.5.1.3. Satisfaction

Customer satisfaction is the measurement of how products or services supplied by a company meet or surpass a customer's expectation. Only if interactions between a seller and a customer, or among the members of a community including seller and

customers result in satisfaction will they stay connected and continue to interact with one another and progress towards engagement (Sashi, 2012). Satisfaction with interactions during a purchase process may precede or follow the purchase and dissatisfaction at any stage can disrupt the process and result in customer exit.

Satisfaction can lead to sharing a positive WOM via social networking tools. Online reviews and word of mouth recommendations are a growing and important information source because of the perceived independence of the message source (Crotts, 1999; Dellarocas, 2003; Johnson & Kayne, 2003; Thurau et al., 2004; Pan et al., 2007; Litvin et al., 2007).

In a tourism setting, consumer satisfaction refers to the extent to which the destination fulfills consumers' performance criteria (Correia et al., 2008). In a research conducted in Korean tourism sector (2014), Cho et al., pointed out that destination factors, such as the natural environment, the scenery, the culture, the availability of activities, facilities and entertainment, might be among the prime determinants of tourist satisfaction. There is a higher perceived credibility of opinions expressed in UGC compared with traditional tourism information sources. This is because of the fact that tourism experiences cannot be evaluated prior to consumption and thus personal recommendations are very influential (Buhalis, 1998; Gretzel et al., 2000; Litvin et al., 2008). In that context, it is very important to make sure that there is a high level of satisfaction among the travellers so that they will act as the advocates in a virtual media.

In regard to the relationship between tourist satisfaction and repeat visitation, as satisfaction increased, word-of-mouth activity also increases (Cho et al., 2014) and tourists who have enjoyed better than expected experiences are more likely to return in the future (Ross, 1993). The level of overall satisfaction with holiday experiences had the greatest impact on the intention to revisit the same destination (Kozak & Rimmington, 2000). Overall satisfaction and/or satisfaction with different aspects of a destination have a positive effect on a tourists' intention to revisit it or recommend it to others (Yoon & Uysal, 2005; Um et al., 2006; Caneen, 2003)

This research seeks to explore how social media can be used by visitor attractions to understand and create customer satisfaction. Ensuring that customers are satisfied

with their product/service, increases the possibility of retaining that customer as a long-term purchaser, whilst also developing a commitment, not unlike brand loyalty, from them.

2.5.1.4. Retention

Customer retention can be the result of either overall satisfaction or highly positive emotions. Overall satisfaction often occurs because of continuous purchases and might result in a long-term relationship even without positive emotions. Satisfaction or dissatisfaction with a previous experience is crucial because it may affect expectations for the next purchase (Kozak, 2001) and thus influence customer retention or motivate consideration of switching "brands". This means that favourable perceptions and attitudes are potentially an important source of competitive advantage.

The research conducted by Maecker et al. (2016) proposes that customer interactions create engagement value for the company, which has a positive effect on customer retention. Social media interactions that are driven by positive customer experiences would exert similar customer reactions and affect customer retention positively (Maercker et al., 2016). In particular, customer engagement, such as participation in positive e-WOM, increases the commitment and social identification with the brand as well as the brand community and leads to higher customer retention (Brodie et al., 2013).

There is an empirical support that when tourists have a more enjoyable experience than expected are more likely to have plans to return in the future than others (Ross, 1993). However, in the case of tourism often the chances for retention is probably low compared to other services considering the fact that tourist might not prefer to revisit the destination more than once (Siri et al., 2012).

If there is a strong positive emotion then a traveller (tourist) could have a commitment for that destination and it could act as a personal motivation for spreading positive e-WOM, which could entice potential customers into visiting the destination (Hsu & Kang, 2007; Kozak & Rimmington, 2000). This research explores the role of social media in the retention activities of the visitor attractions.

2.5.1.5. Commitment

Commitment constitutes of two dimensions namely affective commitment and calculative commitment. Calculative which is frequently referred to as continuance commitment is defined as the "perceived cost associated with leaving the organisation" (Meyer et al., 1993). The customer recognition of the cost is evaluated based on both switching costs and the availability of other alternatives (Gustafsson et al., 2005). Calculative commitment is therefore often associated with the development of "rational bonds" or utility driven bonds between the service provider, brand, and customer and it is often criticised on its inability to consider the emotional bonding between a provider and a customer (Hess & Story, 2005).

Affective commitment reflects the emotional attachment to an object (Allen & Meyer, 1990). It is the force that binds customers out of desire, customers' liking and positive feelings toward the company (Fullerton, 2003). The affective commitment is developed through a number of factors such as increase of customer satisfaction and trust (Bansal et al., 2004).

The satisfaction of tourists and any potential commitment derived from this satisfaction is formed by emotional and cognitive factors of tourism activities as well as other evaluative destination based factors (Allameh et al., 2014). It can therefore be inferred that affective commitment will tend to play an important role in determining customer engagement in the tourism industry. Tourist behaviour is affected by destination choice, perceived satisfaction and willingness to revisit and recommend the destination (Chen & Tsai, 2007, Hume et al., 2007; Ryu et al., 2010; Som et al., 2012). Thus, commitment derived by tourists towards the particular experience delivered by visitor attractions, plays a key role in their behaviour and future engagement whether by revisiting the destination or sharing positive e-WOM (Allameh et al., 2014).

This research tries to identify the role of social media in understanding and promoting commitment amongst customers. Customers who are more affectively committed also demonstrate higher levels of brand advocacy and a reduced tendency to switch brands (Mattila, 2001; Barsky & Nash, 2002).

2.5.1.6. Advocacy

Delighted customers may keep their delight to themselves or in a connected world interact with others in their social networks to spread the word about their positive experiences with a product, brand, or company. Loyal customers in long-term relationships with a product or service develop emotional bonds and will likely become advocates for a product or service or company (Sashi, 2012).

Online consumer reviews not only provide other consumers with information from real users of products and services, but they also act as WOM recommendations (Hyung-Park et al., 2007). Exposure to online consumer reviews increases the consumers' intention to purchase a product and maximises the likelihood that consumers will buy a recommended product (Hyung-Park et al., 2007; Senecal & Nantel, 2004).

Senecal and Nantel (2004) note that product recommendations from other consumers are even more important to prospective purchasers when an experiential product (e.g. intangible services such as tourism) is concerned as opposed to a tangible product. As per PhoCusWright (2009) nine out of ten cyber travellers read (and trusted) online reviews on tourism products and services (hotels, restaurants and destinations). It is common for potential tourists to scour the internet in order to inform their travel plans. They visit relevant social media sites before deciding on the travel due to the fact that they believe the virtual assessment to be useful for their purchasing decision (Sarıısık & Özbay, 2012). A satisfied tourist with a positive attitude towards the destination act as a brand advocate in the social media platforms and thus helps in creating a positive e-WOM which will influence the decision-making process of a potential traveller. This study tries to investigate to what extent Irish visitor attractions aim to promote online advocacy.

2.5.1.7. Engagement

The final step in the cycle is engagement which is also the overall objective of this cycle. When delighted or loyal customers share their delight or loyalty in interactions with others in their social networks and become advocates for a product, brand, or company, the foundation has been laid for proceeding to the next and perhaps most

important step in the cycle, customer engagement. Customer engagement consists of a mutual communication and social media provides a platform for that. Social networking sites allow consumers to engage with other customers to get information regarding goods and services or to express their opinions, behaviours, purchasing decisions and after purchase assessments. For the establishments, they provide a platform where they can market their productions (products), strengthen their brands and develop their customer relations (Albayrak, 2013).

Today, customers' increased level of consciousness, ease of sharing information and possibility of examining multiple comments in a virtual environment in the globalising world, make it possible for tourism destinations or establishments to be assessed by the consumers in a cheaper, faster and easier manner. As engaged customers develop new connections, they become advocates for the seller through interactions with other customers and non-customers. The exchange relationship between seller and customer and amongst customers, becomes more relational, and emotional bonds among them become stronger, and lead to new connections and interactions, creating a virtuous customer engagement cycle.

2.6. Conclusion

After evaluating every step of the customer engagement, it is evident that utilising each step is crucial for every business organisation in order to have a positive and long-lasting relationship with their customers. However, customer engagement through any media requires effort and Pantelidis' (2010) study demonstrated the importance of monitoring and managing electronic communications on social media. It enables the visitor attractions to have a better understanding about what their customers want from them and help them to find out the areas of improvement and enable suppliers to protect their brands and images.

What could be more detrimental than not understanding or adopting social media practices is using such practices in a poor manner (Schegg et al., 2008; Wang et al., 2002). In their study on evaluating social media marketing of hotels in Hong Kong, Chan and Guillet (2011) reported that most Hong Kong hotels failed to facilitate interactions and communications with their audience through social media platforms.

Also, they pointed out that a late reply from the side of a supplier can also be a critical issue as it shows that a company has a low responsiveness to its customers, thereby contributing to a potential loss of business. Here it is clear that those service providers failed to maintain a proper interaction with the customers, making them unsatisfied and this could probably create a negative advocacy by them. From these two examples, it is clear that evaluating the customer engagement cycle from a providers' point of view is very important for the success of a company.

One sizeable gap in the existing literature is research examining the use of social media by the tourism industry. Little research has been conducted to study how tourism entities are evolving with the Internet and using social media to market destinations and engage with potential consumers (Leung et al., 2013; Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014). Consequently, there is a lack of understanding of social media platforms and usage related to tourism. Xiang and Gretzel (2010) echo this fact noting that 'the extent to which social media constitute the online tourism domain is not well understood in an objective, comprehensive way'. The past studies are focused either too broad on the domain of online marketing (Chung & Law, 2003; Law & Ngai, 2005), or too narrow on a particular type of social media platforms such as blogs and user reviews (Chan, 2008; Ye, et al., 2009). Hence we can say that there is a lack of research that examines organisations' utilisation of social media in the customer engagement activities.

By keeping the above-mentioned facts, the following are the research questions of this study that are formulated with the help of the customer engagement model proposed by Sashi:

a) To examine how Irish visitor attractions utilise social media to create a connection with their targeted audiences.

b) To examine how Irish visitor attractions utilise social media to interact with their targeted audiences.

c) To examine how Irish visitor attractions utilise social media to understand and create customer satisfaction.

d) To examine how Irish visitor attractions utilise social media to retain their customers.

e) To examine how Irish visitor attractions utilise social media to understand and promote commitment amongst customers

f) To examine how Irish visitor attractions utilise social media to promote online advocacy amongst targeted audiences.

Tourism organisations that do not adopt social media in their marketing strategies will lack a competitive advantage (Schegg et al., 2008; Stankov et al., 2010; Wang et al., 2002). Hence, clear understanding of why and how the social media function is vital to tourism destination marketing. Thus, by answering all the above mentioned questions, it is expected to address the primary objective of this study, that is, the role of social media on the consumer engagement activities of Irish visitor attractions.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Introduction

Based on the research aim, research objective, and research questions, this chapter critically discusses the available options, and provides adequate justification, for all methodological decisions taken, describing the research process in depth.

Given that an understanding of the philosophy of research is considered as an essential prerequisite in conducting research, the chapter begins with a discussion of research enquiry paradigms. The choice of the research method adopted in this study is then substantiated. The chapter then goes on to develop an appropriate research methodology and the specific procedures used to collect and analyse primary data are detailed. Finally, the chapter concludes by acknowledging the ethical considerations of the research methodology.

3.2. Research aim, objectives, and Research questions

The discussion in the literature review revealed that there is an adequate number of studies that attempt to describe the role and impact of social media. However, the large majority of these studies employ a micro approach from a consumer's point of view, focusing either: (a) on a specific social medium application (e.g. Facebook); or (b) on a specific social media type (e.g. consumer review websites); or (c) on a specific stage of the travel process (e.g. before the trip); or (d) on a specific stage of the decision-making process (e.g. information search) (Fotis, 2015). Despite the advantages of such micro approaches, still the overall picture on the role and impact of social media on the consumer engagement process from a provider's point of view remains unclear.

A number of scholars suggest that published research on the influence of social media on tourism marketing has been very little (Schmallegger & Carson, 2008). Even that little research has been conducted to study how tourism entities are evolving with the Internet and using social media to market destinations and engage with potential consumers (Sashi, 2012). Xiang and Gretzel (2010, p.181) echo this fact noting that

'the extent to which social media constitute the online tourism domain is not well understood in an objective, comprehensive way'. Moreover, this literature gap is further strengthened by the fact that adoption levels and usage behaviour of social media are still in a state of constant change (Universal McCann 2008; 2009; 2010; Madden et al., 2013; Dewey, 2014). It seems therefore that there is a need of a comprehensive study on the overall impact of social media that is not medium or application specific, at the same time focuses equally on each stage of consumer engagement process (Sashi, 2012), to provide input on the current state of impact and role of social media on the consumer engagement activities of Irish visitor attractions.

By adopting a customer engagement model proposed by Sashi (2012), this research seeks to evaluate how Irish visitor attractions are utilising social media in order to enhance their relationship management. By doing so, ultimately this research aims to create a clear understanding of the degree and nature of interaction between Irish visitor attractions and audience, and to offer recommendations to visitor attractions on how customer engagement activities can further be developed using social media.

The primary objective of this study is,
To examine the role of social media as a customer engagement tool for Irish visitor attractions.
To reach to this primary objective, the following are the research questions that have been developed through the application of the Customer Engagement Model proposed by Sashi (2012),

a) To examine how Irish visitor attractions utilise social media to create a connection with their targeted audiences.

b) To examine how Irish visitor attractions utilise social media to interact with their targeted audiences.

c) To examine how Irish visitor attractions utilise social media to understand and create customer satisfaction.

d) To examine how Irish visitor attractions utilise social media to retain their customers.

e) To examine how Irish visitor attractions utilise social media to understand and promote commitment amongst customers.

f) To examine how Irish visitor attractions utilise social media to promote online advocacy amongst targeted audiences.

3.3. Research enquiry paradigms

An understanding of philosophy of research is an essential prerequisite in conducting research.
It provides awareness of the available philosophical alternatives, but also assists the adoption of a philosophical stance that influences, or even determines, informed decisions about research
strategy and methods to be adopted. In social sciences, and in consumer research in particular, the quest between the different paradigms "that guide disciplined enquiry", is evident during the last 30 years (Fotis, 2015).

A paradigm, a term popularised by Kuhn (1962), is perceived as

> ...a set of basic beliefs (or metaphysics) that deals with ultimates or first principles. It represents a worldview that defines, for its holder, the nature of the world, the individual's place in it, and the range of possible relationships to that world and its parts" (Guba & Lincoln, 1998, p.200).

A paradigm can also be seen as a "general orientation about the world and the nature of research that a researcher holds" (Creswell, 2009, p.6), or even as a "net that contains the researcher's epistemological, ontological, and methodological premises" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p.22). Inquiry paradigms relate paradigms to research and researchers, defining what is there to be found, thus creating a research culture including, in addition to beliefs, "...values and assumptions that a community of researchers has in common regarding the nature and conduct of research" (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004, p.24). From a more practical stance, Sarantakos (2005) perceives paradigms as "packages" of ontological, epistemological and methodological prescriptions that guide research.

Paradigms address three fundamental questions in the form of axiomatic components, or basic beliefs (Guba & Lincoln, 1998; Sarantakos, 2005):

• **The ontological question**: What is the nature of reality? Objective, constructed, subjective? What is there in the world that can be known about it?

• **The epistemological question**: How do we know what we know? What is the relationship between what can be known and the inquirer (researcher)? What kind of knowledge is our research looking for?

• **The methodological question**: How do we gain knowledge in the world? How the enquirer goes about to find out what he/she thinks can be known? It should be stated however that the methodological question is not limited to a choice of methods (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005), that is to the choice of the instruments employed in data collection and analysis. It is methods that fit into a methodology, the latter defined as 'a research strategy that translates ontological and epistemological principles into guidelines that show how research is to be conducted' (Sarantakos, 2005, p.30).

The academic literature evidences the existence of a number of paradigms, and also several variations, or versions within each paradigm (Guba & Lincoln, 1998, cited in Fotis, 2015, Sarantakos, 2005; Creswell, 2009). For example, Guba and Lincoln (1994, cited in Fotis, 2015) consider four major paradigms: positivism, post-positivism, critical theory, and constructivism. In their later work, however they include the participatory/cooperative paradigm (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, cited in Fotis, 2015). Onwuegbuzie et al. (2009) and Creswell (2009) added pragmatism to the list of pardigms, but do not present neither positivism nor critical theory, the latter being considered as a qualitative theoretical perspective and not as a paradigm.

Towards the adoption of a research paradigm for the purposes of this study, the discussion below presents briefly five of the most cited research paradigms, namely: positivism, post-positivism, constructivism, participatory/cooperative, and pragmatism

Table 3.1. Research paradigms *(Source – Fotis, 2015)*

Research Paradigm	Ontological Position	Epistemological Position	The methodological question
Positivism	It is based on the pillars of naive realism proposing that there is a single reality consisting of what is directly perceived through human senses.	It proposes a dualist and objectivist view, that is the inquirer should be independent from the object of the study to avoid influence and bias so that to achieve true, objective and replicable findings.	It can be measured through empirical, primarily quantitative methods, that are used to verify hypotheses
Post-positivism	It is based on the pillars of critical realism proposing that an approximate, imperfect, and probabilistic understanding of reality can be achieved only through critical examination.	It abandons dualism accepting that researchers are subjective and therefore able only to approximate reality.	It proposes empirical observation and measurement. However, it encourages qualitative techniques to enable researchers solicit viewpoints, collection of situational information and use of more natural settings for research
Constructivism	It assumes multiple realities that are locally constructed. These realities are mental constructions that are socially and experientially based, therefore their content and form are based on each individual's understanding and interpretation of the world within he/she lives and operates.	It supports that the inquirer and the object are interactively linked. Therefore, knowledge is created as the investigation and the interaction proceeds, based on the participant's views about the object, or the phenomenon under study.	It adopts a hermeneutical and dialectical approach using all forms of qualitative techniques.
Participatory / Cooperative	It proposes a subjective-objective reality: What can be known consists of a subjectively articulated world that is objective in relation to how it is shaped by the knower.	It supports that there are four interdependent ways of knowing based on critical subjectivity: experiential, presentational, propositional and practical.	It is based on cooperative inquiry not only among co-researchers, but also among the informants who are involved in all aspects of research decision-making.
Pragmatism	It is oriented towards problems of the real world, however accepting that there are multiple "existential" realities consisting of different layers, or elements, each of which can be objective, subjective or both.	It supports that knowledge is both based on the reality we experience within the world we live in, but it is also constructed	It enables researchers instead of focusing on methods, to focus on the research problem, on the approaches to understand it and on its consequences to the real world. The ontological belief that there are different layers of reality enables pragmatism to provide the philosophical basis for mixed methods research.

3.3.1. The choice of a paradigm

Is a research paradigm really a matter of choice? It is the researcher's own set of beliefs, developed over lifetime, that provides different answers to the three fundamental questions (i.e. ontological, epistemological, and methodological) that each different paradigm addresses. These answers result in different views of the world and how the researcher acts within it. As a result, it is these answers that lead to the adoption of a research paradigm. Furthermore, each paradigm addresses differently a number of practical consequences, or answers to practical issues faced when conducting research, such as inquiry aim, nature of knowledge, knowledge accumulation, goodness of quality criteria, values, ethics, voice, training, accommodation, and hegemony (Jennings, 2005; Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009). The choice of a specific paradigm further informs the choice of methods, research designs and instruments (Sarantakos, 2005), although it has been suggested that "both qualitative and quantitative methods may be used appropriately with any research paradigm" (Guba & Lincoln, 1998, p.195 cited in Fotis, 2015)

Apart from the researcher's personal beliefs, there are different views on how researchers select their paradigm. First, it should be made clear that paradigms are axiomatic, cannot be proven or disproven as they are all human constructs and therefore subject to human error (Guba & Lincoln, 1998, cited in Fotis, 2015). Creswell (2009) suggests that a researcher's worldview is influenced by (a) the researcher's discipline area; (b) the beliefs of supervisors' and other faculty; and (c) the researcher's past research experiences. On the contrary, Jennings (2005, p.214) from a rather pragmatic perspective supports that "the issue is not which paradigm is better, but rather which best serves the research purposes and the current world context". However, Guba and Lincoln (1998, p.219 cited in Fotis, 2015) admit that "workday scientists rarely have either the time or the inclination to assess what they do in philosophical terms".

Based on the above discussion, and also the discussion on paradigms, the researcher feels the need to admit her pragmatic orientation: The choice of method should not be axiomatic and therefore dictated by an inclination towards one or another paradigm. The choice of method should rather be the result of an informed decision, based on

the particular requirements of the specific research problem to be solved. Philosophical activity should aim in addressing problems rather than building philosophical systems. As a result, the researcher is in agreement with Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) who call for a preference to action rather than philosophising. This does not mean that the author is a pragmatist by dogma. The author is in full agreement with Patton (2002, p.71-72) who suggests that:

> While a paradigm offers a coherent worldview, an anchor of stability and certainty in the real world sea of chaos, operating narrowly within any singular paradigm can be quite limiting. As a pragmatist, I take issue as much as with the purist, one sided advocacy of Lincoln and Guba (1985), who believe that naturalistic inquiry is the only valid and meaningful way to study human beings, as I do with the narrow, intolerant stance of Boruch and Rindskopf (1984), who assert that randomised experiments are "the standard against which other designs for impact evaluation are judged" (p.21). My pragmatic stance aims to supersede one-sided paradigm allegiance by increasing the concrete and practical methodological options available to researchers and evaluators. […] Being pragmatic allows one to eschew methodological orthodoxy in favour of methodological appropriateness as the primary criterion for judging methodological quality, recognising that different methods are appropriate for different situations.

Being a business graduate, the researcher has been conditioned to focus on problems, and on the selection of the appropriate, for each time, tools to solve them the best possible way given the constraints at hand.

The flexibility provided by the author's pragmatic approach, enables the author to admit that the present study's aim, objective and research questions would benefit from an Interpretivist perspective. The core belief of interpretivism states that reality is created by social agents, which needs context to render it comprehensible. It places emphasis on the principle that knowledge is subjectively acquired, and not discovered (Lynch, 2008).

Interpretivism seems that serves best the aim, objectives and research questions of this study due to the very nature of social media. As discussed in Chapter 2, social media facilitate the creation and sharing of user generated content and how that can be utilised by companies for their best interest. The interpretation of such shared content

not only generates different perceptions among recipients, therefore different 'realities', but also acts as stimuli for further interaction among users. Further justification for the interpretative viewpoint is because the research explores a complex phenomenon and attempts to build a clear image of it in its natural setting by interpreting the meanings created by both the actors within it and the researcher (Creswell, 2003).

3.4. Reasoning in research

There are two broad methods of reasoning used in research, namely: inductive reasoning and deductive reasoning (Social Research Methods, 2006; Bryman, 2008). These lie at opposite ends of the spectrum.

3.4.1. Inductive versus Deductive reasoning

Inductive reasoning is concerned with the "discovery" of theory (Dewey, 1933, cited in Gray, 2009, p. 14). It moves from small fragmented observations to "broader generalisations and theories" and, so, tends to be open-ended, exploratory and subjective in nature (Social Research Methods, 2006; Gray, 2009). It is often informally referred to as a "bottom up" approach (Social Research Methods, 2006).

On the other hand, deductive reasoning is concerned with "proof" and, so, aims to test theory rather than develop it (Dewey, 1933, cited in Gray, 2009, p. 14; Creswell, 2014). Deductive reasoning moves from a general, broader view back to more specific particulars (Social Research Methods, 2006; Gray, 2009). Consequently, it is often informally referred to as a "top down" approach (Social Research Methods, 2006). Inductive and deductive reasoning can be compared and summarised as follows:

Inductive Reasoning	Deductive Reasoning
⇩	⇩
Observation/Findings	Theory
⇩	⇩
Theory	Observation/Findings
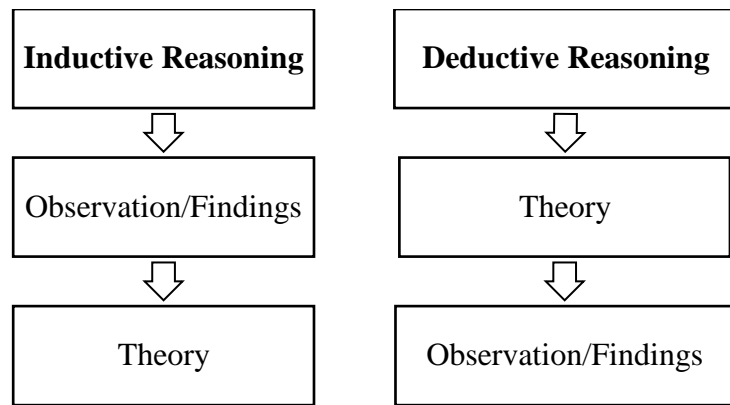
Figure 3.1. Inductive versus Deductive Reasoning (adapted by the researcher from Bryman, 2008, p. 11)

3.4.2. Selected method of reasoning

The present study does not attempt to test a specific theory, thus to search for causal explanations. Therefore, it does not follow a deductive route that usually necessitates the adoption of a quantitative approach. The present study attempts to explore a phenomenon through a wide-angle lens, thus to provide an understanding and description of participants' experiences and life world, in an effort to contribute towards the generation of a theory. This study is exploratory in nature and adopts an inductive approach seeking to explore the nature and degree of the usage of social media among tourism destinations.

3.5. Research methodology

Once the philosophical aspects of research have been addressed (i.e. ontology and epistemology), the next step is to determine the most appropriate research methodology. There are two consecutive steps involved in determining the most appropriate methodology (Blaxter et al., 2006, p. 61):

1. Research *Family* selection (i.e. Methodological Strategy); and
2. Research *Approach* selection (i.e. Methodological Design).
3.

3.5.1. Step 1: Methodological strategy

In every quest, researchers are faced with a choice of appropriate methodological research strategies (Bryman, 2008; Gray, 2009; Creswell, 2014). Selection of the most appropriate strategy should be linked to three factors: the research problem; the researcher's ontological position; and the researcher's epistemological position (Bryman, 2008; Creswell, 2014). Two main strategies are:

1. A Qualitative Strategy; or
2. A Quantitative Strategy.

Alternatively, researchers may opt to use a combination of both a qualitative and a quantitative strategy. This is referred to as a mixed method approach and "is becoming increasingly recognised as the third major research [strategy]" (Johnson et al., 2007, cited in Gray, 2009, p. 203). Mixed methods research is the method ''in which the researcher gathers both quantitative (closed-ended) and qualitative (open-ended) data, integrates the two and then draws interpretations based on the combined strengths of both sets of data to understand research problems'' (Creswell, 2014, p. 2). Mixed method approach is also gaining importance in social media research.

Creswell (2007) argues that as a methodology mixed method research focuses on philosophical assumption/s or worldview/s, such as pragmatism, which then adds a complexity to the research. He argues that all research unquestionably has an underlying philosophical assumption or worldview that guides the inquirer, and in the case of mixed methods this may be one worldview or multiple worldviews. From the perspective, Creswell and others emphasise it is the techniques or methods of data collection and analysis that are the key to mixed method research (Creswell & Clark, 2007).

For the purpose of this research Creswell's definition of mixed method inquiry will be utilised as it incorporates a philosophical worldview, pragmatism, and accommodates the notion of mixed methods as a methodology whilst stressing the importance of method. The fundamental principle of mixed method research is that the combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches provides a better understanding of the problem than either approach can achieve alone (Creswell & Clark, 2007; Elliott,

2005; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003). Support of this central concept can be made in several areas.

Firstly, mixed methods research provides strength to the weaknesses of quantitative and qualitative research; this suited the current study as we wanted to ensure we had a rigorous approach to a complex issue. While quantitative research allows for statistical analysis, qualitative research allows for the collection of 'relatively detailed information about relatively few cases' (Veal, 2009, p. 99). Secondly, researchers are able to draw on a wide range of tools of data collection in order to comprehensively study a problem; an important consideration for a complex study as we proposed. Thirdly, Mixed methods research helps answer questions that cannot be answered by a singular approach and encourages collaboration of researchers across the two fields of inquiry.

Thus, by employing both quantitative and qualitative methods, this research seeks to gain a well-rounded analysis and understanding of the use of social media by Irish visitor attractions. Mixed method research encourages the use of multiple worldviews and paradigms and is seen as a practical approach to research. This practicality of mixed methods research focuses on the notion that individuals tend to problem solve using both numbers and words. As our study adopted a pragmatic approach to answer the research question (Creswell & Clark, 2007), both qualitative and quantitative methods will be utilised to examine in what ways, and for what purposes, Irish visitor attractions are employing social media in the consumer engagement activities.

3.5.2. Step 2: Methodological design

Having determined the appropriate methodology strategy it is important to identify the structure in which this strategy can be utilised through. Therefore, the next step is to determine the most appropriate methodological design (Blaxter et al., 2006).

> You can never empirically or logically determine the best approach [i.e. design]. This can only be done reflectively by considering a situation to be studied and your own opinion of life . . . [we cannot] rank one approach above another . . . The only thing we can do is try to make explicit the special characteristics on which the various approaches are based (Arbnor & Bjerke, 1997, quoted by Blaxter et al., 2006, p. 58)

A research design is a framework for the collection and analysis of data and it reflects the priorities given to a range of dimensions of the research process (Bryman, 2001). Hence, selection of one's methodological design should be also based upon its applicability to one's: ontological position; epistemological position; research problem; and methodological strategy (Blaxter et al., 2006).

Research design is simply a technique for collecting data from the sample which includes one or two specific instruments (Bryman, 2001). Before selecting an appropriate design, it is important to consider the previous studies in this field. So, the following table has been prepared to understand the previous studies that have been conducted in this field.

Table 3.2. Research methods used in previous studies

Authors	Year	Title/Topic	Research Method
Akehurst	2008	User generated content: the use of blogs for tourism organisations and tourism consumers	Qualitative method – content analysis
Miguens et al.	2008	Social media and Tourism Destinations: TripAdvisor Case Study	Qualitative method – case study
Xiang & Gretzel	2009	Role of social media in online travel information search	Qualitative method - content analysis
Hays, et al.	2013	Social media as a destination marketing tool: its use by national tourism organisations	Mixed method research – content analysis and semi structured interviews
Hudson & Thal	2013	The impact of Social media on the customer decision process: Implications for tourism marketing	Qualitative method - Social network analysis
Leung et al.	2013	Social media in tourism and hospitality	Qualitative method - Systematic article review and Content analysis
Rosman & Stuhura	2013	The implication of social media on customer relationship management and the hospitality industry	Qualitative method – Case study
Maria & Jacobsen	2014	Motivation of sharing tourism experience through social media	Qualitative method - Survey
Zeng & Gerristen	2014	What do we know about social media in tourism?	Qualitative method - systematic article review
Roque & Raposo	2016	Social media as a communication and marketing tool in tourism: an analysis of online activities from international key player DMO	Mixed method research – Content Analysis

The above table shows that most of the studies have adopted a qualitative strategy. However, a mixed method approach was adopted by Hays et al. (2013), Roque & Raposo (2016) and Eskali et al. (2017) to conduct research from visitor attractions' point of view. Thus, for this study also it has been decided that Mixed method approach will be suitable.

When it comes to mixed method research, there is a finite set of design typologies that researchers can adapt (Creswell, 2015; Creswell & Clark, 2011). Out of these mixed method research designs, Concurrent triangulation design is adopted for this study. Concurrent triangulation design is a commonly used mixed method research design as it allows the researcher to use two different methods (quantitative and qualitative methods) in order to confirm or cross-validate findings within a single study (Morgan, 1998, Tashakkori et al., 2003). This method often uses quantitative and qualitative methods in order to offset weaknesses inherent in one method with the strength of other method (Tashakkori et al., 2003, Creswell, 2015). This design is known as a traditional mixed method research and it integrates the findings of both data collection methods in the interpretation stage (Tashakkori et al., 2003).

The research approach of this study will be qualitative in the form of semi-structured interview and analysis of social media content and quantitative in the form of content analysis including social media analytics.

3.5.2.1. Semi-structured interviews

Qualitative research in the form of semi-structured interviews are sought to gain an understanding of how and why certain social media initiatives are (or are not) chosen and implemented. Semi-structured interviews which are a type of qualitative research methods proves particularly useful in understanding the extent to which the tourism-marketing professionals utilise social media in their consumer engagement activities (Hays et al, 2013). Qualitative research provides insights to quantitative research to gain an understanding about how visitor attractions' social media strategies are spoken of and conceived.

Polit and Beck (2006) define an interview as: 'A method of data collection in which one person (an interviewer) asks questions of another person (a respondent).' There are three forms of structural layout for interviews: structured, semi-structured, and unstructured. Structured interviews are formal and consist of a set of predetermined questions ensuring that responses from multiple interviewees are easily comparable. This approach ensures that all interviewees are given the same questions, in the same order. Secondly, there is the semi-structured interview, which can result in variation

of questions from interview to interview. However, interviewers should have a grouping of topics and questions that the interviewer can ask in different ways for different participants, prepared in advance (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). This facilitates the interviewers to concentrate on important topics without being restricted to a rigid format. This freedom can help interviewers to adapt questions to the interview situation as well as to the interviewee (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Finally, the unstructured interview is very informal and can be used to deeply examine a general area of study without the use of pre-set questions. Questions can be modified in accordance to inferences gathered by the interviewer with regard to the respondent's intelligence, understanding or belief.

For the purposes of this thesis, semi-structured interviews with both management and/or the employees responsible for the social media promotion were employed. Semi-structured interviews typically refer to the context in which the interviewer has a series of questions that are in the general form of an interview schedule but is able to vary the sequence of questions (Bryman, 2008). Also, the interviewer has some freedom to ask further questions if necessary. The following are the key features of semi-structured interviews suggested by Bloom and Crabtree (2006):

- Scheduled in advance at a designated time.
- Location normally outside everyday events.
- Organised around a set of predetermined questions.
- Other questions emerge from dialogue.
- Usually last from 30 minutes to several hours.

In this research study, researcher outlined a set of issues to be explored with each participant before commencing the interview (Patton, 1990), incorporating a set of broad questions for both managers and staff. All interviews were conducted in-person, at the offices of each tourism organisation and interviews lasted one to one and a half hours. Interview questions were designed to gain additional insight that the content analysis could not provide, but also allowed room for the interviewee to contribute any information they deemed relevant to the use of social media to market tourism destinations.

As with any interview process, the qualitative nature sometimes resulted in subjective opinions, or biased responses from interviewees. This though, is complemented by the content analysis, which attempts to provide a more objective analysis. Ultimately, the data gleaned from the interviews and the data collected from the content analysis was combined to develop a comprehensive representation of the use of social media among the Irish visitor attractions.

3.5.2.2. Content analysis

Content analysis was chosen as one of the research strategies for this study to classify, measure and analyse how selected Irish visitor attractions utilise social media to engage with consumers. Social media are relatively new, so the way and degree with which visitor attractions utilise social media as part of their marketing efforts vary considerably (Hayes et al., 2013). Information, posts, tweets, blog entries, and other forms of content exist freely on the web, but due to the relative infancy of the technology, there is comparatively little research to assess, explain, or even examine these forms of marketing, advertising, and business-to-consumer interactions (Hayes et al., 2013). Content analysis is one of the most appropriate research method for this research since 'the pursuit of content analysis is fundamentally empirical in orientation, exploratory, concerned with real phenomena, and predictive in intent' (Krippendorf, 1980, cited in Hays et al., 2013). So, the content analysis in this study is used to 'describe trends in communication content' (Berelson, 1952, cited in Hays et al., 2013).

Content Analysis can be defined as "an observational research method that is used to systematically evaluate the symbolic content of all forms of recorded communications" (Kolbe & Burnett, 1991, cited in Camprubí & Coromina, 2016). According to Berg (2009) this method can be seen as a careful, detailed, systematic examination and interpretation of a particular body of material in an effort to identify patterns, themes, biases, and meanings; and can be considered as a "phase of information-processing in which communications content is transformed, through objective and systematic application of categorisation rules, into data that can be summarised and compared" (Paisley, 1969, p.133 cited in Camprubí & Coromina, 2016).

Content analysis comprised the most commonly used analytic approach across this group of qualitative and mixed methods research studies. In content analysis studies, researchers used social media content such as Facebook posts, tweets (Twitter posts), and YouTube videos as a data source (Snelson, 2016). Quantitative analysis was chosen to incorporate as much data and scope of social media activity as possible. Content analysis as a method of gathering information requires correct codifying of qualitative and quantitative information into pre- defined categories in order to derive patterns in the analysis and reporting of information (Thia & Ross, 2011).

By adopting quantitative Content analysis as one of the preferred research method allowed the researcher to 'use a set of procedures to make valid inferences from text' (Weber, 1990). And in the qualitative content analysis the qualitative data that have been collected from social media sites and are analysed to create some form of explanation, understanding or interpretation of the people and situations (Taylor et al, 2010).

Through the content analysis of visitor attractions' primary social media platforms, it was possible to understand how these platforms are employed. However, content analysis also has some limitations that must be considered. Hall and Valentin (2005) state that the application of the method depends on the skills and appropriate exercise of judgement on the part of the researcher and appropriate reflection on the research process. Also, content analysis does not specifically examine the strategies employed in the use of social media. For these reasons, this study also used semi-structured interviews as a second strand of research to contextualise and assist the understanding the use of social media in a strategic marketing context.

3.6. Research sample

Once the methodological design had been finalised, the researcher was then able to proceed with data collection. The final step in Grix's (2002, p. 180) "building blocks of research" framework is concerned with identifying exactly where the desired data can be sourced. So, once the research design had been finalised, the researcher then needed to identify appropriate participants to complete it.

The first step in achieving this was to define the population of interest i.e. the exact units, in this case visitor attractions, to be included in the study (Bryman, 2008; Gray, 2009). The emphasis on participants' selection is on specific characteristics that they possess that are meaningful to the aim and the objective of the study, enabling them to provide rich data, rather than on the equal chance that they have to be selected (Patton, 2002; Ritchie et al., 2003). The population of interest for the purpose of this study was defined as the visitor attractions in South East Ireland.

Once the population had been defined, a sample (i.e. a segment from the population) then needed to be selected to participate in the study. The selected sample would be used to represent the overall population (Bryman, 2008; Gray, 2009; Field, 2009).

Probability and non-probability are the two main sampling strategies. Non-probability sampling is the method of choosing a sample not randomly and implies that some units are more likely to be chosen than others (Patton 2002; Ritchie et al., 2003). If non-probability sampling is used sampling bias may occur as human judgement will be used in the selection process with some units more likely to be selected than others (Patton 2002; Ritchie et al., 2003). In contrast probability sampling uses a selection of units that have been chosen randomly with each unit having a chance of being selected (Creswell, 1998). This method is used to avoid sampling error and sampling bias.

Scholars seem to have different approaches on the types of sampling methods available when it comes to non-probability sampling. Marshall (1996) proposes three broad approaches: Convenience sample, judgement (or purposeful) sample, and theoretical sample. Patton (2002) considers that all sampling in qualitative research is purposeful and proposes 15 strategies for sample selection with convenience being one of those. Creswell (1998, p.118) acknowledges that "the purposeful selection of participants represents a key decision point in a qualitative study" and recommends researchers to examine Miles and Huberman's (1994) 16 strategies for purposeful sampling.

It is not among the aims of this study to further discuss the taxonomical issues of qualitative sampling. However, it is evident that convenience sampling, thus selecting the most convenient and accessible participants, is the least rigorous strategy. However, it is noteworthy that this convenience is at the expense of credibility and quality of data (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Marshall, 1996) and therefore it is not adopted in this study. Theoretical sampling, or "theory based" sampling (Miles & Huberman, 1994) is usually proposed for grounded theory studies: "The investigator chooses participants based on their ability to contribute to an evolving theory" (Creswell 1998, p.118). Given that the present effort is not a grounded theory study, theoretical sampling is not adopted.

Purposive (or purposeful or judgement) sampling is a typical choice in qualitative research (Marshall 1996; Bryman 2008), to the extent that Patton (2002) proposes that all sampling in qualitative research is purposeful. In contrast to convenience sampling, where participants are selected among those conveniently available by chance (not randomly) to the researcher, purposive sampling recruits participants that are relevant to the research questions (Bryman, 2008). This relevance is often assured with specific criteria that participants should meet, a reason behind the fact that Ritchie et al., (2003) use the term "criterion-based sampling" as a synonym to purposive sampling:

> The sample units are chosen because they have particular features or characteristics which will enable detailed exploration and understanding of the central themes and puzzles which the researcher wishes to study. These may be socio-demographic characteristics, or may relate to specific experiences, behaviours, roles, etc." (Ritchie et al., 2003, p.78).

Scholars, such as Patton (2002) and LeCompte et al. (1993) who suggest that all sampling in qualitative research is purposive, do propose criterion sampling as one of the sampling strategies. Within the context of the present study, purposive sampling was used as a sampling method, in an effort to achieve a higher quality of data and credibility at least when compared with convenience sampling.

For the purpose of this piece of research, a non-probability sampling strategy was employed as no definitive list of the population was obtainable. This led the researcher

to adopt a purposive sampling technique, which involved strategically selecting companies believed to be representative of the defined population and relevant to the research questions (Gray, 2009).

A purposeful sample of visitor attractions in the South-East Ireland was selected. The rationale behind choosing the participated visitor attractions was that they were well-established visitor attractions and were listed in the list of top tourist attractions in Ireland's Ancient East by Failte Ireland. These are Irish National Heritage Park, Loftus Hall, Kilkenny Castle (OPW) and Waterford Crystal. A detailed interview with Failte Ireland was also conducted. The chosen sample of visitor attractions have been marketing their visitor's attraction site over a long-time period and some have begun to adopt digital marketing approaches. Most of them have expanded their efforts to include adopting social media platforms as part of their marketing efforts.

In order to conduct the semi-structured interviews, an internet search was conducted in order to verify the address of each company. Furthermore, it also allowed the researcher to identify a specific individual within each company with whom the interview would be done. Given the content and nature of the interviews, it was decided to primarily target Marketing Managers. In cases where specific marketing personnel could not be identified, the researcher targeted individuals who were likely to be knowledgeable about the company's social media marketing activities.

For the content analysis, firstly, the main social media platforms that are used by the visitor attractions was identified. These platforms were Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube. Then content analysis of the social media activities on the peak period of the visitor attractions was done. Peak periods are the months that every tourism attractions identified as the time span in which they received most visitors. The peak period was the months of July and August for Irish National Heritage Park, Waterford Crystal and Kilkenny Castle. The peak period for Loftus hall was identified as October and November. Also, for the content analysis the social media analytics of the participants was requested. While, two of the visitor attractions, Waterford Crystal and Loftus Hall, gave the social media analytics, other two participants declined the requests.

3.7. Data analysis

Whilst the methodological structure and design seek to identify the type of data that needs to be extracted and the framework utilised to extract it, the data collected must then be made into a form that is useful to the researcher; this process is data analysis. In selecting a method of data analysis, it is important that the method matches "what the researcher wants to know" (Braun & Clarke 2006, p.80), therefore matches the requirements of the project's aim and objectives. As a result, it is the aim and the objectives that inform the choice of the data analysis method.

In the present study, it is important that the selected analysis method should be able to provide patterns for organising: (a) social media usage during each of the stages of the customer engagement cycle, and (b) its impact on consumer engagement activities by visitor attractions. Those patterns should at the minimum assist in organising and describing the phenomenon under investigation which is to understand the role social media in the customer engagement activities of the Irish visitor attractions, or at maximum provide interpretation in some aspects of the same phenomenon.
The data analysis was done in both qualitative and quantitative phases of the study. A detailed framework for the analysis, both qualitative and quantitative, is deemed necessary.

3.7.1. Data analysis of qualitative data

It is noticeable that there are numerous data analysis methods in qualitative research that provide identification of patterns or themes such as conversation analysis, interpretive phenomenological analysis, discourse analysis, narrative analysis, thematic analysis, or even grounded theory (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Bryman, 2008). However, most of them are tied to specific epistemological and theoretical traditions. For example, interpretive phenomenological analysis is associated with a phenomenological epistemology, while analysis via a grounded Theory approach is directed towards development of a theory. On the contrary, thematic analysis is seen as a flexible method that is independent of theory and epistemology, therefore "it can be applied across a range of theoretical and epistemological approaches" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.78). Based on the above discussion, as well on the researcher's

pragmatic approach in this study, it was decided that thematic analysis should be employed as the data analysis method.

Thematic analysis has been defined as "a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.78). Thematic analysis has been described as "one of the most common approaches to qualitative data analysis" (Bryman, 2008, p.554) and as a "foundational method for qualitative analysis" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.78). Two advantages of thematic analysis are that (a) it provides a set of generic analysis skills that can be commonly shared among a variety of qualitative analysis methods (Holloway & Todres, 2003); and (b) it is more appropriate for novice qualitative researchers as it does not requires the theoretical and technological knowledge of other analysis methods such as grounded theory and discourse analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) for thematic analysis, served as the basis for the analysis process employed in the present study.

Table 3.3. Phases of thematic analysis

Phase	Description of Process
1. Familiarising yourself with your data:	Transcribing data reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas.
2. Generating initial codes:	Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code.
3. Searching for themes:	Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme.
4. Reviewing themes:	Checking the themes in relation to the coded extracts and the entire data set, generating a thematic 'map' of the analysis.
5. Defining and naming themes:	On-going analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells; generating clear definitions and names for each theme.

		The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back of the analysis to the research question and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis.
6. Producing the report:		

Source: Braun and Clarke (2006)

For this study, semi structured interviews were semi-structured and sought to gain an understanding of how and why certain social media initiatives are (or are not) chosen and implemented. A list of open- ended questions was formulated pertaining to this objective, though any additional, relevant information from the interviewee was accepted. The interviews provided very detailed information to enhance the results obtained from the content analysis.

3.7.2. Data analysis of content analysis

After finalising an appropriate design for the qualitative analysis, it is important to do the same for the quantitative analysis also. Content analysis is the chosen quantitative method for this research. Content analysis is defined as:

> a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the context of their use" (Krippendorff, 2013, p. 24).

Hence, the focus of content analysis is looking at data within its context. That is, analysing text, pictures and other forms of expression by trying to understand what meaning is attached to them, what is trying to be conveyed or what the communication enables. Furthermore, the benefit of content analysis is that it can be used to analyse a large number of different types of data, and it is also completely unobtrusive compared to other methods, as for example focus groups or netnography (Krippendorff, 2013).

Similar to a normal research process that consist of problem definition, research approach, research design, fieldwork or data collection, data integrity and analysis and report preparation and presentation (Malhotra et al., 2012), the components of a content analysis also consists of six steps (Krippendorff, 2013).

Table 3.4. Phases of content analysis

Phase	Description of Process
1. Unitising	The researcher decides what social media posts will be included in the analysis, making sure to keep together units of text that create meaning.
2. Sampling	The researcher limits the set of units, making sure it represents the total set of units or population researched.
3. Recording/coding	The data is recorded and coded to make it easier to compare and assess, and present to the readers.
4. Reducing data to manageable representations	The researcher reduces the data to ensure the "need for efficient representations, especially of large volumes of data."
5. Abductively inferring contextual phenomena	The researcher analyses the data and discuss findings or interesting observations in the text.
6. Narrating the answer to the research question	The researcher presents the final results so they are understandable to others

For this study, data extracted from the official Facebook pages and twitter accounts of these visitor attractions were analysed for the content analysis section. Content analysis can code words, word senses, sentences, or themes (Weber, 1990, p. 22). Due to the short nature of Facebook posts and 140-character limit to tweets, this study codes entire posts or tweets, usually between one to three sentences. To determine appropriate categories, several weeks were spent examining the Twitter feeds and Facebook pages of the selected tourist provides' during the pilot study to develop an understanding of the types of content, information, and engagement they were producing. At the end the peak period for the tourist activities in these visitors attractions was selected as the time frame.

To gain an over view of the online activities of the chosen sample, a quantitative analysis was also done. It was undertaken using social media analytics. Each of the visitor attractions' level of activity on Facebook was sampled by looking at number of posts, comments and likes published by them on their own Facebook-walls and/or tweets, retweets and likes by them on their twitter pages.

3.8. Data legitimisation

Data analysed can only be useful to future research if the data holds a certain 'integrity' and can be seen to be legitimate. According to Easterby-Smith et al. (1991), legitimisation is the term that refers to the validity, reliability and generalisability of the employed data. However, this set of criteria is unsuitable for research of an interpretivist nature. Lincoln and Guba (1985) propose four evaluative criteria for interpretivist research: credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability. These concepts are analogous to the positivistic concepts of internal validity, external validity, reliability and objectivity, respectively. These criteria are further investigated below:

3.8.1. Credibility

Credibility involves the integrity of the interpretations that are generated from the research (Bryman, 2004) and is analogous with the concept of internal validity in quantitative research. Lincoln and Guba (1985) state that a researcher must do everything necessary to ensure that interpretation of collected research data is credible and understood. This is because phenomena can be construed differently from one interviewee to the next (Riege, 2003).

The researcher also requested the sample to complete the consent form, which permits the researcher to use the data for the purposes of the research. Finally, throughout the whole research process, the researcher endeavoured to provide a rich contextualisation, allowing external observers to review the researcher's interpretation of the data in an appropriate context (Klein & Myers, 1999).

3.8.2. Transferability

Credibility of research speaks to the integrity of the data used, however focusing solely on this may give a narrow scope for research. Therefore, it is an important part of the evaluative criteria to ensure that research (or data) is transferable. This essentially means that trends/patterns identified in data collected on a selection of visitor attractions, can potentially be extrapolated to draw conclusions on for example, a whole industry.

Transferability is analogous to the concept of external validity in quantitative research. As qualitative research is generally concerned with the intensive study of a small group, or of individuals sharing certain characteristics, qualitative findings tend to be orientated to the contextual uniqueness and significance of the social worlds being studied (Bryman, 2004).

For this research, it is significant to realise that the issue of being able to generalise findings beyond the boundaries of the tourism industry is not essential. (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Despite this, Lincoln and Guba (1985) mention that the rich, thick description provided by interpretivist research can enable external reviewers to decide whether the data accrued from this research can be transferred to other contexts.

3.8.3. Dependability

Credibility and transferability of data go hand-in-hand with the dependability of data. Ensuring research has integrity and can be used to draw wider conclusions are both important characteristics that evaluative research must adopt, however, often research is used as a platform for action and for it to be used in this way it must be dependable.

Cepeda and Martin (2005) highlight two steps needed for assuring the dependability of research, which is analogous to the concept of reliability in quantitative research. First, employing multiple sources of evidence allows for triangulation on similar findings which ensures dependability (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). Second, relating to the collection of various sources of evidence, Lincoln and Guba (1985) advise that researchers should adopt a "stocktaking" approach with regard to data storage and retrieval. For this, the researcher has completed records of every phase of the research process such as formulation and selection of the research process, selection of participants, observation notes, transcribed interviews and data analysis decision; and all in an accessible manner. The recording of the research process will facilitate peer review of the dependability of the researcher's work.

During the interview process, respondents were continually probed to ensure that as much relevant data as possible could be collected from each interview. The research

paper has been written on the basis of this study and was presented in the IAM conference. The constructive feedback gained from these events contributed to the methodological approach employed. In addition, regular discussion with research supervisors over the research lifetime, aided by an open-door policy, allowed the researcher to further augment the dependability of the research.

3.8.4. Confirmability

Relating to the dependability of research, it is important that data obtained has not been misconstrued in any way to force a particular conclusion. For this reason, the last evaluative criteria that must be met is confirmability. Confirmability is analogous to the concept of objectivity in quantitative research. The concept of confirmability focuses on ethical issues such as striking a balance, and the importance of objectivity and retaining impartiality in research (Hirschman, 1986, cited in Drohan, 2010). Confirmability is tested by assessing if the interpretation of the presented data is rational and unbiased (Riege, 2003).

To ensure confirmability, an audit trail was developed to facilitate data access for inspection (Riege, 2003). For this, the researcher had numerous meetings with the supervisors. Meetings with supervisors ascertained that the interpretations of the obtained data were consistent with any documentation presented to them.

3.9. Ethical considerations

Research should always be carried out in a morally responsible manner (Gray, 2009). Therefore, it was necessary to consider the ethical concerns associated with this piece of research (Blaxter et al., 2006; Tiernan, 2015).

Five key concerns were identified.
Table 3.5, as follows, documents these concerns, highlights methods that were used to reduce and/or eliminate them, and indicates the subsequent level of risk that each concern posed to the research:

Table 3.5. Ethical concerns and methods to reduce and/or eliminate them

Ethical Concerns Taken into Consideration, Methods used to Reduce and/or Eliminate them, and the Subsequent Level of Risk that each Concern Posed to the Research		
Ethical Concern	**Method(s) used to Reduce and/or Eliminate the Concern**	**Subsequent Level of Risk**
Harm to Participants (through stress and/or breach of confidentiality)	•The researcher will be guided by the code of ethics for business research from IT Carlow's Policies and Procedures on Ethics in Research (2016. •The researcher will demonstrate integrity and fairness during the research process and in turn gain the trust of the participants. •Participants will be consulted throughout the research to ensure they are comfortable with responses submitted and will be given the opportunity to withdraw from the research at any point throughout the process and without any consequences.	Low
Lack of Informed Consent	Informed consent was achieved by clearly highlighting the following to all participants: - Research purpose and objectives; - What was expected of the participant; - What the data collected would be used for; and - Their right to participate on a purely voluntary basis.	Low
Invasion of Privacy	Strongly linked to the above two concerns. Therefore, the risk of an invasion of privacy was minimised by addressing these. Risk was further minimised by ensuring that only information which was relevant and necessary to the study was sought. Also following measures are taken: •The names of participants will not be used on any transcripts. Therefore, their identity will not be made public. Identification	Low
Deception	Linked to the previous three concerns. Therefore, the risk of deception was minimised by addressing these as indicated above.	Low
Anonymity and confidentiality	In order to keep the anonymity of the content Paraphrases and keywords will be used in this research	Low

Source: Tieranne (2015)

As these concerns could be minimised (Table 4.4), it was considered unlikely that the research would present participants with any stress beyond what is experienced in their everyday lives (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009 cited in Tiernan, 2015). Resultantly, the researcher was confident that this study carried minimal risk.

To verify this, an application detailing the proposed research procedures and their associated ethical considerations was submitted to the educational institution's ethics committee, which was comprised of several professionals. This submission facilitated an independent ethical review of the intended research. An evaluation report was subsequently provided that granted ethical approval. Nonetheless, ethical considerations in social research will always be "wide-ranging and challenging" (Cohen et al., 2000, p. 50) and, thus, will never be static. Consequently, the researcher made a conscious effort to ensure that the ethical policies and procedures as set out by IT Carlow (2016) continued to influence the research throughout its entire progression.

3.10. Conclusion

Firstly, the appropriate research paradigm for this study was identified as Interpretivism. Next, this chapter developed an appropriate research methodology aimed at addressing the research gap being examined in this study. Then the chapter proceeds to explain the exploratory nature of the study. Furthermore, it was established that this study has an inductive approach seeking to explore the nature and degree of the usage of social media among tourism destinations.

The chapter developed by identifying the suitable research strategy that included both methodological strategy and methodological design. Next, data collection methods were recorded, which included addressing the issues of identifying participants. This was followed by outlining the relevant data analysis procedures followed by explaining the ethical considerations. The findings are presented in Chapter 4, which now follows.

4. Presentation of Findings

4.1. Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to present the findings of the data obtained from the interviews, a review of social media analytics and content analysis of the visitor attractions researched. This chapter will initially present an outline of the companies researched as well as a discussion of their usage of social media. Following this, the findings relating to each of the research questions is presented.

4.2. Company profiles

A purposeful sample of tourism providers from visitors' attractions in the South-East Ireland was selected. The sample includes the Irish National Heritage Park, Loftus Hall, Kilkenny Castle, Waterford Crystal and Fáilte Ireland. These are well-established visitor attractions and were listed in the list of top tourist attractions in Ireland's Ancient East by Fáilte Ireland. These visitor attractions have been marketing their visitor's attraction over a long-time period and are utilising social media as a part of their marketing efforts. The following section contains a brief summary of company profiles of the participated visitor attractions.

4.2.1. Irish National Heritage Park (INHP)

Founded in 1987, the Irish National Heritage Park is an open-air museum located in Wexford town. The interviewee from Irish National Heritage Park explained:

> It started as a concept for a group of local historians and it is a dream and vision to have a tourism and educational attraction just on the outskirts of Wexford town.

The park contains 35 acres covering the prehistoric periods through to the Norman periods and features various buildings and structures stereotypical of each period.

The company has a social media presence on different platforms including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube. The following table details the social media presence of Irish National Heritage Park:

Table 4.1. Social media overview - INHP

Website	http://www.inhp.com
Facebook Handle	@irishnationalheritagepark
Twitter Handle	@heritageparkwex
Instagram Handle	irishnationalheritagepark
Youtube Handle	Heritage Park

The Irish National Heritage Park currently has a marketing strategy that includes the use of social media. The company is currently revising their social media approches and ensuring that they have an active presence on all platforms including Snapchat. The interviewee from the Irish National Heritage Park details the delegation of social media responsibilities within the company by stating:

> We have just started to allocate three days a week with a social media person. Her name is Mary. She is our front desk officer. She has trained up in Facebook, Twitter, Google, Trip advisor, and everything … Because we realise how important this is to us.

The above comment highlights that social media is recognised as an important marketing tool and thus their willingness to invest in it. The Park has provided training to a staff member who manages social media activities for three days a week.

The interviewee from the Irish National Heritage Park also indicated the financial challenges in investing more in social media marketing by stating:

> We did a lot of our training through the local enterprise centre. So, we subsidised our training. Because we don't have enough money to spend for full training.

The above statement shows that limited funding has restrained the Irish National Heritage Park from providing from providing sufficient training to support social media activities. This was echoed in the words of the interviewee while stating:

> I think if we had a dedicated person and we had somebody on a full time basis then we can reach more followers. So, if we have a more of a budget to able to put towards it we would certainly do more of it.

In conclusion, the Irish National Heritage Park has a strong social media presence and has a good understanding of its importance. Irrespective of the lack of resources, the company has made efforts to develop their social media marketing by providing training to one of their staff members and allotting three days a week to their social media activities.

4.2.2. Loftus Hall (LH)

Loftus Hall, popularly known as Ireland's most haunted house, is a large country house located on the Hook Peninsula in County Wexford. It was, at first, known as Redmond Hall which was built in 1170 by the Norman knight Raymond Les Gros. The Loftus Hall representative explained:

> Loftus Hall opened in 2012, so we are heading into the sixth years. Before that, it was an old house which was closed off to the public … what we found when we bought the property was, it wasn't just known locally, it was known nationally and internationally.

The hall has been turned into a tourist attraction with guided tours of the property and seasonal events such as Haloween, with people travelling from all over the world to take part in paranormal investigations in the Hall.

A review of the social media activities of the company showed that Loftus Hall has a very strong social media presence on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. The following table details the social media presence of Loftus Hall.

Table 4.2. Social media overview - Loftus Hall

Website	https://www.loftushall.ie/
Facebook Handle	@LoftusHook
Twitter Handle	@LoftusLucifer
Instagram Handle	loftushallireland
YouTube Handle	Loftus Hall

The respondent from Loftus Hall mentioned their future plans to develop their website by stating:

> It's not a very interactive website. But it's an informative website … we are moving in a different direction with websites now … Websites now are becoming more intelligent and responsive. Ours is not. But we are in process of rebuilding where we will put sort of hidden areas in our website which you need to be a member to access.

The above statement indicates that the company is investing in developing their website in a way to ensure that audience can access some features only by taking a membership. The interviewee from Loftus Hall stated that he was charged with the responsibility of managing social media activities along with his other duties, as it was not cost effective to employ an additional person to do so. The interviewee elaborated on this by stating:

> We are the only one with a privately-owned location. Everyone has funded government schemes or whatever. They can employ somebody to be the social media person. I am everything in my business.

The above statement shows that Loftus Hall faces challenges with limited financial resources and budgets to invest more in the social media marketing.

In conclusion, Loftus Hall has a social media presence across multiple platforms. They are aware of the increasing need to become more interactive and responsive. However due to limited funding, employing an individual solely responsible for social media remains a challenge.

4.2.3. OPW - Kilkenny Castle

Built back in the first decade of the 14th century, Kilkenny Castle is one of the major archaeological tourist attractions in Ireland. Kilkenny Castle has a very complex architectural structure due to alterations that have occurred over the last eight centuries. The building was transferred to the people of Kilkenny in 1967 and the castle with the surrounding garden and grounds are now managed by the Office of Public Work (OPW).

The OPW is a service organisation which specialises in two areas of operations namely Estate Portfolio Management and Heritage Service and Flood Risk Management. The management and conservation of different buildings and heritage sites including Kilkenny Castle comes under the Estate Portfolio Management and Heritage Service.

A review of social media activities of the company showed that Kilkenny Castle has an active presence on Facebook and that the Twitter page of Kilkenny Castle has not been active since 2014. The following table details the social media presence of Kilkenny Castle:

Table 4.3. Social media overview - Kilkenny Castle

Website	http://kilkennycastle.ie/
Facebook Handle	@kilkennycastle
Twitter Handle	@kilkennycastle

The OPW has a social media management team in their head office. However, each OPW managed tourist destination has its own social media presence and is managed by the employees who are interested in social media on the site. This was explained by the interviewee from the OPW who stated:

> I identify staff that would be enthusiastic, interested to do the social media. I manage it, but I don't do it. It is physically impossible, I have 50+ Facebook pages so it is impossible for me to tweet or post what is going on in each sites. So, we have a person in each site to manage the social media.

When asked about the social media management of Kilkenny Castle in particular the respondent replied:

> In Kilkenny Castle I have three staff members out there having access to the Kilkenny Castle Facebook page and they manage it on a daily basis.

The above comments show that there is team that manages social media activities for the OPW and Kilkenny Castle. However, it was also mentioned by the respondent that they are not utilising other social media platforms such as Snapchat or Instagram due to lack of expertise. The financial constraints were also mentioned by the respondent while discussing the future plans in relation to social media marketing. The respondent stated:

> I don't have the money. I don't have the resources. There is a lot of stuff you like to do but no, not at the moment. I am just trying to manage what I have.

In conclusion, Kilkenny Castle, managed by OPW, has a strong Facebook presence. The company has limited on other social media platforms.

4.2.4. Waterford Crystal (WC)

Owned by Fiskars Corporation, Waterford Crystal is a manufacturer of crystal products. Waterford Crystal is located on the Mall in Waterford city centre where the facility offers visitors the opportunity to take guided tours of the factory and a retail store. Since its reopening in June 2010, over one million people have visited the retail store and enjoyed guided factory tours.

Waterford Crystal has an active social media presence on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube. The following table details the social media presence of Waterford Crystal:

Table 4.4. Social media overview - Waterford Crystal

Website	https://www.waterfordvisitorcentre.com/
Facebook Handle	@House.Of.Waterford.Crystal
Twitter Handle	@WaterfordCrystl
Instagram Handle	waterfordcrystalfactory
YouTube Handle	House of Waterford Crystal

The company has a marketing team, which manages all social media activities. Along with this, they utilise the services of marketing agencies to organise campaigns that include social media. The respondent from Waterford Crystal stated:

> We have a person who manages social media – we have a dedicated person, and we also use an agency who support our digital and social media activity.

The company has adopted an approach where they utilise social media posts and interactions with customers to create promotional campaigns. The respondent stated:

> User generated content is great so we've done stuff where, you know, share your images of being here … we have a competition, 'share your memories'. Then we use all those content, that became a campaign for why you should visit us because of someone saying 'it was amazing, this is my photograph here'. So, we use all that content for an advertising campaign.

The respondent has also mentioned that they are utilising social media in their marketing activities. He stated:

> So we think social media is one leg of the stool, you know you've got, print, PR, digital and social media, you know, it shouldn't be your only leg.

All the above mentioned statements show that Waterford Crystal is utilising social media to market their tourist attraction in an effective way. In conclusion, social media plays an integral role in the marketing activities of Waterford Crystal. The company has a very strong social media presence and social media awareness.

4.2.5. Fáilte Ireland

Fáilte Ireland is the National Tourism Development Authority of Ireland, which was established under the National Tourism Development Authority Act of 2003. It replaces, and builds upon the functions of Bord Fáilte, its predecessor organisation. The main goal of Fáilte Ireland is to provide strategic and practical support in developing and sustaining Ireland as a high quality and competitive tourist destination for Irish tourists. The respondent from Fáilte Ireland has detailed this by stating:

Fáilte Ireland is a tourism authority. So, we are responsible for developing the tourism product and to develop the new attractions and helping the existing attractions become better and be ready for the tourists. That is one side of our job and second side is to promote Ireland as a holiday destination for the Irish visitors.

Fáilte Ireland promotes Ireland as a holiday destination through the domestic marketing body, DiscoverIreland.ie and manages a network of nationwide tourist information centres that provide help and advice for tourists. The activities of Fáilte Ireland fall into four categories namely Tourism Marketing, Training Services, Product Development and Research, and Statistics.

A review of the social media platforms showed that Fáilte Ireland has a very strong social media presence. They are active on Facebook, Twitter Instagram and YouTube. On social media, Fáilte Ireland operates under two brand names; Discover Ireland, which is the consumer interaction platform, and Fáilte Ireland, which is the corporate interaction platform. The following table details the social media presence of Fáilte Ireland:

Table 4.5. Social media overview - Fáilte Ireland

Website	http://www.failteireland.ie/
	https://www.discoverireland.ie/
Facebook Handle	@discoverireland.ie
Twitter Handle	@discoverirl
	@Failte_Ireland
Instagram Handle	discoverireland_
YouTube Handle	FailteIrelandTV

Fáilte Ireland has a strong social media awareness which plays an important role in their marketing strategy. The organisation has a marketing team based in Dublin, which manages the social media activities. The respondent from Fáilte Ireland explained this by stating:

> … We have a marketing team, a digital team, based in Dublin and they would manage our social media activities. We have a number of social media channels … we manage jointly between the Dublin team and the team within the Ireland's Ancient East.

The importance of social media in achieving the objectives of Fáilte Ireland was also outlined by the interviewee. According to the interviewee from Fáilte Ireland, social media helps the organisation to educate the tourists about Irish tourism and inspire them to visit these places as well as helping visitor attractions to understand new opportunities and develop their businesses. The respondent stated:

> It's about inspiring people, educating them, telling, showing how much there is to see and inspiring them to actually a great place to go. So that's the sort of key role of social media. That's the consumer side. Then corporately it is about sharing industrial updates, make people actually aware of what is new and what the new opportunities are for their business, and what new researches and trends are.

When asked about the role of social media in communicating with visitor attractions, the interviewee stated:

> On Fáilte ireland.ie website we share a lot of research, a lot of reports tourism trends things like that. It's all about trying to bring the tourism industry up to speed with latest developments and health and identifying new opportunities. Fáilte Ireland YouTube channel, again it is a corporate channel talking to the industry. So we have a series of webinars, where we are bringing experts, experts in social media or digital marketing.

In order to achieve these goals, Fáilte Ireland is using different social media platforms. The respondent explained this by saying:

> … for industrial news it is twitter, and for consumer activity we use Facebook, Twitter, Instagram … for Ireland's Ancient East, it will be visitors, so it will be trying to encourage Irish people to come on holidays in Ireland's ancient east. Fáilte Ireland Twitter will be for tour operators and tourism providers. So that sort of split-in the channels depending on the audience. Different social media channels to talk to different audiences.

From the above statements and data, it is clear that Fáilte Ireland has a marketing strategy that includes the use of social media. The organisation has identified the best-

suited social media platform for interacting with different audiences and utilising it in an effective way.

In conclusion, Fáilte Ireland has a strong social media presence and digital media awareness. The organisation is using social media platforms for communicating and interacting with Irish tourists as well as different visitor attractions. The organisation utilises social media as an important element in their marketing activities to promote Ireland as a tourist destination especially for domestic tourists. In addition, they are using social media to assist visitor attractions in improving their services and understanding new opportunities.

4.3. Research question: To examine how Irish visitor attractions utilise social media to create a connection with their targeted audiences.

Connection is the first and foremost step of the adopted customer engagement cycle proposed and is described as an emotional or functional bonding between a buyer and a seller (Sashi, 2012). This study investigated how Irish visitor attractions utilise social media tools to create a connection with their audience. Thematic data analysis of the interviews and content analysis of relevant social media platforms were undertaken in order to answer this research.

During data analysis of the interviews three relevant themes were identified. The first theme was the relevance of social media as a customer engagement tool. The second theme was the choice of social media tools that visitor attractions utilise. The last theme recognised was the use of social media to communicate with their audience. The first theme is discussed in detail in the next section.

4.3.1. Relevance of social media

In order to understand how visitor attractions are utilising social media to establish a connection with their targeted audience it is important to identify whether visitor attractions recognise social media as a viable communication tool. Within the analysis of this theme, three sub-themes were identified. Firstly, visitor attractions have normalised the use of social media as a means of communication. Secondly, social media is utilised as a marketing tool to connect with audience. Thirdly, companies recognise the opportunities that social media provides and its implications for their

business.

The first sub-theme was the normalisation of social media as a useful or advantageous tool. The wide usage and reach of social media makes it an ideal communication tool for visitor attractions. When questioned whether they respond to people via social media, the OPW representative stated:

> …they would certainly respond, as there is little difference in social media communication and individuals emailing or phoning up.

This quote captures the fact that, not only are visitor attractions understand that social media is now a normalised and accepted means of communication.

The second sub-theme identified was the usage of social media as a marketing tool. The normalisation of social media usage allows it to emerge as a marketing tool for visitor attractions. The invaluable importance of social media in the tourism industry today was echoed in the sentiments of the interviewee from Loftus Hall when he stated "… I started the business with Facebook". Having identified the relevance of social media, it can be seen how visitor attractions are actively using these platforms to launch their businesses, taking advantage of the new opportunities that come with this new communication tool.

The last sub-theme was the awareness of opportunities provided by social media platforms. Not only did all businesses in the sample show that they considered social media relevant within the tourism industry, but they also displayed an awareness of the ways in which social media changed the way individuals/businesses connected and interacted with each other. This was confirmed in the response of a respondent from the Irish National Heritage Park, who stated:

> The fact that times are changing … - I don't know what the stats are for everybody having a smartphone – …people are accessing, you know, information, experiences, all through these smartphones and we need to keep up with that. … We realise how important this business is to us.

This shows that visitor attractions are actively noticing the changing ways in which people communicate and the relevance that they have derived from this change for their business.

The data analysis illustrates that companies consider social media as a viable and generally accepted means of communication; that they have adopted social media as a marketing tool and also that they are aware of the opportunities of social media and its effect on their businesses. Ultimately the answers of the respondents showed social media as a strong communication tool that is being utilised by visitor attractions to create a connection with their targeted audience.

4.3.2. Choice of social media tools

The second theme was the choice of social media tools by visitor attractions to connect with the targeted audience. The choice of social media platform is crucial in determining the success of connection with the audience. During the analysis of this theme, four sub-themes were noted. The first sub-theme was the range of social media platforms preferred by visitor attractions. The second sub-theme identified was that user friendliness was a key characteristic that visitor attractions sought out in their chosen platform for connection. The third sub-theme was that visitor attractions tended to favour a platform that required a low level of expertise of the user. The fourth and last sub-theme that was identified during the data analysis was the demographic considerations made in the choice of platform used.

The first sub-theme identified was the range of social media tools that are employed by visitor attractions. Table 4.6. summarises the choice of social media tools used by the visitor attractions interviewed:

Table 4.6. Social media tools

Organisation	Facebook	Twitter	Instagram	Snapchat	YouTube
Irish National Heritage Park (INHP)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Kilkenny Castle (KC)	✓				
Loftus Hall (LH)	✓	✓	✓		✓
Waterford Crystal (WC)	✓	✓	✓		✓
Fáilte Ireland (FI)	✓	✓	✓		✓

The above table shows that the most commonly used platforms used by all visitor attractions who participated in the research were Facebook and Twitter followed closely by Instagram and YouTube. The preference for Facebook was reflected in the comment of the Irish National Heritage Park representative, "We are using Facebook, mainly. We are using Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, WhatsApp". All interviewed participants pointed out Facebook was their primary social media tool.

Both the OPW and Loftus Hall interviewees went on to confirm this preference, outlining that despite the use of multiple platforms, Facebook remained the main platform of choice. The interviewee from the OPW said:

> Facebook primarily. And Twitter … I have 50 Facebook pages, but I have only 14 Twitter accounts … I am focusing more on Facebook. Kilkenny Castle is just Facebook only.

The respondent from Loftus Hall made the same point explaining "Facebook is primary… and Twitter".

As seen from the above quotes, Facebook is seen as more preferred in terms of social media platforms, with it often being prioritised in relation to other platforms. In order

to understand the usage of these social media tools an analysis of their social media pages was undertaken. This gave an insight into the connections that have been made by these visitor attractions using these platforms. Table 4.7. shows the social media statistics for the analysed visitor attractions as of February 18th, 2018

Table 4.7. Social media analytics

Followers/ Subscribers	INHP	OPW	LH	WC
Facebook	13,169	11,355	26,325	10,662
Twitter	4075	No	3590	2741
Instagram	820	No	1820	1,264
YouTube Subscribers	234	No	74	5

Table 4.7. shows that content analysis of social media analytics was on a par with the statements made by respondents during the interviews. From the table, we can also conclude that Facebook followers are visibly higher than any other social media platforms.

It was also noticed during the content analysis of social media platforms used by the visitor attractions that participated in this study has more 'likes' on their Facebook page than followers subscribing to their Twitter updates. Using Facebook more than Twitter to engage consumers is a widely accepted strategy, as the respondent at Waterford Crystal observed that people with a Facebook account would engage more than in a daily Twitter feed. When asked about Twitter he replied,

> So Twitter is primarily used for, you know, what is happening, it's current, it's live,
> we're doing it, it's happening- and stuff like that.

Upon identifying Facebook as the preferred social media platform, this choice could then be analysed further to understand what characteristics of Facebook make it most favourable for visitor attractions. It is through this analysis that the next two sub-themes emerged.

The second sub-theme was the notion that user friendliness for visitor attractions as an important characteristic behind choosing a social media platform. When questioned further about the reasons behind the choice of platforms it was found that the most desired characteristic by visitor attractions when choosing a social media platform was an easy to use interface. The majority believed Facebook to be the most user friendly of all platforms, explaining its prioritisation above other social media platforms. Both Loftus Hall and Waterford Crystal representatives reaffirmed this. The ease with which Facebook can be used was identified as a key reason for using it as a primary platform for the Loftus Hall interviewee who stated:

> Facebook … simply because of its user friendliness. Even I can use Facebook…it is
> no good if I am using a platform that is very elegant that is very nice and textured but
> it requires too much time to get the media out there so, the reason I use Facebook is
> it is instant.

This was confirmed by the Waterford Crystal respondent, saying:

> Facebook is more, you know, it's more effective. From a resource perspective, we
> find Facebook user friendly… it's easier to reach a wider audience to get engagement

As mentioned above, in terms of resources, the expertise required to use Facebook was deemed to be lower compared to other platforms such as Instagram. A social media platform which requires little expertise but is still capable of reaching a wide audience was the preferred characteristics for visitor attractions. This was reaffirmed when the Waterford Crystal representative went on to elaborate about the additional effort required to maintain connection through a platform such as Instagram, stating,

> Instagram …– there's a little bit more work in actually trying to get people to follow
> and to get people to follow you and I don't have enough resources to do both of them
> as well as I want, so I've actually prioritised Facebook, even though I do – Instagram

> – ideally I need another person to drive Instagram to do it right, you know, to start a story every day […] and get the content and the images. You can do lots of stuff on the cheap but it never looks right.

As can be seen, the increased expertise (i.e. photography skills) that may be required to successfully engage customers on a platform like Instagram, makes it less favourable than other platforms at the disposal of visitor attractions.

The final sub-theme identified was the role of demographics when visitor attractions choose a social media platform. Interviewees suggested that some social media platforms such as Instagram or Snapchat are predominantly used by the younger demographic. The interviewee from Loftus Hall explained:

> We don't use Snapchat. We are too old for that. My children use Snapchat. It is a young person's platform and it is like watching your father dance at a disco, it is just wrong to be there.

As shown from the above quote, organisations may be hesitant to participate in those social media platforms that are primarily used by the youth segment. However, the respondent from Irish National Heritage Park stated that they had decided to include Snapchat into their social media tools when they noticed that it has been used by the younger generation these days and they wanted to "… tap into the new market".

The thematic analysis of interviews and content analysis of social media pages show that visitor attractions are actively seeking to use a range of social media platforms as a means to connect to their targeted audience. Data analysis illustrated that choice of social media tools has its own importance in the marketing strategy of the sample of visitor attractions. An evaluation of the data has revealed that visitor attractions take into account different characteristics of social media platforms, such as user friendliness and level of expertise required for use, along with other demographic factors. Having recognised the relevance of social media in their business and choosing the most appropriate social media platforms, the next logical step for an organisation is to understand and choose a targeted audience. This theme will be further explained in the next section.

4.3.3. The use of social media to communicate with their audience

The final theme identified during the thematic data analysis was the tailoring of social

media communications by visitor attractions to connect with their targeted audiences. Whilst conducting this analysis, three sub-themes were identified from the data. Firstly, it was noted that social media was used as a business-to-consumer communication tool, allowing visitor attractions to target different market segments. Secondly, the analysis showed that visitor attractions were using social media to target the business market segment, reaching out to tour operators. Lastly, a gender preference, favouring women, was noted in the social media marketing of visitor attractions within the sample.

The first sub-theme that was identified during the data analysis was that social media was used as a business to customers communication tool. Undoubtedly, social media reaches people on a larger scale and quicker than previous communication mediums. This allows visitor attractions to utilise social media to target their chosen customer base. In order to identify whether visitor attractions are attempting to target particular sub-markets within their customer base, it is first important to understand how the customer base is divided. When questioned about their customer base, the representative from the Irish National Heritage Park representative stated:

> …65% of our market is domestic market so not necessarily Irish people but people living in Ireland and other 35% is International visitors.

The OPW representative reaffirmed this dominance of the domestic market by stating how the majority of repeat visitors come from the domestic market:

> Now when I say repeat visitors you have people in the offices in that area who literally go there every day for a walk or for a lunch or people who come there every Sunday or Saturday with their family but then you also have people who go once in a lifetime or once a year … in Kilkenny Castle, you will have a lot of walk through traffic there that will be locals who will be there daily, weekly, monthly.

Whilst it can be seen that the domestic market is the larger of the two markets for the visitor attractions above, this was not the case for all visitor attractions, with the Waterford Crystal interviewee stating:

> … we attract roughly around 200 thousand visitors a year, 80% of our visitors are international visitors from the US, Canada, Australia, the UK, France Germany|…|a lot more countries.

Visitor attractions can thus tailor their social media marketing strategy to reach a specific customer market. The Waterford Crystal representative stated that they specifically organised international marketing campaigns through social media in order to attract the tourists. He stated:

> … for the US people, for their spring break, we start promoting on social media in October because people are thinking "what am I going to do for spring holiday?" so we target them to get a ticket to Ireland.

From this we can see how the social media marketing approach of a visitor attraction can be altered to target a specific market segment. An interest in expanding into the international market is shown in the statements of the Irish National Heritage Park representative:

> Our main markets would be French, German and then the US. These are the target markets Tourism Ireland and Fáilte Ireland have pinpointed that they are spending millions in France and Germany and the US to tell people about Ireland so the awareness in their country to come and visit Ireland. So, we can now piggyback with Tourism Ireland and start targeting these markets.

The Loftus Hall representative repeated this sentiment stating:

> …we are especially responsive to international customers. Because there are important. They are like a new hope.

These examples illustrate that visitor attractions recognise the wide range of audiences that could be connected through a social media platform. It can also be concluded that visitor attractions are tailoring their social media activities to create more connections within their international audience.

The second sub-theme identified during the data analysis was that social media provides a platform to facilitate business-to-business communication. When questioned about business-to-business communications, interviewees from two out of five visitor attractions in the sample pointed out that they wanted to communicate more with tour operators in the future. The respondent from Irish National Heritage Park stated: "with the tour operators, we will be directly marketing to them via social media, I'd say, within 3 months". This quote shows the desire to use social media to establish a connection with tour operators in the near future. Such a connection would

work towards creating new business opportunities for visitor attractions. Thus, a targeted social media marketing strategy can be used not only to expand the business scope in terms of reaching out to consumer markets but also to connect with business-to-business audiences.

The last sub-theme identified was that there was a bias in targeting social media communications towards females. Upon analysing the data collected, it was found that a clear distinction was made between genders in the social media marketing approach. Every visitor attraction in the sample stated that they believed women predominantly connect and interact through social media and thus social media communications was primarily focused on women. The National Heritage Park representative elaborated on this trend, suggesting that this was due to women being the decision makers within the household when planning days out:

> When we are doing sponsored ads on Facebook and we know exactly which demographic to aim at, depending on what it is. So, we know who the influencers are. We know that it is always the mum who in the family will decide where they go for a day out. There are statistics and we know it is always the mother of the family who makes the decision.

The OPW representative confirmed this gender preference, stating:

> … we found a lot of activity in the evening time, from about 8 o'clock 9 o'clock onwards. It was usually female, and we have no proof but we are just looking at the comments, and we decided that is mummy in the summer time…

The Loftus Hall respondent expanded on this by stating that their social media approach is tailored to reflect this gender preference:

> Our main customer base according to Facebook is … women from 24 to 25 years and reflects in our booking so we tailor our posts for them.

Based on a review of Facebook audience demographics provided by the Waterford Crystal, 76% of their audience are women between the ages of 35 – 44. Therefore, it is evident from these examples that there is a gender-based segmentation in social media communications.

In summary, three themes emerged during the data analysis which showed that visitor attractions are aware of the relevance of social media tools; are choosing social media

platforms that are suitable and tailoring social media activities in a way that they could connect with their targeted audience. The normalisation of social media makes it an advantageous marketing tool for business to use in order to establish a connection with potential customers. Thus, social media is increasingly being considered as an important communication channel for visitor attractions today. In addition, evidence was also provided to indicate Facebook is the primary social media tool that was utilised by the sample of this research to connect with their targeted audience. When analysing this preference further it was found that this was due to Facebook's user-friendly interface and the low level of expertise required by visitor attractions in order to utilise it. Visitor attractions are able to tailor their social media communications to target audiences both business-to-customer, and business-to-business. From all this it can be inferred that Irish visitor attractions are utilising social media tools to create an effective connection with their target audience.

4.4. Research question - To examine how Irish visitor attractions utilise social media to interact with their targeted audiences.

Once a connection is established through the use of a social media platform, the tourist/customer can begin to interact with the visitor attraction (Sashi, 2012). This study investigated the nature of interactions between Irish visitor attractions and their audiences. Alongside the thematic data analysis of the interviews, content analysis of social media pages was conducted in order to answer the research question.

During the data analysis of the interviews three relevant themes were noted. The first theme identified was the type of posts that visitor attractions consider effective. The second theme was the frequency of interactions on a social media platform. The final theme identified was the monitoring of interactions by visitor attractions. The first theme is detailed in the following section.

4.4.1. The types of posts

In order to understand the nature of the interactions between Irish visitor attractions and their audience on social media platforms, it is essential to understand what type of posts are considered effective. Within the analysis of this theme two sub-themes

emerged. The first sub-theme was the preference for competition-based posts. The second sub-theme identified was the preference of visual posts over text posts.

The first sub-theme identified was the preference for competition-based posts. From the data and content analysis, it was found that visitor attractions used a variety of posts to engage customers. Whilst some posts were contest-based, others asked a question or requested photos from customers. Some posts were more general in nature (i.e. checking in with customers), whereas others were seeking to advertise upcoming events. When questioned on the posts that visitor attractions found to be most effective, the responses indicated that posts with a competition element received the most interaction. The interviewee from Irish National Heritage Park was one such provider, stating:

> And we have started a kind of a quiz type thing on Facebook called "Walderdash" and we give them a question as to name a Viking name of something and we give them three options to answer and people comment on it and come back to us. So it is interactive. People are always interested in competitions.

The above quote shows competition-based posts are seen as favourable by visitor attractions and can be effective in stimulating interaction with audience. This opinion was reiterated by the interviewees from Waterford Crystal and Loftus Hall:

> We only have competitions; we don't have a rewards program on social media. Competitions are always great, if you don't overdo them. (Waterford Crystal)

> Quiz or contest are most effective. It is a video less than 30 seconds with a competition element which drives your overall visibility. (Loftus Hall)

As shown by the above quotes, competitions can be seen as an effective way for visitor attractions to interact with their customers through social media platforms.

Content analysis was undertaken to establish both the preference for competition posts and the engagement derived from them. Total engagement by the audience with a post was calculated through combining the total likes, comments, shares and tags. This figure was then divided by the total posts within the peak time period for each

attraction in order to establish average engagement per posts. Average engagement per posts was then compared between competition based posts and non-competition based posts.

There were five competition posts for the Irish National Heritage Park from a total of 92 Facebook posts for the peak period. For Loftus Hall, there was only one competition post from a total of 23 Facebook posts for the peak period. For Waterford Crystal, there were two competition posts from a total of 50 Facebook posts over the peak period. Kilkenny Castle (OPW) was excluded from this as there were no competition posts. The below graph depicts the findings:
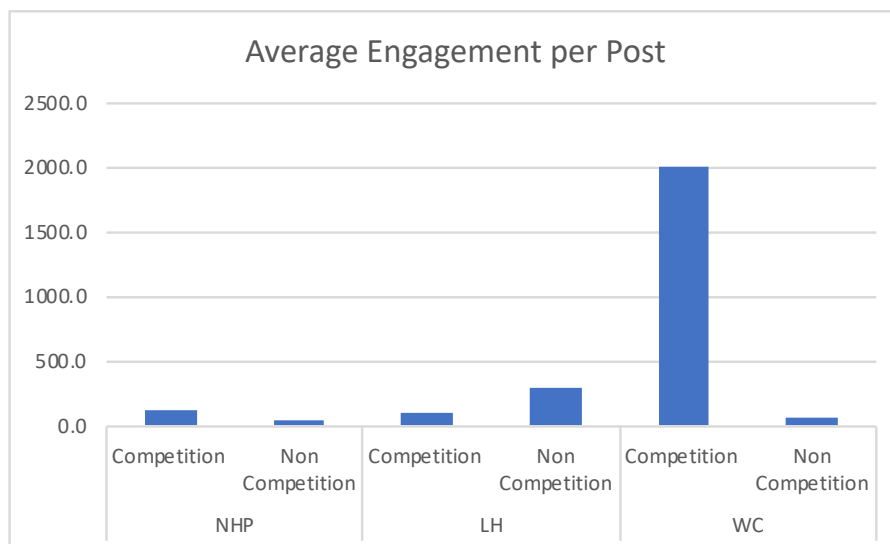
Figure 4.1. Average engagement per posts

The above graph indicates that competition posts result in higher average engagement than non-competition posts for the Irish National Heritage Park and Waterford Crystal. For Loftus Hall the average engagement for non-competition posts is higher than the competition based posts. However, due to the limited number of competition posts, it is difficult to draw a definitive conclusion as to the effect of competition posts on total engagement. Interestingly despite some indication that competition based posts may derive a higher level of engagement, the percentage of competition posts remained low for all visitor attractions. Competition based posts compromised only 5% of total

posts for Irish National Heritage Park and this was even lower, at 4%, for Loftus Hall and Waterford Crystal. It should be noted that the OPW is excluded from the above graph as none of the posts analysed were competition posts.

Furthermore, a separate content analysis of the Facebook page for the month of November was conducted for the Irish National Heritage Park. This was done in order to analyse the engagement rate after the introduction of their Facebook competition, Walderdash. The content analysis showed that the percentage of competition posts doubled (an increase of 9%) in the month of November on the their Facebook page. The following graph shows the engagement rate during the month of November after the introduction of Walderdash:
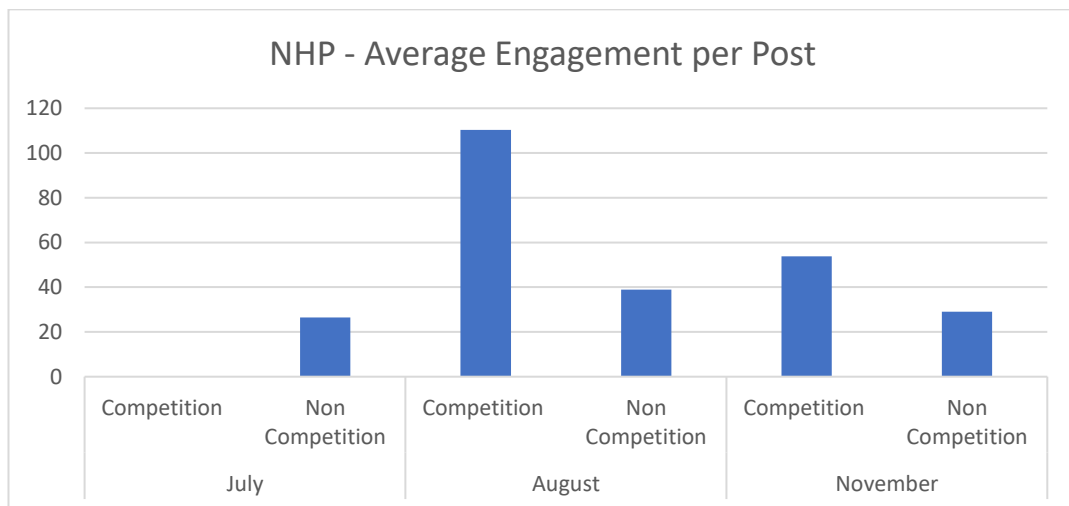
Figure 4.2. Average Engagement per post – INHP

The above graph shows that the average engagement on competition based posts was higher than that for non-competition based posts in November. However, the average engagement per competition based post in the month of November was less than that of August. This could be due to the fact that November falls outside of the peak period and therefore lower interactions from the audience is expected. It should also be noted that there were no competition based posts in July.

Not only is interaction governed by the type of post provided by visitor attractions, but social media platform on which it is posted also plays a key role. On the subject of the most effective interactive posts, the interviewee from Fáilte Ireland interestingly

went on to state the effectiveness of each type post (i.e. competition, question, etc.) might also depend on social media platforms:

> You have a different strategy for each channel by seeing the different types of posts that best works. We would monitor them and photos without people in them works well on Instagram and on Facebook photos with people enjoying their holidays work better. On Facebook, we try to ask questions like "did you know" questions, trying to create curiosity and trying to get people to respond. So that very much depend on the channel.

The above statement shows that visitor attractions have to tailor their social media communications according to the platforms they are utilising. Rather than emphasise one sole type of post that would generate the most interaction, the Fáilte Ireland representative shows the importance of having an awareness of the different ways in which posts are received on different platforms. This shows that not only are visitor attractions aware of the relative distinctive nature of posts and content but also that they have insight into how the choice of social media used to initiate these posts is also important.

In summary, three out of five respondents were of the opinion that posts with a competitive element are the most effective in terms of interaction, as people are more interested in them. The content analysis has shown that the average interaction received for competition based posts are higher than non-competition based posts for two out of three visitor attractions analysed. This gives support to the conclusions drawn in the thematic analysis, indicating that competition posts derive more interaction than non-competition posts. However, it was noted that the number of competition based posts on Facebook are substantially lower than the non-competition based posts despite the aforementioned higher average engagement derived from competition based posts. It was also found that the effectiveness of posts may also differ depending on what social media platform is utilised. This stresses the importance of having a well-thought out interconnected social media marketing approach in place.

The second sub-theme that emerged while analysing the data in order to answer the research question was the preference for visual-based posts over text-based posts in

interacting with the target audience. From the data analysis, it was found that visitor attractions tended to favour imagery and video posts over text posts. The OPW interviewee indicated a clear preference for imagery-based posts. When questioned about the most effective posts that get customers to interact, the respondent stated:

> Personally, imagery. Anything with imagery is very effective.

In addition to this, all the participating visitor attractions expressed the opinion that video posts have the ability to attract the attention of their targeted market segment quicker than text posts. This was mentioned in detail by the respondent from Irish National Heritage Park:

> People will watch a video quicker on Facebook than they read seven or eight or ten lines. They will press the video as long as the video is quick. They will watch it. A lot of our short videos seem to get more interaction now at the moment.

The Loftus Hall representative reaffirmed this by stating:

> To be effective we have to post in a video format and if that means stitching still pictures together … Single picture or text posts don't work for Facebook anymore.

Therefore, it can be concluded that visitor attractions consider video and visual posts as the most effective to interact with their audience on a social media platform.

Content analysis on all social media platforms was carried out in order to explore the second sub-theme. Social media content was analysed to identify the type of posts preferred by visitor attractions and these were placed into three categories: picture posts, video posts and text-only posts. This was done across all social media platforms used by visitor attractions. The following table indicates the findings:

Table 4.8. Percentage of posts

	Pictures	Videos	Text-only
Facebook			
INHP	75%	25%	0%
LH	70%	30%	0%
WC	64%	22%	14%
OPW	98%	0%	2%
Twitter			
INHP	64%	27%	9%
LH	55%	0%	45%
WC	100%	0%	0%
Instagram			
INHP	88%	12%	N/A
WC	42%	58%	N/A

The content analysis of Facebook posts showed that the majority of posts by visitor attractions are picture posts. While the Irish National Heritage Park and Loftus Hall preferred pictures and videos, the OPW showed a clear inclination towards picture posts with a small amount of text posts. Waterford Crystal was the only visitor attraction which utilised all three types of posts. During the content analysis it was noted that three out of four visitor attractions are using Twitter. As seen from the above table, the Irish National Heritage Park is the only visitor attraction which is using all three types of posts on Twitter. While Loftus Hall is using both picture and text based posts, Waterford Crystal is using only picture based posts. The content analysis showed that only two out of four visitor attractions are using Instagram. The above table indicates that most of the Instagram posts by the Irish National Heritage Park are picture based posts while Waterford Crystal has more video based posts.

In order to understand whether the preferred type of posts by visitor attractions are cultivating interaction from the audience, the average engagement per post on all social media platforms was also calculated. The following diagram shows the details of the content analysis conducted:
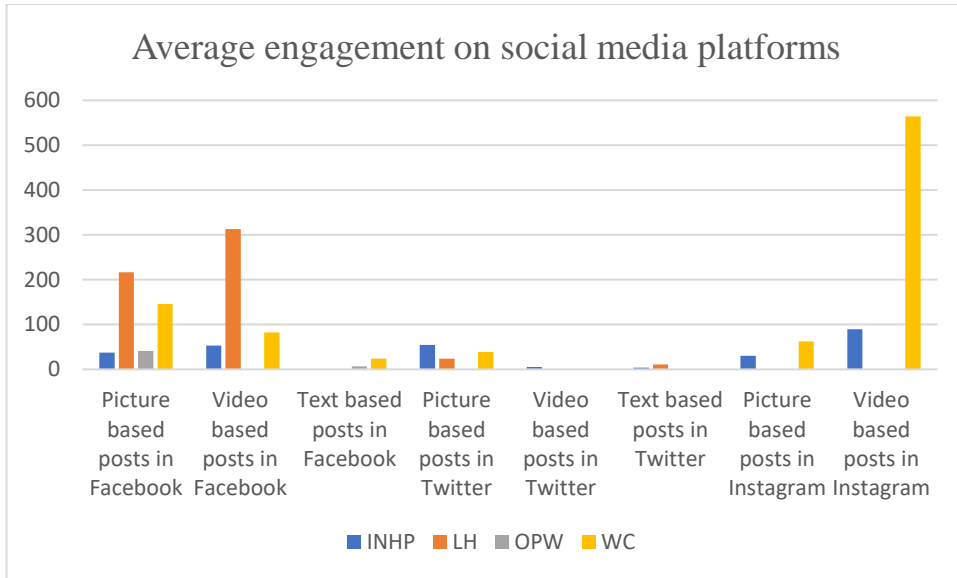
Figure 4.3. Average engagement on social media platforms

From the above graph it is clear that the posts that yield more interactions are the picture and video-based posts. Thus, it can be concluded that the content analysis conducted supports the conclusions drawn in the thematic data analysis of the interviews.

Thus, in conclusion, upon the thematic analysis of the interviews it was shown that posts with a competitive element in it are considered as the most effective by most of the visitor attractions. Further from the content analysis it was confirmed that the competition posts derive more interaction than non-competition posts which is in support of the opinion of visitor attractions. It was also identified that the effectiveness of posts in interacting with customers may also depend on the social media platform utilised to connect with customers, with similar posts potentially being received differently. Analysis of the data obtained from interviews also showed that both imagery and video based posts were seen by visitor attractions as generating the most interaction due to their attention-grabbing nature. Content analysis confirmed that picture and video-based posts are more beneficial in creating interaction than text posts. Having identified the nature of effective posts for their social media interaction, every organisation has to decide the frequency with which they are interacting with audience. This is illustrated as the second theme in the following section.

4.4.2. Frequency of interaction

The second theme identified in relation to the research question was the frequency of interaction on social media platforms. It is important for any organisation, including visitor attractions, to decide on the frequency in which they interact with their audience. While analysing this theme two sub-themes were noticed. The first sub-theme was the optimum frequency of posting whilst ensuring consistency of quality. The second sub-theme identified was the importance of response by visitor attractions.

The first sub-theme that emerged was the frequency of posting content on a social media platform by visitor attractions. It was noticed that three out of four visitor attractions are of the opinion that they want content to be posted at least once every day. The frequent posting of content on a social media platform is essential for an organisation to ensure that new and continuing interactions are created and to maintain a continuous relationship with their audience. The idea of posting regularly to maintain steady interaction with customers was made clear when the interviewee from the OPW stated:

> I have always told everybody, it is not about the number of likes, it is just getting online, get active, put up active content, content up-to-date, put up as much as imagery out there showcasing your site. We basically ask all of the sites to post content on regular basis. Don't let your Facebook page go stagnant, we set up the Facebook page for you, we guided you, we have given the tools to use it, smart phones, tablets, can you now use Facebook please.

This highlights the importance of having an active online presence, an opinion that was reiterated by the interviewee from Waterford Crystal, who stated:

> Our main activity is like we post maybe twice a day on Facebook, maybe twice on Instagram, and it's about talking to different audiences.

The Loftus Hall respondent expanded on this by highlighting that whilst posting on a regular basis can stimulate successful interactions with customers, excessive posting can often do the opposite. The interviewee emphasised the importance of making sure

that visitor attractions are not posting too frequently and that posts maintain a relevance to the target audience, through monitoring quality of posts:

> We have made mistakes in the past by over posting and all of a sudden people don't want to see us in their time line or whatever. So, it become irrelevant … our posting outside of your own special field or field of interest. So, we now reduce the amount of posting but try to improve the quality of it.

Thus, visitor attractions must strike a balance between regular posting and excessive posting in order to ensure that they have successful interactions with their target market segment. It was noted that all other respondents in the sample also agreed with the above opinion that the quality of the posts are relevant. This was clear when the interviewee from Irish National Heritage Park stated:

> We post something every day … Every day in some shapes or forms, might be in YouTube, might be in Facebook, might be a sponsored ad, it could be sharing Archaeology Ireland, something that they (audience) had put up and we would like and share it and put our own comment on it as well. Something that has a relation with our business and is relevant.

The respondent from Waterford Crystal also stated:

> It's about the quality, it is not pushing rubbish just to say I have a post out today. There is a logic and thought behind it.

All these examples show that visitor attractions are trying to establish a continuing interaction with their audience, whilst also making an effort to ensure that they are sharing information that is relevant and connected to their business. Content analysis related to the second theme was conducted in order to understand the frequency of interaction on social media platforms by visitor attractions. It was noted during the content analysis that none of the visitor attractions in the sample consistently posted daily over their peak period. It was also noticed that often when they post content on social media platforms they would provide multiple posts on one given day.

The second sub-theme identified was the importance of visitor attractions responding on social media platforms in order to maintain successful interactions with the

audience. In order to maintain a two-way conversation-based relationship with their audience, it is important that visitor attractions respond to customer queries and comments in a timely manner. From the detailed analysis of the data, it was noticed that all visitor attractions who participated in this study are striving to increase their responsiveness and maintain an on-going interaction with their audience. The OPW respondent stressed the importance of responding to customers via social media, stating:

> … we try we encourage our staff to respond to the comments … We do try to encourage, we get questions asked of us publicly and we get questions asked through private message. I try to get the staff to interact and respond always.

A time limit within which to respond to a customer via social media was also mentioned by the interviewee from Waterford Crystal:

> We respond to all our social media, generally within 24 hours. We thank people for posting and saying you know, give us a shout out.

The above quotes show that visitor attractions have an awareness of the impact of how the frequency of postings may affect the levels of interaction. Though regular posts have been identified as being a successful driver in continuous interaction, the Irish National Heritage Park respondent indicated that a personal touch must not be lost within this. Therefore, it is not simply a matter of responding or how quickly a response is made, but that the individual chosen to respond can also be of importance. The respondent stated:

> Now we are changing the way of interaction slightly. So, where somebody will put down "oh I visited yesterday. I had a lovely tour with Alan. He was great fun. Enjoyed a lot. The kids really loved it." We are now getting Alan to answer. Alan is now going to say 'Hello the Murphy family, thank you very much. Delighted to visit at the park. I am still working here.' So now we are going to personalise it a little bit more. So, it is going to be with a perception that Alan will be answering.

This example highlights that the visitor attraction is utilising social media to maintain a constant interaction with their audience.

In summary, data analysis and content analysis was done to understand the frequency with which visitor attractions are posting content. The visitor attractions have noted that regular but not excessive postings lead to successful interactions, whilst also ensuring that posts maintain a good quality. However, the content analysis showed that visitor attractions are not posting content on social media platforms daily in their peak period. As interactivity includes posting content on social media platforms, it is very important to monitor and assess the degree of interaction which is the third and last theme which will be detailed in the next section.

4.4.3. Monitoring the degree of interaction

The last theme in relation to the research question, identified during data analysis was the monitoring interactions by visitor attractions. Monitoring social media activities helps visitor attractions to measure and understand the sentiments of the audience and enhance the level of engagement. It also allows visitor attractions to identify what types and frequency of posts work well to form effective interactions with customers, which in turn can help to improve the social media approach they have put in place.

When asked about the monitoring of their social media activities all respondents replied that they constantly keep a track on their analytics. This can be seen from the response of Loftus Hall stating:

> We do measure the social media statistics … keep an eye on it … It's always a goal to keep that number increasing. Also, it is important to monitor the comments and when you see an opportunity to drive the conversation a little more or drop something else in, then do it.

This opinion was shared by the interviewee from OPW:

> What we did from the very beginning, we created a simple spreadsheet, and she (a colleague) monitors each site for me and eventually she puts down the likes and dislikes on it. So, we got a tracking tool in that. That is why I can roll off my head and get you figures for each of the particular sites.

Therefore, it can be seen that visitor attractions are seeking to better their approach to social media marketing through monitoring the degree of interaction achieved by

various posts. The final theme was further analysed by evaluating the social media analytics provided by Loftus Hall and Waterford Crystal. The analysis of the social media analytics provided by Waterford Crystal and Loftus Hall confirmed that companies are keeping a track of the interactions on their social media platforms in a detailed way. They are tracking and monitoring topics like "most used hashtags", "most shared tweets", "top shared posts in facebook" and/or "impressions" which would help them to enhance their communication with their audience. This shows that visitor attractions are trying to identify what types and frequency of posts are effective in generating interactions, which in turn can help to streamline the social media marketing approach they have put in place. Through the thematic analysis of the data obtained through interviews and analysis of social media analytics, it is clear that visitor attractions are actively seeking to gauge their own performance in terms of successful interactions made through social media.

In conclusion, while conducting the data analysis examining the role of social media in interaction between visitor attractions and their audience, three relevant themes emerged. The first theme was the type of interactions that visitor attractions consider effective. It was found that alongside posts with a competition element, visual posts, as opposed to text-based posts, were found to be the most effective by visitor attractions in stimulating interaction with customers through social media. It was noted during the content analysis that the percentage of competition posts remain low for all visitor attractions and the engagement on the visual posts are higher than text-based posts for all visitor attractions. The second theme that emerged was the frequency of interactions in a social media platform. The study found that visitor attractions were seeking to strike a balance in their frequency of posts and response rates to ensure the optimum level of interactions whilst also ensuring that posts and responses maintained a high quality and personal element. However, contrary to the opinion shared during the interviews, it was noted that none of visitor attractions are posting every day during their peak time. The final theme identified was the monitoring of the level of interaction. Visitor attractions are monitoring the interaction level in order to maintain a relationship with their audience on a continuous basis. In summary visitor attractions showed an awareness of the importance of pursuing successful interactions with customers in order to establish and maintain a relationship with their target audience. The analysis of social media analytics also showed that

visitor attractions are monitoring and understanding the interaction level with their audience. Ultimately, it can be concluded through data analysis and content analysis that visitor attractions are aware of the importance of the interactions on social media platforms with their audience.

4.5. Research question - To examine how Irish visitor attractions utilise social media to understand and create customer satisfaction.

This study sought to explore how social media can be used by visitor attractions to understand and create customer satisfaction. Customer satisfaction can be defined as the measurement of how products and services supplied by a company meet or surpass a customer's expectation (Yuksel et al., 2010). Only if interactions between a visitor attraction and a customer, or among the members of a community result in satisfaction will they stay connected and continue to interact with one another and progress towards engagement (Sashi, 2012).

While answering this research question, two relevant themes emerged. The first theme identified was how positive feedback received through social media platform, helps visitor attractions to understand customers' satisfaction levels. The second theme examines the different approaches adopted by visitor attractions to create satisfaction on social media platforms. The first theme is detailed in the next section.

4.5.1. Understanding customer satisfaction through social media feedback

The first theme identified was the various forms in which feedback could be received through social media platforms. Through these channels of feedback, visitor attractions are able to gain an understanding of the satisfaction levels of their target audience. This understanding is essential in order for visitor attractions to monitor customer satisfaction levels in real time.

Analysis of the data highlighted that feedback can be received in different forms, such as liking a post, sharing a post, uploading pictures, retweeting a post, checking in, tagging and/or comments. Whilst highlighting the ways in which customers interacted with them, the OPW respondent mentioned several ways in which the customer may give feedback on social media:

And I see many people liking and sharing their post in social media on a regular basis. They constantly interact with the site through social media. They were already on social media they were mentioning us on social media. They now mention us and tag our page.

The above comment shows that the respondent understands the various channels through which positive feedback may be received online. During the data analysis, it was identified that feedback also came in the form of comments, along with 'checking in' from audiences. This was detailed by the respondent from OPW, stating:

People often are putting up comments, uploading pictures saying "Beautiful day at Castletown, lovely facilities, nice tours, nice grounds" or 'checking in' on our sites, to Kilkenny Castle especially. You'll see a lot there checking in.

The above-mentioned opinions show that the forms of feedback on social media platforms help visitor attractions to understand customer satisfaction levels. Through observing the likes, shares, comments or tags received, visitor attractions are able to obtain an understanding of their customers' satisfaction levels.

Content analysis was conducted to understand the level of feedback that visitor attractions are receiving through their social media platforms. The following table shows the total number of likes, shares, comments, tags, retweets and views each visitor attractions received in their peak periods:

Table 4.9. Feedback on social media platforms

Social media platforms	Companies	Likes	Shares/Retweets	Comments	Tagging
FB	INHP	3786	471	295	104
	LH	4243	357	1059	677
	OPW	2283	192	102	64
	WC	3316	1177	1239	1115
Twitter	INHP	2292	970	53	NA
	LH	162	73	10	NA
	WC	188	41	4	NA
Instagram	INHP	0	NA	5	NA
	WC	867	NA	14	NA

The above table shows the various features of social media platforms that customers use to share their feedback. The feedback received on Facebook is higher than other social media platforms. The feedback received on Facebook is higher than all other social media platforms.

The Loftus Hall respondent explained how the different features of social media platforms help visitor attractions understand the satisfaction levels of their customers. The interviewee stated:

> … who is following you … if there is 26,000 friends, how many are following what you are doing? We have a high rate of followers. That is important. Whereas, I look at other pages they have high rates of "likes" but lower rate of followers … if we have 26,679 likes, we have also got 26,340 something following. You can see that they are actively watching because when you put up a good relevant post they are all in there.

According to the respondent from Loftus Hall, there is little difference between the number of people following and liking their Facebook page. The respondent explains that this shows that the followers on their social media pages are active followers who

are regularly engaging through social media. The interviewee implied that this could be an indication that these individuals are satisfied with the content provided by Loftus Hall. This evaluation of the activity level of followers demonstrates how they are using social media to understand the satisfaction levels of their audience.

In brief, the thematic analysis of the data has shown that visitor attractions are tracking and analysing the positive word of mouth they are receiving on social media platforms. The content analysis of social media platforms shows that the feedback received on Facebook is higher than any other platforms. Visitor attractions are also using the different features on social media platforms to identify satisfaction among their targeted audience. This leads to the next theme, the social media strategies employed by visitor attractions to promote satisfaction, which is discussed in the next section.

4.5.2. Using social media to create satisfaction

The second theme identified was the approaches adopted by visitor attractions to create satisfaction on social media platforms. While analysing this theme, two sub-themes were also noted. The first sub-theme was the ways in which visitor attractions respond to feedback. The second sub-theme was the use of 'live' online experiences to improve satisfaction.

The first sub-theme identified during the data analysis explored the various ways in which visitor attractions respond to feedback online. Whilst exploring this, it was found that there were three steps in which visitor attractions responded to feedback. The first step identified during the data analysis, was the decision of whether to respond to feedback. Four out of five visitor attractions mentioned that they always encourage their employees to respond to their audience. This was shown in the response of the OPW respondent, who stated:

> Yes we try … we encourage our staff to respond. We do try to encourage, we get questions asked of us publicly and we get questions asked through private message. I try to get the staff to interact. I tell them, if you've got a phone call you answer it, if you get an email you'd answer it, it's the same on social media. Don't forget you have a social media page, so please answer that.

The Fáilte Ireland respondent also reiterated the same opinion by stating:

> Yes, yes. We respond. Sometimes if they're asking some information on locations
> then we send them links on where they can find information. We try to answer straight
> away on the channel itself.

The above-mentioned statements show that visitor attractions have adopted an approach of responding to feedback received online. Through this, visitor attractions try to ensure that their audience is satisfied.

Content analysis was carried out in order to explore the first step mentioned in this sub-theme. Thus, every Facebook post during the peak period was examined to identify whether visitor attractions are responding to social media feedback. For a better understanding, the percentage of posts that include a reply from visitor attractions was also calculated. The following graph depicts the details:
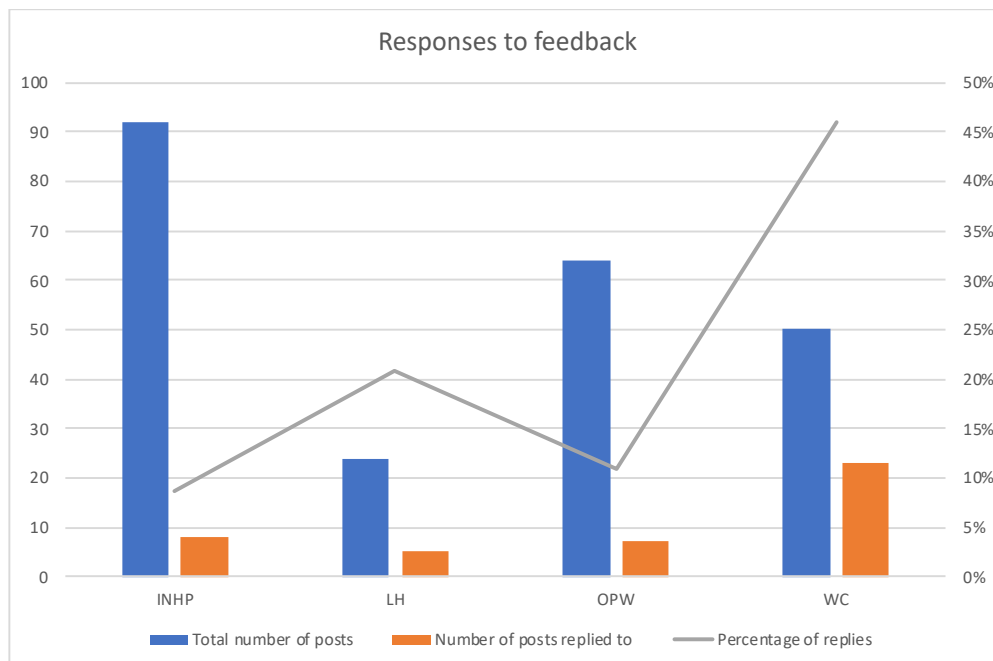
Figure 4.4. Responses to feedback

Interestingly, the percentage of posts that included a reply from visitor attractions remained low. Waterford Crystal has the highest response rate of 46% when all others are below 25%. This indicated that the results of content analysis were not in support with the findings of the data analysis. However, it should be noted that this analysis does not extend to private messages sent to the attractions and therefore, it cannot be

conclusively stated that visitor attractions fail to respond to customers feedback online.

Interestingly, the Loftus Hall respondent presented an alternate approach. This gives rise to the second step in handling a feedback. The Loftus Hall representative stated:

> If it is a positive comment … If you look at who is that positive comment for. If I am looking for a positive comment, as Loftus Hall as a business but then it is egotistic but I am not. I am looking to drive my business … what I am looking for is the third person to enter which is the next person to say, "yes I visited there and I enjoyed it too". The conversation starts between two customers, now these customers are forming a relationship based on our experience.

The Loftus Hall respondent explained that it is better to use positive feedback on social media platforms as a way to cultivate a relationship between the customers, rather than responding to it directly. This implies that customer to customer communication could be used as a means to create and maintain customer satisfaction.

The final step was the choice of content in responding to feedback It was noticed that visitor attractions are careful about the content of their responses. The respondent from Waterford Crystal confirmed this by stating:

> We go through our posts carefully in terms of warning, that people don't read the wrong thing into it, wrong context, stuff like that, and we don't post a lot that's controversial.

The respondent explains they are concerned about how their posts may be perceived by the audience. Hence, they are trying to maintain the customer satisfaction level by actively posting content that is not effective.

In summary, whilst evaluating ways in which visitor attractions created satisfaction on social media platforms, three steps were found. Firstly, four out of five respondents adopted the strategy of actively responding to feedback from the audience in order to ensure customer satisfaction. However, this was not substantially supported by the content analysis. The percentage of posts with a reply from visitor attractions was

found low during the analysis of the Facebook posts. Secondly, it was found that cultivating a relationship amongst customers, through shared feedback, was also seen as a strategy to promote satisfaction. Finally, the last strategy identified was the careful selection of social media content, in order to limit and/or avoid dissatisfaction.

The second sub-theme explored the usage of 'live' features of social media platforms, to generate online experiences to create satisfaction. Visitor attractions are utilising these features to allow them to deliver live content to audiences across the world. This enables visitor attractions to create a level of satisfaction amongst their audience, which would not have been possible without social media platforms.

The respondent from Fáilte Ireland elaborated on this, stating:

> For the first time, the Winter solstice in Newgrange is going to be live-streamed on our YouTube channel. So using our social media channels we are saying, our tag lines are "be here" regardless of where people are in the world, they've been able to see what is happening in Newgrange for the first time ever. And social media has made that possible.

The Loftus Hall respondent also shared the opinion of using the concept of live streaming features to generate customer satisfaction by stating:

> Live streaming is something - we are going down that road because people want to see what is happening right now, you know, it is like Facebook live. I don't want to look at a video that you recorded yesterday because that is old news. It doesn't even need to be that good it has to be instant. That is what people are looking for, I think.

As shown from the above quotes, visitor attractions are using the new technological developments of social media platforms to ensure that they can constantly engage their audience so that it would lead to satisfaction. Thus, they are able to stay relevant through being innovative in their social media communication efforts.

In conclusion, whilst analysing the data in order to answer the research question, two key themes were identified. The first theme was the different forms of feedback received, and how this contributed to understanding the level of customer satisfaction.

It was found that feedback could be in the form of likes, shares, tags, retweets, checking in and comments. By identifying the various forms of feedback from social media, visitor attractions can aim to understand the satisfaction levels of customers. The second theme identified three steps while handling feedback to ensure satisfaction among targeted audience. The first relates to the decision of whether to respond to positive feedback. A detailed content analysis of the peak period was also conducted to understand the percentage of posts with a response from visitor attractions. The second method was an alternative approach whereby customers were allowed to foster a relationship through shared feedback. The last and final practise was the careful choice of content to avoid or limit dissatisfaction. It was also found that visitor attractions were utilising 'live' features of social media platforms in order to create new online experiences to generate satisfaction amongst their customers. In short, it can be concluded that visitor attractions are using social media platforms to understand and create satisfaction amongst their audience.

4.6. Research question – To examine how Irish visitor attractions utilise social media to retain their customers

This study investigated the role of social media in the retention activities of the Irish visitor attractions. Retention can be the result of either overall satisfaction or highly positive emotions and it can lead to either affective commitment (highly positive emotions) or calculative commitment (long-term relationships), or both affective and calculative commitment (long-term relationships with highly positive emotions) (Sashi, 2012).

Two relevant themes were identified during the analysis of data, whilst answering this research question. The first theme related to the research question was the nature of the responses to negative feedback on the social media platforms. The second theme examined the various features of social media that visitor attractions use to retain customers. The first theme is detailed in the next section.

4.6.1. Nature of responses to negative feedback

The first theme evaluated the various ways in which visitor attractions respond to negative feedback in order to retain their customers. Negative feedback or negative

comments could be considered as complaints from the audience due to their dissatisfaction with the service provided. From this theme, two subthemes emerged. The first sub-theme identified was the appropriateness of responding to negative feedback. The second sub-theme found was the speed with which to respond to negative feedback.

The first sub-theme relates to the decision of visitor attractions to respond to negative feedback on social media. The data analysis indicated that four out of five visitor attractions adopted the strategy of replying to any negative feedback. The interviewee from Irish National Heritage Park explained, "Oh yes. We do reply to the negative comments". When questioned about replying to negative feedback, the respondent from Waterford Crystal also stated, "We reply to both positive and negative feedback". The interviewee from OPW explained how the decision to respond to a complaint on social media, could possibly make the difference in whether the customer is retained or not, by stating:

> You'll often get somebody who's angry and fires off a complaint on social media. If they get a response to it, suddenly the tone calms down and they come back "oh thank you very much Niall". As far as the best way is when somebody is being negative or giving out and you can actually satisfy your customer by responding to the query, you are keeping them, retaining them as customers. And that has happened on occasions.

The above-mentioned statement shows that, to an extent, the decision to respond to negative comments may help visitor attractions to retain their customers. In this way, customers are likely to respond positively if they feel that their feedback is 'heard' by visitor attractions. Whilst the majority of visitor attractions adopted the approach of responding to negative feedback, the respondent from Loftus Hall detailed a different approach of refraining from doing so. The interviewee stated:

> We never respond to negative comment because we leave it for the public to engage. That's the rule from day 1. Never! If somebody has a negative comment, don't delete it, don't hide it, don't respond to it. Leave it there.

The interviewee went on to explain:

> If we respond to defend ourselves, what I observe from other people doing is that,
> then we are opening an argument.

From this it can be seen that an alternate opinion is presented, in which responding to feedback may not be the most beneficial way to retain a customer. In this instance, responding to feedback may be seen as opening the possibility of an argument rather than solving a query. In conclusion, the data analysis showed that four out of five respondents had adopted the approach of responding to negative feedback on social media platforms in order to ensure customer retention.

The second subtheme identified whilst analysing the responses to negative feedback was the timely response to complaints. The data analysis showed that four out of five visitor attractions in the sample mentioned handling complaints in a timely manner. This ensures satisfaction and can be an efficient way to retain customers. The OPW respondent confirmed the strategy of responding quickly, "We try to answer the negative comments as quick as possible". The interviewee from Irish National Heritage Park reiterated this opinion: "Oh yes. We do reply to the negative comments. As soon as possible, mostly within 24 hours." In addition to this, the Fáilte Ireland respondent reconfirmed this opinion by stating:

> If there is any negative comment, we try to respond straight away during office hours.
> Then we have a team that monitor social media sites outside the office hours … yeah,
> we try to respond to it as quickly as possible.

As seen from the above quote, the constant monitoring of any complaints emphasises the importance of a quick response in order to diffuse a negative situation. This in turn, it can be argued will have an effect on whether or not the customer is retained. Thus, it can be concluded that timely responses to negative feedback has been given importance by the majority of the respondents in the sample.

In conclusion, the thematic analysis of the data has shown that respondents employ different approaches when it comes to the decision of whether to respond to negative comments. However, the majority of the respondents in the sample are responding to negative feedback rather than leaving feedback unanswered. In addition, during the

data analysis it was evident that most of the respondents consider that addressing a negative comment as quickly as possible would help to retain a customer. Having identified the nature of responses to negative feedback, the data was further analysed to identify the ways in which visitor attractions seek to retain dissatisfied customers and the social media features that allow them to do so. This theme is further detailed in the next section.

4.6.2. Social media features that facilitate customer retention

The second theme identified during the thematic data analysis was the various features of social media that visitor attractions utilise to retain a customer. Through the data analysis, it was noted that the visitor attractions incorporated social media within their wider retention activities. Three out of five of respondents mentioned solving complaints received from dissatisfied customers through social media.

Data analysis showed that the first feature utilised by visitor attractions was the convenience and accessibility of the social media. Through their various social media pages, visitor attractions have a direct line of communication with customers. Social media offers visitor attractions with an enhanced visibility of complaints. It is through this, that complaints are recognised and addressed. This is shown in the response from the Irish National Heritage Park respondent when questioned about the handling of complaints:

> We offered a free ticket to come to the park and we asked them to direct message us directly and we would try to rectify it.

This view was shared by the OPW respondent. While answering about retaining a customer the respondent from the OPW stated:

> I remember, a query came in, on Facebook. We addressed the query, we were partly to blame, but so was the person complaining, it was at a 50/50 scenario. We apologised, they apologised, we gave them the Heritage card and they were full of praise and satisfied. Because we addressed it … the Heritage card, it doesn't cost us a penny, it is €90 to the person to buy so if you give out to me and I addressed your

query and I am wrong so I gave you a heritage card, I would like to think you would
go back and say "well, look what OPW did.".

Thus, social media is used as a valuable platform with which to enhance the retention activities of visitor attractions. It can be seen from the above mentioned quote, that one way visitor attractions are handling dissatisfied customers is through connecting with the customer through the social media platforms and asking them to direct message in order to solve the issue in a quick and efficient way. Furthermore, visitor attractions are extending an offering through social media, which would prompt the customer to return to their tourist site. This process is facilitated by the convenience and accessibility of social media.

Social media creates a platform for open communication which allows visitor attractions to quickly rectify any issues in order to retain customers. The Waterford Crystal respondent explained how it can be utilised when dealing with customer complaints:

We respond to positive and negative reviews … Then we get product queries on it, problems, we have an open policy, if you buy something you don't like, it's still in the box, we'll take it back. A faulty item, if you just take a photograph of it, showing the issue, we try and solve it and send you a replacement.

As seen from the above comment, the respondent mentioned sending photographs of a faulty item as a way to quickly deal with an issue. This indicates the use of a readily available feature of social media in order to respond to and solve a complaint from a customer. In this way visitor attractions are able to examine and address issues received in an quick and efficient way, in order to retain a dissatisfied customer.

Another important feature utilised by visitor attractions is the speed of communication on social media platforms. During the content analysis it was noted that majority of the non-competition posts shared on social media are informative in nature. The following table shows the percentage of non-competitive posts on social media platforms:

Table 4.10. Percentage of non-competitive posts

% of Non-competition posts		
Visitor attractions	**FB**	**Twitter**
INHP	95%	100%
LH	100%	100%
OPW	100%	NA
WC	96%	100%

From the above table it is clear that majority of the posts shared by visitor attractions are non-competition in nature. Content analysis showed that visitor attractions are utilising social media platforms to share the events or news related to their organisations. Social media enhances the marketing activities by increasing the speed at which visitor attractions share information with large audiences. In this way social media is playing an important role in attracting more customers to the tourist sites.

Social media can also be beneficial for the retention activities of visitor attractions due to its cost-effective nature. Not only does the above mentioned quote from the Waterford Crystal representative indicates the usefulness of the inherent features of social media (i.e. ease of uploading photographs), but it also implies its cost effective nature. Through a simple uploading of a photograph visitor attractions are able to examine first-hand the issue that a customer is facing and make an appropriate response. Rather than sending the faulty good back and forth, which is likely to be costly to both parties, a photograph can be sent through a social media platform, which will allow the visitor attractions to examine the product without this added cost. The Waterford Crystal representative highlighted the importance of using an easy and low cost approach in order to retain customers, who stated:

> If the customer is right and within reason, we'll try to facilitate that customer. So change their mind, faulty product, we make the journey of solving the problem as simple and cost effective as possible.

From the detailed data analysis it could be concluded that the visitor attractions are trying to solve the dissatisfaction of their customers through social media platforms itself by responding to them and addressing them in an easy and cost effective manner.

In addition, most of the visitor attractions are attempting to solve the complaints received on social media platforms, through the platforms themselves. This could be through using the features inherent in these platform to better understand the complaint (e.g. by requesting photographs) or through using social media to offer other benefits such as free vouchers or replacements of faulty items.

In summary whilst analysing the data to understand the role of social media in the retention activities of the Irish visitor attractions, two relevant themes emerged. The first theme identified was the nature of responses to negative feedback, primarily the decision of whether to respond and the speed of that response. It was found that majority of visitor attractions in the sample adopted an approach of responding to any negative feedback. Alongside this, adopting a strategy to give a timely response to any complaints can also be essential in ensuring that customers are retained. The second and final theme was the features of social media that allow it to facilitate the handling and retention of a customer. It was found that the accessibility and direct communication offered by social media allowed visitor attractions to respond to complaints with ease and understand any issues presented by a customer in a better way. The cost-effective nature and speed of communication on social media also made it a beneficial tool to use, when attempting to retain a customer. Ultimately it can be concluded that the social media plays an important role in the retention activities of the Irish visitor attractions.

4.7. Research question – To examine how Irish visitor attractions utilise social media to understand and promote commitment amongst customers

This study tries to understand the ways in which visitor attractions are using social media to understand and promote commitment amongst their customers. Commitment is the result of the cumulative efforts of visitor attractions to ensure positive satisfaction and retention of their customers (Sashi, 2012). Commitment displayed by tourists towards a particular visitor attraction plays a key role in their future behaviour and engagement. Commitment can be shown through the sharing of positive e-WOM (affective commitment) or revisiting the destination (calculative commitment) (Allameh et al., 2014; Sashi, 2012).

While conducting data analysis in relation to this research question, two distinct themes were identified. The first theme explored how visitor attractions understand the presence of affective commitment. The second theme explores the ways visitor attractions use social media platforms to promote calculative commitment. The first theme is detailed in the next section.

4.7.1. The level of affective commitment on social media platforms

The first theme identified was the affective commitment expressed on social media platforms. Affective commitment refers to the highly positive emotions of the tourists towards the tourist destination, due to the satisfaction with the tourist attraction (Sashi, 2012). This can result in the sharing of positive word of mouth through social media platforms. It can be argued that the higher the satisfaction level greater would be the commitment towards a particular tourist destination. Satisfied customers often share these positive experiences online in the form of comments on social media platforms. The Waterford Crystal respondent confirmed this, stating, "We receive loads of notifications to say, 'tour was amazing. We enjoyed it a lot'". This type of post shows the satisfaction that a visitor has towards the service provided by the tourist destination can be expressed through sharing on social media platforms. The expression of positive emotional experience by customers, was also noted by the interviewee from The Irish National Heritage Park, who stated:

> Somebody will put down "oh I visited yesterday. I had a lovely tour with Alan. He was great fun. Enjoyed a lot. The kids really loved it."

From the above quote it can be seen that visitors of attractions are demonstrating affective commitment through sharing positive e-WOM. Customers are also utilising different features of social media to share positive word of mouth online. The OPW respondent mentioned this, stating:

> And I see many people liking and sharing our posts on social media on a regular basis. They constantly interact with the site through social media. They were already on social media they were mentioning us on social media. They now mention us and tag our page.

As expressed above, the interviewee states that customers are liking, sharing, mentioning and tagging the page. This shows that customers are not only using different features of social media platforms to share positive experiences, but they are utilising multiple features in unison. Through this it can be determined that the use of multiple forms of e-WOM, indicates a level of positive emotions which in turn indicates a level of affective commitment.

Content analysis of the social media platforms was done in order to understand the level of usage of different features in social media platforms by the customers. The following table shows the total number of likes, shares, comments, tags, retweets and views each visitor attraction received in their peak period:

Table 4.11. Feedback on social media platforms

Social media platforms	Companies	Likes	Shares/Retweets	Comments	Tagging
FB	INHP	3786	471	295	104
	LH	4243	357	1059	677
	OPW	2283	192	102	64
	WC	3316	1177	1239	1115
Twitter	INHP	2292	970	53	NA
	LH	162	73	10	NA
	WC	188	41	4	NA
Instagram	INHP	0	NA	5	NA
	WC	867	NA	14	NA

The above table indicates that customers/audience on social media platforms are expressing their commitment by using different features to like or share or re-tweet or tag. The Irish National Heritage Park and the Waterford Crystal have a social media presence on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. Hence the cumulative level of affective commitment is higher for them than others. It was also noted that use of multiple features by audience is higher on Facebook than all other social media platforms.

In summary, the above comments highlight that customers are using social media

platforms to express affective commitment towards visitor attractions. Satisfied customers are likely to share their highly positive emotions through utilising the various features provided by social media. The use of multiple features in unison is also a firm indication of highly positive emotions being derived from customers. Content analysis of the social media platforms showed the level of affective commitment expressed through social media.

4.7.2. The promotion of calculative commitment through social media

The second theme that emerged during the data analysis was the role of social media in understanding and promoting calculative commitment amongst customers. Calculative commitment is the state when a customer revisits the tourist destination due to a high level of satisfaction derived during the initial visit (Allameh et al., 2014). During the data analysis one sub-theme that was identified was the role of social media in loyalty programmes.

The thematic data analysis showed that visitor attractions are promoting loyalty programmes through social media platforms to attract domestic customers. For example, when asked about using social media platforms to connect with their targeted customers, the respondent from Irish National Heritage Park mentioned their loyalty card, stating:

> Yes, for the Wexford residents' reward card, most definitely we use social media to promote it. Yeah, we do. Actually, we only launched it last year and we only launched it through social media and we have eight and a half thousand people signed up. We haven't even done anything in the newspaper or radio, nothing.

As can be seen from the above quote, the loyalty scheme is promoted social media. This shows how visitor attractions are using social media to promote commitment from their primarily domestic customers. The respondent from OPW pointed out how they are utilising social media to advertise their loyalty card, namely their Heritage card, through social media platforms:

> …A perfect Christmas gift - Heritage card. Price and everything all information is online. We post that on every Facebook page, so that is going on in 50 Facebook pages.

These opinions show that these visitor attractions are utilising social media marketing

to promote their loyalty schemes in order to attract more Irish people into their sites and ensure a longer term commitment from them.

In conclusion, whilst analysing the data, it was found that social media plays an important role in understanding the existence of affective commitment and promoting calculative commitment. During this analysis, two key themes emerged. The first theme was the understanding of the presence of affective commitment by customers on social media. It was identified that customers are showing their highly positive emotions towards the tourist destination through spreading positive word of mouth on social media. In addition they are using various features on social media platforms to share their positive experiences, both individually and in unison. The second theme emerged was the role of social media in promoting calculative commitment. Data analysis showed that visitor attractions are utilising different loyalty programmes to ensure calculative commitment from their repeat customers. In short, it can be inferred that social media can be used by the visitor attractions in order to understand and promote customer commitment.

4.8. Research question - To examine how Irish visitor attractions utilise social media to promote online advocacy amongst targeted audiences.

This research aims to explore the extent of online social media advocacy by customers of visitor attractions. Satisfied customers in a connected world, interact with others in their social media networks to share their positive experiences with a product, brand or a service and tend to act as brand advocates on digital platforms (Sashi, 2012). In order to answer this question, data analysis of interviews and content analysis of social media platforms were conducted.

In answering this research question, two themes were identified while conducting the data analysis. The first theme identified was the online advocacy of customers. The second and last theme was the advocacy undertaken by the third parties. The first theme is detailed in the next section.

4.8.1. Online advocacy by customers

The first theme identified was customer's advocacy of visitor attractions on social media platforms. Usually, satisfied customers share their delight on social media platforms (Sashi, 2012). The ways in which visitor attractions ensure satisfaction play an important role in promoting advocacy. Different approaches visitor attractions adopted to create satisfaction in social media were identified in this research study. These include timely responses to customers, cultivating a relationship with customers, careful selection of the media/post and the usage of social media's technological features. These approaches followed by tourist provides are important as a satisfied tourist can act as a brand advocate on social media platforms and help in creating positive e-WOM for a tourist attraction.

While analysing the data to understand the extent to which visitor attractions are promoting online advocacy, two relevant sub-themes were emerged. The first sub-theme concerned the ways in which visitor attractions are promoting the use of online advocacy. The second sub-theme identified was the level of online advocacy by customers.

The first sub-theme was the way in which visitor attractions are promoting online advocacy. The data analysis of interviews has shown that visitor attractions are promoting online advocacy by encouraging visitors to follow their social media pages. The respondent from the Irish National Heritage Park mentioned this in detail:

> Every tour guide now will say at the end. They will say, 'if you enjoy the tour, if you think I am great, if you think I am not great, tell us on Trip Advisor. Also let me know if you want to join us on Facebook, social media' and then they will give out the information. Yeah. Follow us ... follow us ...

The Loftus Hall representative reaffirmed this by stating:

> Yes, we do. At the end of each tour our tour guide will say, 'if you enjoyed our tour or if you are looking for our Facebook page, Twitter and even Trip Advisor'. They will say, you know they have a joke, say if Mary is giving the tour 'if you enjoyed the tour, please go to trip advisor and give Mary a good review, if not say it is John'.

When asked about the online promotion of visitor attractions by the customers the interviewee from OPW stated, "I know everybody was liking and sharing, we encourage everybody to do as much as possible". In summary, visitor attractions are requesting the customers directly to follow their social media pages, like, share or retweet their content. This helps visitor attractions to increase the visitation numbers on their social media platforms, websites and digital communication, and engage effectively with their targeted market.

The second sub-theme identified was the level of online advocacy on social media platforms by customers. A positive e-WOM spread by a customer could be considered as an act of advocacy. This is likely to influence the decision-making process of a potential traveller. The data analysis of the interviews indicates that all visitor attractions are actively identifying this form of online advocacy by customers. The respondent from the OPW detailed this, stating:

> We would have regular users on both Twitter and Facebook on particular sites, who are constantly liking and sharing our content or putting comments like "it's a lovely site, you should go there". "It's a lovely site, you should go there ". You almost would think that they are working for the OPW. They're not, but they love Botanical Gardens or they love Castle townhouse or they love Trim castle. So they always, without even asking, put a post and tag us on it.

The above quote highlights that customers who are satisfied with a product or a service can act as brand advocates on social media. The respondent from Loftus Hall has mentioned the ways in which the audience shares the content that they find useful or entertaining:

> People are talking on social media "have you seen this, did you see what happened here", and they are sharing information about us.

This opinion was reiterated by the interviewee from the Waterford Crystal:

> … they usually do, I have noticed a lot of shares and tags and retweets. We receive loads of notifications to say, you know, "tour was amazing" … I think our ratings are nearly at 5.

It is evident from the above comments that visitor attractions are identifying online advocacy or positive word of mouth by customers on social media platforms. Also, the data analysis of previous research questions has shown that visitor attractions utilise several approaches in order to understand and create satisfaction. This would in turn help visitor attractions to generate further positive word of mouth and create brand advocates on social media platforms.

A content analysis of Facebook and Twitter accounts of the visitor attractions was undertaken in order to understand the online advocacy by the customers. Online advocacy can be shown by using Facebook and Twitter features like 'share', 'tag' and 're-tweet'. Thus, the total number of the posts which were shared, tagged and re-tweeted on Facebook and Twitter during peak period was calculated. This data is illustrated in the following table:

Table 4.12. Table of online advocacy

Company	Social media platform	Total percentage of posts tagged	Number of tags	Total percentage of posts shared/retweeted	Number of shares/retweets
INHP	FB	26%	94	59%	372
LH	FB	67%	357	67%	560
OPW	FB	23%	64	64%	192
WC	FB	28%	1115	72%	1177
INHP	Twitter	NA	NA	66%	970
LH	Twitter	NA	NA	83%	156
WC	Twitter	NA	NA	100%	41

The above table indicates that on Facebook, 67% of the posts by Loftus Hall were tagged which was the highest percentage among all. When it comes to number of tags and shares, Waterford Crystal has the highest number. However, during content analysis it was noted that it could also be because of the nature of posts. One of the competition based posts by Waterford Crystal on July 21, 2017 was "To celebrate

these new pieces in our collection, we are giving away the ring pictured in the post. To enter tag two friends who would like this piece and share the post." This post received 822 shares and 1000 tags. Also, all the posts on Twitter by Waterford Crystal were retweeted by the audience and 88% of posts by Loftus Hall were retweeted. Thus, it can be assumed that Waterford Crystal and Loftus Hall has the highest level of online advocacy on social media.

In conclusion, data analysis of interviews and content analysis was undertaken to understand the advocacy by customers on social media. During the data analysis of interviews, it was noted that visitor attractions promote advocacy by ensuring satisfaction or by encouraging visitors to follow them on social media platforms. Data analysis also revealed that visitor attractions recognise the positive word of mouth from satisfied customers who can act as brand advocates on social media. Having identified the advocacy by customers, it is essential to understand third party advocacy received by the visitor attractions on social media platforms. This is illustrated as the second theme in the following section.

4.8.2. Third party advocacy on social media platforms

The second and last theme identified in relation to this research question was the advocacy by third party on social media platforms for visitor attractions. Third parties include the Government tourist promotion bodies and other tour domestic and international tour operators.

One of the major third parties identified was Fáilte Ireland. The respondent from Fáilte Ireland outlined their role in promoting tourist destinations in Ireland by stating:

> Fáilte Ireland is an international tourism authority. So, we are responsible for developing the tourism product and to develop the new attractions and helping the existing attractions become better and be ready for the tourists.

When asked about social media promotion and advocacy the respondent from Fáilte Ireland stated:

> We encourage all of our kind of key clients or industrial partners to use the hashtag #irelandsancienteast because then they will be getting more momentum. You know, more and more people will be seeing that on Facebook and Twitter and Instagram and then there will be more content. There, if you search Ireland's Ancient East hashtag in Instagram you can see quite a good amount of photos already.

The above statement highlights how Fáilte Ireland is actively trying to create more content on social media platforms, which would help in creating the awareness and the promotion of the tourism sector in Ireland. When asked about the third party advocacy on the social media, the respondent from Loftus Hall mentioned the support provided by the Fáilte Ireland by stating:

> … with the development of Ancient East brand which we are pivotal in, we are using the brand as much as possible to because it helps. Fáilte Ireland promotes us.

The respondent from the Irish National Heritage Park shared the same opinion, stating:

> Tourism Ireland and Fáilte Ireland are spending millions in France and Germany and the US to tell people about Ireland so the awareness in their country to come and visit Ireland. So, we can now piggyback with Tourism Ireland and Fáilte Ireland and start targeting these markets.

The above quotes show the pivotal role played by the Fáilte Ireland as a tourism-promoting organisation in Ireland.

Other than Fáilte Ireland, other domestic tour operators also play an important role in the online advocacy of tourist destinations in Ireland. The data analysis showed that two out of the four visitor attractions mentioned being promoted by tour operators on their social media platforms. One among these two respondents was from Waterford Crystal detailed the social media advocacy by tour operators by stating:

> We get a lot of promotion, what happens is we supply them [tour operators] with a copy and images and they put them in the print and digital material, so they'll have itineraries why you should come to Ireland and stuff like that and then they'll be posting stuff out and tagging us to say 'well if you're coming to Ireland, you go to house of Waterford Crystal' and then on Instagram some of the operators are posting when they're at experiences so 'we're now at Waterford Ireland; at the home of the

famous Waterford Crystal or at the Cliff's of Moher' – so some of them actually have their tour guides posting stuff like that.

The respondent from OPW has stated that online advocacy by tour operators is limited to some of the tourist destinations under OPW. The respondent stated:

Not a lot of tour operators … I see some of them. But no not many. We have capacity issues in a lot of sites and those are the sites unfortunately tour operators like.

While answering the question about online advocacy by tour operators, both the respondent from the Irish National Heritage Park pointed out the lack of promotion by the tour operators. The Irish National Heritage Park respondent stated:

Not tour operators. Not, to a certain extent. There is not enough promotion from tour operators, if you ask me.

In brief, in the data analysis of interviews, two types of third parties were identified. The first one is the government tourism organisations, like Fáilte Ireland and the second type are the tour operators. The data analysis showed that Fáilte Ireland is actively promoting the tourist destinations in Ireland and trying to create more user-generated content. However, the online advocacy by tour operators is limited. Two out of four visitor attractions mentioned the lack of support from the tour operators in the promotion of the tourist sites on social media platforms.

In conclusion, while conducting the data analysis, two themes have emerged with respect to social media advocacy. The first theme was advocacy by customers/audiences on social media platforms. It was noted that all visitor attractions sampled have strategies in place to encourage online advocacy. This is done through ensuring satisfaction or by encouraging visitors to follow them on social media platforms. The second theme that emerged was the advocacy by third parties. The study found that Fáilte Ireland is actively promoting and developing tourist destinations in Ireland through social media. However, two out of four visitor attractions have mentioned that there is a lack of online advocacy from tour operators. Ultimately, it can be concluded that the visitor attractions are seeking to promote and ensure online advocacy.

4.9. Conclusion

This chapter presented the key research findings obtained from the qualitative and quantitative analyses of the research questions. These research questions were derived from the steps of customer engagement cycle proposed by Sashi (2012) namely connection, interaction, satisfaction, retention, commitment, advocacy and engagement. Overall, the research findings supported the research objective of this study, that social media can be utilised as a customer engagement tool for visitor attractions.

These findings are discussed in light of the relevant literature in the following chapter, where the implications emanating from them are also addressed.

5. Discussion and Implication

5.1. Introduction

This chapter, through a synthesis and critical analysis of the findings, provides an understanding about the role of social media in the customer engagement activities of Irish visitor attractions. Furthermore, a critical discussion of the findings within the scope of the reviewed literature is presented.

5.2. Discussion of the research questions

The main focus of this study is to answer the research question:

To understand the role of social media in the customer engagement activities of Irish visitor attractions.

In order to answer this question and, research objective, six relevant sub-questions were posed in relation with the customer engagement cycle proposed by Sashi (2012). They are:

a) To examine how Irish visitor attractions utilise social media to create a connection with their targeted audiences.

b) To examine how Irish visitor attractions utilise social media to interact with their targeted audiences.

c) To examine how Irish visitor attractions utilise social media to understand and create customer satisfaction.

d) To examine how Irish visitor attractions utilise social media to retain their customers in the retention activities.

e) To examine how Irish visitor attractions utilise social media to understand and promote commitment amongst customers.

f) To examine how Irish visitor attractions utilise social media to promote online advocacy amongst targeted audiences.

To deduce an answer to each of the six individual research questions, the findings are now discussed in light of the literature review in the next sections of this chapter.

5.3. To examine how Irish visitor attractions utilise social media to create a connection with their targeted market

Three findings were identified while examining how Irish visitor attractions utilise social media to create a connection with their targeted market. Firstly, visitor attractions have an awareness of the relevance of social media tools. Secondly, the different factors considered by visitor attractions while choosing an appropriate social media platform such as a user friendly interface and low level of expertise required for use. Finally, the various audience bases which visitor attractions use social media activities to connect with, such as international and domestic customers, along with tour operators.

This research study identifies that visitor attractions are aware of the relevance of social media as a communication tool for the enhancement of their customer engagement activities. As highlighted in the findings section, the normalisation of social media usage allows it to act as a medium for communication for visitor attractions to connect with their targeted audience. This in turn indicates that visitor attractions have recognised a shift in societal preferences due to the emergence of social media as a communication platform. Visitor attractions are aware of the fact that UGC is widely used by consumers of hospitality and tourism services both for information sharing and as an information source for making decisions (Gretzel & Yoo, 2008).

Thus, attractions are actively trying to incorporate social media into their overall marketing or communication efforts (Uşaklı, 2017). Thus, it can be inferred that visitor attractions are aware of the need to establish a connection with their customers through a changing communication medium.

This research indicates that visitor attractions are taking advantage of the new opportunities that arise with social media and thus are making it an integral part of

their marketing approach (Barnes, 2010; Pantelidis, 2010; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Karataş & amp, 2013; Babür, 2013; He et al., 2013). This not only shows the resilience of the tourism industry to respond to changing business environments but also gives insight into the future potential of the industry if it continues to evolve in this way. Whilst the business potential of social media can be seen for most industries, it lends itself particularly well to the tourism industry which at its core seeks to engage visitors across the world. Therefore, an easily accessible form of communication such social media, can prove to be a powerful resource.

The findings of this research highlighted that visitor attractions consider different factors while selecting the appropriate social media platforms to facilitate their marketing approach. Selecting the suitable social media tool is crucial for a business as it creates a platform to communicate with their targeted audience (Schmallegger & Carson, 2008; Pantelidis, 2010). Thus various factors were taken into account whilst selecting an appropriate platform, such as the user friendliness of the interface and expertise required to operate it. Costs involved in maintaining the selected social media platform was another prominent factor raised by visitor attractions in the sample. This research indicated that Facebook fulfilled this aforementioned criteria for the visitor attractions in the sample and was the social media platform predominantly used by all. The business potential of Facebook in assisting organisations to pursue international electronic marketing was highlighted in the literature (Kasavana et al., 2010; Chan & Denizci, 2011; Uşakli et al., 2017).

Interestingly, Instagram, a purely visual based platform, is not used frequently by any of the visitor attractions sampled despite the fact that tourism is a visual and intrinsically scenic business. While the business potential of Facebook in assisting visitor attractions is clearly evident in the sample (Kasavana et al., 2010; Chan & Denizci, 2011; Uşakli et al., 2017), visitor attractions in the sample are yet to fully utlise other platforms. This shows that whilst visitor attractions are incorporating social media into their business, there is still room for development in terms of capitalising all forms of social media tools. It is only after this that it can be definitively stated which social media platform is the most advantageous in connecting and thus establishing an engagement with audience.

Through this research it was noted that various social media activities are carried out by visitor attractions to connect with their multiple audience bases. This research showed that the Irish visitor attractions' audience on social media platforms varies from national and international tourists to tour operators. The reviewed literature highlighted the concept that social media creates a platform for visitor attractions to connect and engage with their audience across the globe (Bethapudi, 2013). Thus, in terms of business to customer communication, the findings are consistent with the existing literature on the reach of social media to connect with international customers. Alongside this, the study also identified that social media is utilised by visitor attractions to connect with other audience bases such as tourist operators. Thus, it could be concluded that the relevance of social media in business to business communication (Lew, 2007) has been identified by visitor attractions and this shows the potential role social media platforms to engage corporate connections.

Overall, this study highlighted the awareness of visitor attractions about the business potential of social media as a communication tool. Visitor attractions are reacting to the changing technological landscape of communication and responding to it in a way that allows them to capitalise on its various social media developments. Social media is seen as an integral part of the overall communication strategy of visitor attractions to engage with their targeted audience. Additionally, visitor attractions consider different characteristics of social media when choosing the appropriate platform for their businesses. Whilst Facebook seems to be the most predominantly used platform, it cannot be definitively stated which platform has the most business potential, as not all platforms have been fully utilised by visitor attractions to the same degree. The findings of the study show that visitor attractions are using social media for business to customer communication as well as business to business communication. Having considered the research findings in light of the literature, this research indicates visitor attractions/attractions are actively selecting certain social media platforms to create effective connections with multiple audiences.

5.4. To examine how Irish visitor attractions interact with their targeted audience through social media

Three relevant findings were noted while examining how Irish visitor attractions interact with their targeted audience through social media. Firstly, the different type

of social media posts such as visual posts, competition based posts. that are considered effective by visitor attractions. Secondly, the frequency of interactions on a social media platform by visitor attractions. Finally, the monitoring of interaction by visitor attractions.

The first finding highlighted the different types of posts that visitor attractions consider to be effective in interacting with their targeted audience. Further to this, this study was able to identify the exploratory behaviour of visitor attractions which means they are actively experimenting with the type of content posted and level of interaction generate. Thus, visitor attractions were found to have an understanding of the types of posts that would generate the highest level of engagement from their audience. For example, they are aware of the effectiveness of visual posts in generating more interactions from the audience than text posts (Hays et al., 2013; Uşakli et al., 2017). In addition, this study identified the effectiveness of competition-based posts in generating high levels of interactions on social media platforms. Thus, visitor attractions are aware of the varying degrees of interaction associated with different types of posts and have made some progress towards utilising this knowledge in their social media activities.

Secondly, through this research the frequency of interactions on social media platforms by visitor attractions was studied. Visitor attractions were seeking to strike a balance between their frequency of posting and response rates to ensure an optimum level of interactions with their audience. This was due to the awareness that regardless of their online presence, their service will be subjected to ongoing discussion on social media platforms. Thus, visitor attractions are actively participating in this conversation in order to turn them into their benefits (Tolkki et al., 2015). Moreover, visitor attractions are ensuring that posts and responses maintain a high quality and a personal element to ensure a higher level of interaction. Thus, this shows that visitor attractions are seeking to take some ownership or initiate some level of control over the social media conversation regarding their organisation and are trying to tailor both the direction and the impact of such conversation.

The third finding identified that visitor attractions are monitoring the level of interaction their audience have with their social media posts. The third finding builds upon the aforementioned point regarding the exploratory behaviour of visitor

attractions in order to identify posts which create high level of interaction from their target audience. Whilst this means varying the types of social media content posted (e.g. visual posts or competition posts), monitoring the outcome of such varied posts ultimately gives an insight to visitor attractions over the success of their social media approach (Pantelidis, 2010). Therefore it can be concluded that visitor attractions are proactive and are critically assessing their social media usage to ascertain its longer-term use and benefit for their business (Hays et al., 2012; Lee et al., 2015).

In conclusion, this study identified the varying degree of interaction associated with different types of posts. Visitor attractions are adopting an explorative approach to understand which posts generate higher levels of interaction, for example through competition based posts and visual posts. It is only through the uses of multiple types of posts that visitor attractions were able to ascertain which posts would generate more interaction and tailor their social media marketing approach accordingly. By ensuring an optimum level of frequency in posting social media content and measuring the level of interaction, visitor attractions are able to enhance their customer engagement activities. It can be concluded that Irish visitor attractions are utilising and monitoring the interaction level of different posts in order to enhance their performance on social media.

5.5. To examine how Irish visitor attractions utilise social media to understand and create customer satisfaction

Two key findings were identified while examining how Irish visitor attractions utilise social media to understand and create customer satisfaction. Firstly, understanding customer satisfaction via he different forms of feedback such as likes, shares, tags, retweets, checking in and comments which are received on social media platforms. Secondly, different ways in which visitor attractions are creating satisfaction amongst the target audience on social media.

The first finding highlighted the relevance of feedback such as likes, shares, tags, retweets, checking in and comments on social media platforms in understanding the level of satisfaction amongst audience. The emergence of social media has fundamentally changed the way organisations receive feedback from their target audience. Therefore, when reviewing the role of social media within the marketing

approach of visitor attractions, it is essential to understand both whether visitor attractions understand this change in feedback and also the various ways in which this feedback can be obtained. This study found that visitor attractions recognise positive feedback in the forms of likes, shares, tags, retweets, checking in and comments. This not only shows that visitor attractions have recognised the shift in the form of feedback due to the emergence of social media as a communication tool but also that they have recognised the various different social media features which their target audience may use to give feedback to them. This in turn allows visitor attractions to assess the level of customer satisfaction achieved, along with ensuring that as a business their social media approach evolves with the evolution and updates of various social media platforms (Thurau et al., 2004; Pan et al., 2007; Cho et al., 2014). By understanding the level of customer satisfaction, visitor attractions are able to understand the extent to which their services are fulfilling the consumers' performance criteria (Correia et al., 2008). Thus it helps the visitor attractions to assess their performance and improve the quality of their service.

The second finding of this research study identified three different ways in which visitor attractions are creating satisfaction amongst their target audience via social media. Firstly, visitor attractions are using social media platforms to ensure timely responses to the feedback they receive. By being responsive to their audience on social media platforms, visitor attractions aim to create customer satisfaction (Chan & Guillet, 2011). Feedback from social media comes instantaneously and this give visitor attractions instant access to information regarding satisfaction levels of their customers. Thus, visitor attractions can tailor their approach quicker to ensure satisfaction and maintain a persistent engagement by keeping up an ongoing dialogue with customers/audience (Park & Allen, 2013). Secondly, visitor attractions are carefully choosing social media content to ensure a customer satisfaction and also to foster a relationship with their audience (Uşakli et al., 2017). Finally, it was noted that visitor attractions are utilising 'live' features of social media platforms in order to create new online experiences to generate satisfaction amongst their customers. All these methods show that visitor attractions are able to respond to the various changes in social media features and utilise these developments for their benefit. Furthermore, the aforementioned methods devised by visitor attractions show their awareness of the importance of social media in today's digital world as a medium which customers' use

to voice their satisfaction (Neilsen, 2012; Uşaklı et al., 2017). If visitor attractions continue to regularly assess the changes in communication pattern through social media and utilise it for the betterment of their services, they are likely to be able to adequately respond to the various changes in features that are expected through future social media development.

Overall, this study highlighted the importance of social media in creating customer satisfaction. Visitor attractions are recognising the positive feedback in the forms of likes, shares, tags, retweets, checking in and comments on social media platforms to understand and maintain customer satisfaction. Visitor attractions are aware of the shift in the way of communication with the emergence of social media and are actively utilising these platforms to provide timely responses to enquires or feedback to ensure satisfaction. Visitor attractions are also using new technological developments related to social media to enhance customer satisfaction and in turn, engagement. Therefore, it can be concluded that visitor attractions are aware of the various forms in which their feedback is generated using social media and are using these platforms to identify and create customer satisfaction.

5.6. To examine how Irish visitor attractions utilise social media to retain their customers in their retention activities

Two relevant findings were identified while examining how Irish visitor attractions utilise social media to retain their customers in their retention activities. Firstly, the nature of responses to negative feedback on social media. This refers to the decision of visitor attractions on whether to respond to negative feedback and the speed of that response. Secondly, the features of social media that facilitate the retention of a customer.

Through this research study, the nature of response to negative feedback was explored. Visitor attractions have adopted a strategy to give a timely response to any complaints on social media platforms as a late reply from them can create bad word of mouth (Maecker et al., 2016). Social media has the ability to enhance the timeliness of the

communication between visitor attractions and their customers. However, the same features of social media (namely the speed and accessibility of the platform) that allow the creation of customer satisfaction could equally lead to dissatisfaction if not monitored efficiently. Thus, the fact that visitor attractions are utilising social media to maintain a high level of responsiveness to their customers would result in customer satisfaction which can lead to customer retention (Chan & Guillet, 2011).

The second and final finding was that the features of social media that allow it to facilitate retention of a customer. Unlike other traditional communication channels, social media creates a platform where tourists can share their opinions or complaints about a destination both while on the trip or post trip and this feedback can instantaneously reach the visitor attractions. Visitor attractions in the sample exhibited an understanding about the efficiency of social media in handling the customer complaints and enquiries. Visitor attractions are creating triggered engagement by minimising their reaction times and limiting expectation-delivery gaps (Zeithaml et al., 2002). The accessibility and direct communication offered by social media allowed visitor attractions to respond to complaints with ease, whilst the media capabilities of social media allowed visitor attractions to gain a better understanding of any issues presented by a customer in a better way. The cost-effective nature and speed of communication on the social media platforms secured these platforms an important role in the customer retention activities of visitor attractions.

In conclusion, visitor attractions are aware of the fact that a late response or being unresponsive to customers could bring about potential business loss or even a worse consequence—negative word of mouth. Thus, visitor attractions are ensuring timely responses to customer complaints and feedback on social media platforms. In addition, different features of social media like its speed of communication, cost effective nature and accessibility have made it a viable tool for visitor attractions to retain their customers. Ultimately it can be concluded that visitor attractions are ensuring that social media plays an important role in their retention activities.

5.7. To examine how Irish visitor attractions utilise social media to understand and promote commitment amongst customers

Two key findings were identified while examining how Irish visitor attractions utilise social media to understand and promote commitment amongst customers. Firstly, the presence of affective commitment by customers on the social media platforms of visitor attractions. Secondly, the role of social media in promoting calculative commitment among customers.

The first finding identified the affective commitment of customers on social media platforms. Customers express positive emotions towards the tourist attraction on social media platforms in the form of likes, retweets, comments and shares. The visitor attractions are identifying and promoting this positive word of mouth as this indicates customer satisfaction. Furthermore, the behaviour of tourists to use the social media platforms to share their positive experience could be inferred as the existence of affective commitment towards the visitor attractions (Allen & Meyer, 1990; Fullerton, 2003). These forms of feedback or displays of affective commitment are facilitated by the speed and accessibility of social media. These forms of sharing positive emotions also act as indicators of a potentially longer-term commitment between visitor attractions and visitors. Visitor attractions have extended their relationship into the daily lives of visitors, ensuring that they stay up to date on the various new activities and events taking place at the attraction. This ultimately means that visitor attractions are ensuring that their attractions are at the forefront of their audiences' mind so that when it comes time for holidays, visitors will be considering visiting or revisiting their attractions. Thus, this research shows that visitor attractions are using social media platforms to ensure affective commitment from their repeat customers.

The second finding was the role of social media in promoting calculative commitment. Calculative commitment was defined as the rational commitment/decision of a customer to create and maintain a long-term relationship with the service provider (Hess & Story, 2005. The nature of the tourism industry is at its core an 'experience-based' industry. In this way it can be said that the relationship between visitor attractions and visiting tourists is centralised around the particular tourist attraction visited. Therefore, a key question is whether this relationship can be sustained after a

visitor has left the chosen tourist attraction. It is here that social media plays a pivotal role. Social media is uniquely placed to extend this relationship between visitor attractions and visitors and decentralise it from being primarily focussed around their presence at a tourist attraction to a more longer-term relationship away from the attraction itself. Visitors can share pictures and comments regarding their experiences after leaving and continue the conversation online. Visitor attractions are utilising social media to promote different loyalty programmes to create a willingness to revisit and recommend the destination to other tourists (Hume et al., 2007; Ryu et al., 2010; Som et al., 2012). Thus, this research proves that visitor attractions are using social media to ensure calculative commitment from their repeat customers.

In conclusion, visitor attractions are aware of the fact that commitment derived by tourists towards the particular experience plays a key role in their behaviour and future engagement whether by revisiting the destination or sharing positive e-WOM. It was found in this research that social media plays an important role in understanding the existence of affective commitment and promoting calculative commitment. The study shows visitor attractions are extending their relationship with their customers beyond their presence at their various tourist attractions, to ensure that they stay up to date with developments at the attractions even after their visit has ended. Visitor attractions are actively using social media as a channel to promote different loyalty programs to promote calculative commitment. In short, it can be inferred that social media can be used by the visitor attractions in order to understand the presence of affective commitment and promote the calculative commitment among their customers.

5.8. To examine how Irish visitor attractions utilise social media to promote online advocacy amongst targeted audiences

Two findings were identified while examining the ways in which Irish visitor attractions utilise social media to promote advocacy. Firstly, the advocacy by customers on social media platforms was highlighted. Secondly, the level of advocacy by third parties for visitor attractions.

The first finding was related to the advocacy by customers on social media platforms. It was noted in this research that all visitor attractions sampled have strategies in place to encourage online advocacy. Social media is an easily accessible and therefore an

intrinsically inclusive platform, and this is what makes it so valuable for online advocacy. Social media users can easily bring other people into the conversation, with features such as tagging and sharing. This research study shows that visitor attractions are aware of the notion that satisfied customers would act as their brand advocates on social media and actively encourage individuals to act in this manner (Han et al., 2012; Prayag et al., 2017). Visitor attractions are therefore demonstrating that they understand that the experiential nature of tourism means that spreading and encouraging positive word of mouth through social media can be a key way to draw in new visitors. This includes ensuring satisfaction among their customers or by encouraging visitors to follow them on social media platforms. Thus, visitor attractions are capitalising on the inclusive nature of social media in order to promote and benefit from online advocacy.

In relation to the first finding, it was also noted that visitor attractions are able to generate positive e-WOM by creating satisfaction among the customers, and this satisfaction is ultimately what eventually spurs online advocacy. This study noted a higher level of advocacy on Facebook by customers/tourists than on any other platform. As stated earlier due to the fact that all platforms were not utilised equally, it cannot be stated definitively that Facebook allows for the most online advocacy. However, it does give an indication that the various features used on Facebook do facilitate an ease of online advocacy. For example, many individuals would comment and tag their friends on a social media post and this would in turn generate conversation and further tags/shares. This indicates that as long as visitor attractions ensure a high level of satisfaction and encourage advocacy, customers can then themselves attract other customers towards the various tourist attractions with seemingly little or no effort. This gives insight into a potential shift in business focus, away from a traditional more business-led advocacy to a more open customer-led advocacy. Overall, the presence of online customer advocacy is apparent and clearly shows the importance of the role of social media for visitor attractions.

The second finding revealed the third-party advocacy on social media. Two types of third parties were identified in this research; government organisations like Fáilte Ireland, and tour operators. While there is an active online promotion by government bodies like Fáilte Ireland, this study revealed a lack of advocacy from tour operators.

This gives insight into an area of further development for social media usage by visitor attractions in the future. As visitor attractions begin to assess the benefits of customer advocacy and advocacy by government bodies, they may in turn seek to promote online advocacy with tour operators. Visitor attractions may benefit from a more established online relationship with tour operators, who in turn could introduce a wide range of new customers to the various tourist attraction. Thus, this research revealed the current scope of online advocacy by third parties of tourist attractions, and the potential for future development.

Ultimately, this research identified different types of online advocacy for visitor attractions. Visitor attractions are aware of the importance of WOM by satisfied customers as this can ultimately initiate online advocacy. The inclusive nature of social media makes it an ideal tool for online advocacy and the study shows that satisfied customers are acting as brand advocates on social media. Moreover, this indicates a shift from business-led advocacy to customer-led advocacy. This study also extends the scope of online advocacy for visitor attractions by identifying the relevance of third party promotion through social media. It can be concluded that visitor attractions are seeking to promote and ensure online advocacy from customers and third parties.

5.9. To understand the role of social media in the customer engagement activities of Irish visitor attractions.

Having considered the six research questions individually in light of the findings and literature review, a number of key points relating to the overall research objective were identified. Firstly the interdependent nature of steps in customer engagement cycle. Secondly, the usage of social media to connect with a wide variety of audiences. Thirdly, different features of social media that would enable customer engagement. Lastly, the importance of social media specific communication rather than transferring old marketing/communication activities to social media.

Firstly, the steps in the Sashi's (2012) customer engagement cycle are interdependent in nature. It could be argued that the key element of customer engagement is interaction between visitor attractions and their audience (Farook & Abeysekara,

2016) as it is the interaction activities of visitor attractions that ultimately initiates a response from customers. Whilst this is a core component of the engagement cycle, due to the interdependent nature of the steps, focusing solely on one, or rather a lack of focus on other steps, can negatively affect the engagement on the subsequent step/steps of the engagement cycle. For example, posting good quality content on the appropriate social media platforms, would likely have a positive effect on the satisfaction levels of the audience. However, if visitor attractions focused on quality posts in isolation, and did not focus on key retention activities such as timely responses to complaints, customers can still feel dissatisfied with the service provided. This can in turn impact negatively on future interactions or could even potentially create negative word of mouth about their service (i.e. a negative form of advocacy such as discouragement). This highlights the importance of focusing on the engagement cycle as a whole, or rather the potentially detrimental impact of focusing on one step in isolation. Therefore, visitor attractions should attempt to take a holistic view when attempting to establish optimum customer engagement through social media platforms, and evaluate their performance on each step of the engagement cycle.

Secondly, social media provides a platform for the visitor attractions to connect and engage a wide range of audiences. Social media has fundamentally changed the way that visitor attractions can interact with their audience. Social media provides a platform to maintain a persistent engagement where they are able to keep up an ongoing dialogue with customers, even when they are not physically at the property. Social media allows instantaneous conversation which enables the visitor attractions to maintain a high level of responsiveness to their customers. This would result in customer satisfaction as well as retention (Chan & Guillet, 2011). The reach and accessibility of social media has meant that visitor attractions have the ability to diversify their chosen market and audience. Whereas in the past, marketing activities may have been limited to domestic visitors or visitors on/around the site and its surrounding areas, social media has broadened the scope and reach of marketing activities that are available to visitor attractions (Dholakia & Durham, 2010). With the aid of social media, Irish visitor attractions can reach out to potential tourists whilst they are still in their home countries, and perhaps even before they have chosen Ireland as a holiday destination. In this way visitor attractions have a valuable tool which helps

them influence the decisions of potential tourists very early on in their decision-making process.

Thirdly, visitor attractions have made significant progress towards understanding the social media features in place and evolving their customer engagement activities alongside new technological developments. This study showed the social media awareness of visitor attractions specifically with regard to features such as likes, shares, retweets, comments that are inherent within platforms. These features are the basis on which interaction is initiated on social media and it is through the monitoring of the level of interaction on these features that satisfaction levels can be determined. Visitor attractions are therefore monitoring the level of overall engagement with their targeted audience through these features, at various steps in the engagement cycle. This shows that visitor attractions have a substantial understanding of the various features available on social media platforms and how best to utilise these features in a beneficial way. Furthermore, visitor attractions are keeping up to date with the new technological developments and taking advantage of emerging features such as "live" features in order to ensure customer satisfaction for remote audiences. Every social media platform comes with distinct unique features, so understanding these features and staying up to date on new developments is vital for the visitor attractions. From this research study it can be seen that visitor attractions are aware of this and have understood existing features and have made efforts to utilise new features within their marketing activities as well.

Lastly, the relevance of social media specific communication in order to ensure maximum utilisation of social media in customer engagement. Social media centric engagement refers to customer engagement activities which are exclusive to social media and could not be carried out without the use of social media platforms. For example, with regard to advocacy, the use of tagging competitions (i.e. posts that encourage individuals to tag their friends in order to be awarded a prize), is an advocacy strategy that is unique to social media. Likewise, posts encouraging those who have visited the site to post a picture of their visits for half price future tickets is a social media specific retention strategy. Throughout this study, visitor attractions have shown an awareness of the potential activities on social media platforms that may initiate more engagement from their targeted audience. However, more can be done to

ensure that these activities are carried out in a way to generate maximum social media engagement. Visitor attractions can still make further effort to devise social media centric approaches rather than simply transfer their existing marketing or communication activities onto social media platforms, for example posting posters (Uşakli et al., 2017). Despite being aware of the effectiveness of social media in customer engagement, visitor attractions are not fully utilising the potential benefits that come with social media. In the modern era, social media plays a vital role in the decision-making process of a tourist and thus influences the communication and engagement activities in tourism related industries (Sigala et al., 2012; Leung et al., 2013; Benckendorff et al., 2014; Law et al., 2014). Thus, whilst progress has been made to incorporate social media into the customer engagement activities of visitor attractions, there is still room for visitor attractions to be more creative with their approach, by initiating social media centric communication activities.

Overall, this research study tries to identify the role of social media in the customer engagement activities of Irish visitor attractions. The interdependent nature of the steps in Sashi's customer engagement cycle (2012) was highlighted throughout this study. Visitor attractions should attempt to take a holistic view when attempting to establish customer engagement through social media. This study highlighted the importance of social media to engage domestic as well as international audience. This study also showed that visitor attractions have made significant progress towards understanding the existing social media features and are evolving their customer engagement activities alongside with new technological developments. Furthermore, visitor attractions need to initiate formulating social media focused customer engagement activities rather than utilising it like the way a tradition communication tool was used. Social media is and can be a powerful customer engagement tool for visitor attractions.

6. Conclusion

The purpose of this final chapter is to present the conclusions and recommendations to the research. The chapter structure is to initially present a general overview of the conclusions in light of the original research aim, followed by the conclusions to each research question. The practical implications of this study which are drawn from the analysis of the research questions will then be detailed. Finally, contribution to theory, research limitations and areas for further research will be presented.

6.1. To understand the role of social media in the customer engagement activities of Irish visitor attractions.

The overall research objective of this study was to understand the role of social media in the customer engagement activities of Irish visitor attractions. In order to understand this, the customer engagement model proposed by Sashi (2012) was adopted. The customer engagement activities of Irish visitor attractions were studied through the seven steps of the customer engagement model; connection, interaction, satisfaction, retention, commitment, advocacy and engagement. Some conclusions were drawn from the analysis of the findings from this research study.

Firstly, it could be concluded from this research that all the steps of the customer engagement cycle are interconnected. Thus, every action of a visitor attraction at one stage of the engagement cycle would influence the forthcoming steps. For example, posting good quality content on the appropriate social media platforms, would likely have a positive effect on the satisfaction levels of the audience. Likewise, a lack of focus at each stage of the customer engagement cycle can negatively affect the engagement on the subsequent step/steps of the engagement cycle. This highlights the importance of focusing on the engagement cycle as a whole, or rather the potentially detrimental impact of focusing at one stage of cycle in isolation.

Secondly, social media provides a platform for the visitor attractions to connect and engage a wide range of audiences. Social media provides a platform to maintain a persistent engagement where they are able to keep up an ongoing dialogue with

customers, even when they are not physically at the property. Social media allows instantaneous conversation which enables the visitor attractions to maintain a high level of responsiveness to their customers. This would result in customer satisfaction as well as retention. The reach and accessibility of social media has meant that visitor attractions have the ability to diversify their chosen market and audience.

Thirdly, visitor attractions have a substantial understanding of the various features available on social media platforms and how best to utilise these features in a beneficial way. These features are the basis in which interaction is initiated on social media and it is through monitoring the level of interaction of these features that satisfaction levels can be determined. Visitor attractions are, therefore, monitoring the level of overall engagement with their targeted audience at various steps in the engagement cycle through these features. Furthermore, visitor attractions are keeping up to date with the new technological developments and taking advantage of emerging features such as "live" features in order to ensure customer satisfaction for remote audiences.

Lastly, the relevance of social media specific communication in order to ensure maximum utilisation of social media in customer engagement. Social media centric engagement refers to customer engagement activities which are exclusive to social media and could not be carried out without the use of social media platforms. Visitor attractions have shown an awareness of the potential activities on social media platforms that may initiate more engagement from their targeted audience. However, more can be done to ensure that these activities are carried out in a way to generate maximum social media engagement.

In conclusion, social media has been playing a significant role in the customer engagement activities of Irish visitor attractions. This study has undertaken an in-depth analysis of each stage of the customer engagement cycle to get a clear picture of the role of social media in the customer engagement activities. The conclusions that are drawn from each step after are detailed in the following section along with the recommendations.

6.1.1. To examine how Irish visitor attractions utilise social media to create a connection with their targeted market.

The first research question was based on the first step of Sashi's Customer Engagement Cycle (2012). The key objective of this research question was to examine how Irish visitor attractions are utilising social media to create an effective connection with their targeted audience. Three main conclusions were drawn during the analysis of this research question.

Firstly, visitor attractions are aware of the business potential of social media as a communication tool. Visitor attractions have recognised a shift in the technological landscape of communication due to the emergence of social media as a communication platform and are actively trying to incorporate this into their overall customer engagement activities.

Secondly, visitor attractions are selecting particular social media platforms based on different characteristics such as a user-friendly interface and low level of expertise required for usage. As social media plays a vital role in the communication strategies of visitor attractions, selecting an appropriate platform is crucial for the success of customer engagement activities. Thus various factors were taken into account whilst selecting an appropriate platform.

Thirdly, visitor attractions are using social media to connect with their multiple audience bases, i.e. business to customer communication as well as business to business communication. The audience of Irish visitor attractions on social media platforms vary from national and international tourists to tour operators. visitor attractions are extending the scope of social media as a communication platform by using it in their corporate communication also.

6.1.2. To examine how Irish visitor attractions interact with their targeted audience through social media.

The second research question was based on the second step of Sashi's Engagement Cycle (2012). The key objective of this research question was to examine how Irish visitor attractions interact with their targeted audience through social media platforms. Three main conclusions were drawn during the analysis of this research question.

Firstly, visitor attractions are aware that varying degrees of interaction can be associated with different types of posts on social media platforms. Visitor attractions are utilising multiple types of posts on social media in order to understand the effectiveness of different types of posts. They are utilising this knowledge in their social media activities in order to generate a greater level of interaction.

Secondly, visitor attractions are aiming to achieve an optimum level of interaction with their audience. Visitor attractions are trying to determine the adequate frequency with which to post content online. Furthermore, they are actively participating in social media conversations in order to turn them into their benefits. They are taking a degree of ownership of the social media conversation by ensuring that high quality content and responses are posted regularly.

Thirdly, by measuring the level of interaction with their targeted audience, visitor attractions are able to enhance their customer engagement activities. Visitor attractions are assessing their social media usage in their customer engagement activities in order to ascertain its longer-term use and benefit for their business. By monitoring of the level interaction, visitor attractions gain an insight about success of their social media approach.

6.1.3. To examine how Irish visitor attractions utilise social media to understand and create customer satisfaction.

The third research question was based on the third step of Sashi's Engagement Cycle (2012). The key objective of this research question was to examine how Irish visitor attractions are utilising social media to create customer satisfaction. Two conclusions were drawn during the analysis of this research question.

Firstly, visitor attractions recognise positive feedback in the forms of likes, shares, tags, retweets, checking in and comments on social media platforms. This shows that visitor attractions have recognised the shift in the form of feedback due to the emergence of social media as a communication tool. Furthermore, they have actively recognised the various different social media features with which their target audience use to give feedback.

Secondly, visitor attractions are using new technological developments related to social media to enhance customer satisfaction and in turn, engagement. Different characteristics of social media like its speed of communication, cost-effective nature and accessibility have made it a viable tool for visitor attractions to retain their customers. In addition, visitor attractions are utilising 'live' features of social media platforms in order to create new online experiences to generate satisfaction amongst their customers.

6.1.4. To examine how Irish visitor attractions utilise social media to retain their customers in their retention activities.

The fourth research question was based on the fourth step of Sashi's Engagement Cycle (2012). The key objective of this research question was to examine how Irish visitor attractions are utilising social media in their retention activities. Two conclusions were drawn during the analysis of this research question.

Firstly, visitor attractions are aware that a late response or being unresponsive to customers could have negative consequences for example negative word of mouth. Thus, they are ensuring timely responses to customer complaints and feedback on social media platforms.

Secondly, different features of social media like its speed of communication, cost-effective nature and accessibility have made it a viable tool for visitor attractions to retain their customers. Visitor attractions showed an awareness of the efficiency of social media in handling customer complaints and queries. Social media provides a platform for direct communication which allows visitor attractions to respond to complaints with ease and understand issues presented by customers in a more effective way.

6.1.5. To examine how Irish visitor attractions utilise social media to understand and promote commitment amongst customers

The fifth research question was based on the fifth step of Sashi's Engagement Cycle (2012). The key objective of this research question was to examine how Irish visitor attractions are utilising social media to understand and promote commitment amongst customers. Two conclusions were drawn during the analysis of this research question.

Firstly, visitor attractions are aware of the fact that commitment derived by tourists from a particular experience plays a key role in their behaviour and future engagement. Examples of future engagement could be through revisiting the destination or sharing positive word of mouth through social media. The study shows visitor attractions are extending their relationship with their customers beyond their physical presence at the attraction to ensure that they stay up to date with developments and continue to promote commitment.

Secondly, visitor attractions are actively using social media as a channel to promote different loyalty programs to promote calculative commitment. By using social media, visitor attractions are ensuring that their attractions are at the forefront of their audiences' mind so that visitors will consider visiting or revisiting their attractions. Thus, visitor attractions are utilising social media platforms to promote calculative commitment.

6.1.6. To examine how Irish visitor attractions utilise social media to promote online advocacy amongst targeted audiences.

The sixth research question was based on the sixth step of Sashi's Engagement Cycle (2012). The key objective of this research question was to examine how Irish visitor attractions are utilising social media to promote online advocacy amongst their targeted audience. Two conclusions can be drawn from the analysis of this research question.

Firstly, visitor attractions are identifying the presence of customer advocacy on social media platforms. The inclusive nature of social media makes it an ideal tool for online advocacy and the study shows that satisfied customers are acting as brand advocates on social media. Visitor attractions are able to generate positive e-WOM by creating satisfaction among the customers, and this satisfaction is ultimately what eventually spurs online advocacy. This gives insight into a potential shift in business focus, away from a traditional more business-led advocacy to a more open customer-led advocacy.

Secondly, social media creates a platform where there is a scope for third-party advocacy. Two types of third parties were identified in this research; government organisations like Fáilte Ireland, and tour operators. In Ireland, there is an active online

promotion by government bodies like Fáilte Ireland and Tourism Ireland to national and international audience. This study revealed a lack of advocacy from tour operators. Visitor attractions may benefit from a more established online relationship with tour operators, who in turn could introduce a wide range of new customers to the various tourist attraction. This gives insight into an area of further development for social media usage by visitor attractions in the future.

6.2. Recommendations

This chapter began by listing the main conclusions that are drawn from the research based on each step of Sashi's Customer Engagement Cycle (2012). The following are the practical recommendations that are drawn from this study.

6.2.1. Understanding social media

It is essential for visitor attractions to understand the nature of social media and how this could be used in their customer engagement activities. Social media is a rapidly changing phenomenon and complacency in such an environment will result in visitor attractions lagging behind competitors. The nature of social media and technological developments is such that, often older platforms may become obsolete as seen with platforms such as Myspace. So it is important that visitor attractions are continuing to seek new ways of initiating engagement.

Furthermore, it is crucial that visitor attractions do not overly rely on one platform but that they grow their social media activities to incorporate as many platforms as possible. Identifying and utilising new social media platforms as well as older platforms will be advantageous for visitor attractions in the competitive market and will ensure they remain connected to their targeted audience.

6.2.2. Social media platforms

Visitor attractions are yet to fully use all the social media platforms available to them and therefore more effort can be made to utilise currently underutilised platforms. Visitor attractions are primarily using Facebook and partly Twitter as a means for connection, however, more can be done to use other platforms such as Instagram and Youtube. These under-utilised platforms hold great potential, so it is therefore important for visitor attractions to act in a way that allows them to reap the most benefits from these social media platforms. For example, Instagram, being a purely visual based platform, could be incredibly useful to visitor attractions as tourism is an intrinsically scenic and visual sector. Thus, it is vital to find appropriate social media platforms for their business and understand how to use that platform in the most beneficial way. Visitor attractions must also ensure that they are actively identifying opportunities in new emerging social media platforms.

6.2.3. Social media features

Visitor attractions could utilise and monitor more effectively specific features of social media that would help them understand the level of customer engagement. Social media provides a platform that allows customers to give feedback which will be visible to other potential tourists as well as visitor attractions. Tourists/customers use different features such as likes, shares, tags, retweets, checking in and comments of social media to express their feedback. Visitor attractions can monitor these features to understand customer satisfaction. Also, monitoring these features can help visitor attractions to retain customers by being more responsive to complaints or negative feedback.

Furthermore, social media platforms are evolving and new features are being introduced, therefore it is vital for visitor attractions to regularly update features utilised in the engagement process. These new features can be used by customers to express their opinions or complaints. Thus, visitor attractions need to make sure they are including all new features in their assessment of engagement and or rather not excluding any forms of feedback. Otherwise, they will not be capturing a true

reflection of the satisfaction levels achieved. This means that they would not be able to adequately assess their progress in their customer engagement activities.

6.2.4. Characteristics of social media

Visitor attractions need to ensure that they are responsive to their audience especially when there is a complaint or bad feedback. Social media is different from traditional communication channels because of different characteristics like the speed of communication, cost-effective nature and accessibility. Tourists can share their opinions or complaints about a destination both while on the trip or post-trip and this feedback can instantaneously reach the visitor attractions. Being unresponsive to customers' negative comments or complaints may put an visitor attraction in a disadvantageous position as it may prevent that customer from visiting the destination in future and also influence the decision-making process of a potential tourist. Thus, visitor attractions should utilise these characteristics of social media for their benefit.

6.2.5. Social media content

Fifth, tourist provides should create social media content that would enable them to generate maximum engagement from customers. Social media content plays a significant role in creating relationships between visitor attractions and their audiences. Visitor attractions have made progress in understanding the type of content that generates more engagement. However, this study highlighted that visitor attractions are not actively incorporating these types of posts in their activities. For example, all visitor attractions stated the belief that competition based posts tend to generate a higher level of interaction, however, the number of competition based posts still remained low. Furthermore, visitor attractions should maintain the quality of their content as well as try to add a personal touch to their interactions. This would help them to create a rapport with their audience.

Social media is uniquely placed to extend the relationship between visitor attractions and tourist beyond the tourist attraction. Therefore, it is important that visitor attractions make an active effort to engage with customers after they have left the tourist site. This means visitor attractions should create social media content that would help them to reach out specifically to customers who have previously visited

the tourist attraction. For example, asking to provide feedback surveys with an opportunity to win a prize/offer on successful completion or competitions/quizzes about facts that visitors would have learnt during their visit to the attraction. These kinds of competitions give visitors an opportunity to continue their relationship with the visitor attraction after their initial visit. This would also help visitor attractions to create committed customers.

6.2.6. Social media audiences

Social media has the ability to facilitate communication with multiple audiences and visitor attractions can therefore specifically target different sectors using these platforms. Whilst the social media efforts of visitor attractions are primarily focused on achieving business to customer connection, more can be done to establish a stronger relationship with other businesses such as tour operators and tourist bodies. A strong relationship with such tourist bodies can be greatly beneficial as they are likely to provide third-party advocacy for the visitor attractions.

6.2.7. Social media strategy

The final recommendation would be to create a social media specific strategy for customer engagement activities. Social media specific promotional strategies would benefit the marketing efforts of visitor attractions to a great extent. Currently, visitor attractions are transferring their traditional marketing activities to social media or using social media as a communication channel only. Social media has many significant features and characteristics that would enable visitor attractions to implement customer engagement activities successfully. Thus visitor attractions can formulate social media centric engagement strategies. Social media specific engagement refers to customer engagement activities which are exclusive to social media and could not be carried out without the use of social media platforms. If visitor attractions successfully formulate a social media strategy, then it will ensure the maximum utilisation of social media in their customer engagement activities.

6.3. Academic contributions of the study

This section details the academic contributions that this research makes to the social media marketing field. The section starts with the contributions this study has made

while extending the scope of the customer engagement model proposed by Sashi (2012). Then the contribution this study has made to the social media marketing and tourism industry is detailed.

Firstly from a theoretical standpoint, a seven-step process was used to examine the role of social media in the customer engagement activities of Irish visitor attractions. This was achieved by extending the scope of the Customer Engagement Cycle proposed by Sashi (2012). The seven-step process in this study focuses on analysing social media usage in the customer engagement process through examining its effect on connection, interaction, satisfaction, retention, commitment, advocacy and engagement. This categorisation of engagement activities is the major theoretical, as well as the methodological, contribution of this study. Previous research studies relating to social media usage in tourism have primarily focused on single elements of the customer engagement cycle, for example the effect of social media usage on customer interaction or satisfaction (Hays et al., 2013; Lei et al., 2016; Mariani et al., 2016; Roque & Raposo, 201). Therefore, previous studies failed to adopt a holistic view of customer engagement as a whole and consequently lacked an in-depth analysis of the social media usage at each stage of the customer engagement activities of tourism organisations. This study seeks to fill this research gap and provide an extensive analysis of the various elements of the customer engagement activities of Irish tourist attractions at each stage of the cycle, whilst also giving insight into the co-dependency of these steps. This approach allows this study to move beyond its theoretical contribution and enables it to act as a road map for visitor attractions to further develop their customer engagement activities.

Furthermore, while there are many social media platforms, most existing studies relating to social media in tourism are confined to a single platform – either Twitter (Jabreel et al., 2016; Philander & Zhong, 2016; Sevin, 2013) or Facebook (e.g. Hsu, 2012; Yoo & Lee, 2015; Mariani et al., 2016). It is important to note that an extremely limited number of studies focused on both Facebook and Twitter (e.g. Hays et al., 2013; Leung et al., 2015). However, Tufekci (2014) argues that single-platform studies create methodological challenges due to different features provided by each platform. This research study did not focus on one particular platform (i.e. customer engagement on Facebook) but aimed to understand the social media usage across

platforms. Facebook and Twitter were identified as the predominant platforms but this study sought to explore the general approach visitor attractions had for engagement. With regard to the underutilised platforms that were identified (e.g. Instagram), the reasons behind the underutilisation were also evaluated. Thus the scope of the study was not limited to particular platforms. By doing so, the present study not only contributes to the broader understanding of social media usage but also minimises the methodological challenges associated with single-platform studies by making measures compatible across all platforms.

The majority of the previous studies relating to social media usage in the tourism industries have adopted a qualitative research methodology (Akehurst, 2008; Miguens et al., 2008; Xiang & Gretzel, 2009; Leung et al., 2013; Rosman & Stuhura, 2013; Hudson & Thal, 2013; Zeng & Gerristen, 2014). However, a few of the recent studies have adopted a mixed method research methodology in order to gain a well-rounded analysis and understanding of the use of social media in tourism (Hays at al., 2013; Roque & Raposo, 2016; Eskali et al., 2017). By adopting a mixed method research methodology, this study adds value to the limited amount of literature. This research also adds to the body of research related to the Irish tourism industry.

6.4. Limitations and Future research

Limitations of the present study should be recognised when interpreting the results and used as opportunities for future research directions. Firstly, the findings of this study are specific to only the South-East of Ireland. Therefore, future research replicating this study with tourist attractions from other regions of the country or other countries will increase the overall understanding of this important research area. Secondly, given the fact that most tourist attractions included in this study are established visitor attractions, it would be interesting to conduct a similar study with a focus on emerging attractions. Thirdly, this study examined social media postings over a limited period of time. The content analysis reported here would ideally benefit from a longer timeframe and larger sample size. Were the research to be conducted again, content analysis categories could be expanded accordingly. Fourth, social media is a constantly evolving technology. New platforms and features are being added which have the potential to change the engagement activities of organisations,

allowing for alternative forms of feedback to be received or different types of content that can be posted online. Thus, repeating the same study in a year's time would most likely yield significantly different results. Additionally, similar research with a larger sample size and time period would provide more comprehensive insights into the use of social media in customer engagement activities. Finally, this research could be easily applied to other businesses and/or organisations in the tourism sectors, such as hotels, restaurants or events. Additional studies related to social media and the tourism industry would aid in providing a broad, well-rounded representation of the social media phenomena.

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