

Online Forums and Digital Tools:

Fuel for the Ireland Traveler Passionate Affinity Group

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Gee (2011) describes a new-age learning system in which “people organize themselves in the real world and/or via the Internet (or a virtual world) to learn something connected to a shared endeavor, interest, or passion.” The name for these learning systems: passionate affinity groups (Gee & Hayes, p. 106). This definition and a sampling of online forum posts can be used to argue that Ireland travelers participating in online travel forums demonstrate some key characteristics of a passionate affinity group (PAG). Their interest is passion filled (e.g., addicted comments from [Michele Erdvig, CowboyCraic, and Wellsley](#)); leaders serve as resources in the form of experts and moderators (e.g., [suggestion from leics](#)); members consume advice through the forums and are encouraged to produce content (e.g., [review creation](#) at TripAdvisor.com, [trip reports](#) at IndependentTraveler.com; [dinglepeninsula](#)); and support is encouraged among members (e.g., comment from [Britannia2](#)).

To better understand what fuels the Ireland traveler PAG, exploratory visits were made to five Ireland travel online forums. The visits revealed users soliciting advice on planned Ireland travel itineraries (e.g., [corianderstem](#), [crumpio](#)) and loosely formed travel ideas (e.g., [miniature](#)), as well as sharing personal trip reports detailed through videos, essays, and photo collections. Closer study revealed two frequently discussed topics in both the solicitations and sharing: must-sees for first-time visitors (e.g., [maureenann](#)) and debate about exploring the country by rental car or tour bus (e.g., [cmullikin](#), [familytraveling](#)).

In response to these findings and with the aim of participating in the PAG by producing content and providing specialist knowledge (Gee & Hayes, 2010), a driving route for first-time visitors was developed in the form of an online tool, and was posted in travel-related discussions

online. Comments and any interaction the tool provoked would determine if and how this tool might fuel the passion of the Ireland traveler PAG. This paper provides analysis of the reaction and response, followed by conclusions and implications.

The Tool, its Distribution, and Data Collection

The driving route tool was developed using Google Maps and was based on the recent personal travel experience of a first-time visitor, who drove a rental car on a tour of the southern and southwestern coast of Ireland. The resulting [customized Google Map](#) included imbedded tips, driving directions, travel times and distances between sites, photos, anecdotes, and Web links. To enhance usability, a customized shortened URL was created for the map: <http://bit.ly/irelandmap>.

Over a period of two weeks, a link to this tool was posted 20 total times in five Ireland travel forums (TripAdvisor.com, IndependentTraveler.com, LonelyPlanet.com, VirtualTourist.com, and Ireland.ActiveBoard.com) and four general interest social media channels (Google Maps, Facebook, Twitter, and Reddit.) The tool was posted in two ways: 1) seven times as an independent unsolicited post and 2) thirteen times in response to a posted request for trip planning advice.

As of April 27, 2011, Google logged more than 2,700 views of the map. Tracking of the shortened URL through [bit.ly](#) revealed that total views could be traced to eight countries, with the U.S. accounting for 70 percent. Additional analysis revealed that posts at the TripAdvisor.com forum referred the most views of the map, logging 50 percent of total views. Across the nine identified social media channels, users posted 28 comments in response to the map.

Data Analysis and Discussion

Travel-Specific Forums versus General Social Media Outlets

The notion that PAGs are built on common interests and shared passion (Gee & Hayes, 2010) formed the foundation for a hypothesis: Since Ireland travel forums are a draw for passionate Ireland travelers, the environment should be predisposed to content such as a travel map that adds to the shared interest of the group. As such, posting in a travel-specific forum should yield more reaction from the PAG. Analysis of the data suggests that in this instance, the hypothesis was correct. Of the 28 total comments posted in reaction to the map, 39 percent appeared in general social media forums, while 61 percent appeared in travel-specific forums.

General social media forums offer more opportunities for users to participate in the PAG: they can comment as they do in travel-specific forums but they can also participate more peripherally (Lave & Wenger, 1991) through “like” buttons (e.g., Facebook), votes (e.g., Reddit), Retweets (e.g., Twitter), and views (Google). For example, while just one person (besides the creator) posted a comment on the actual Google map, approximately 2,700 relatively more passive views were logged. This activity may require less commitment from the user but should not be considered any less valuable since, as Gee and Hayes (2010) suggest, learning and passion-sharing is possible through multiple routes to participation. Evidence of legitimate peripheral participation (LPP) was also noted in one of the travel-specific forums, where one post received four replies but was actually viewed 395 times (e.g., [Re: First time to Ireland](#)).

Unsolicited Posts versus Posts in Response to Requests

The proposal that PAGs encourage peer feedback and help (Gee & Hays, 2010) formed the foundation of a second hypothesis: Posting the map link in response to travel advice seekers should yield more comments than posting it unsolicited. Surprisingly, actual activity in the forums seemed to counter this hypothesis. Comments based on unsolicited posts comprised 68

percent of the total comments, while just 32 percent of the total comments were reactions to the link posted as a reply to a travel assistance request.

The unsolicited post that yielded the most comments (e.g., [Unforgettable Connection](#)) was more detailed than any other post in this experiment. This particular post also could be deemed the most passion-driven because it attached significantly more emotion to the topic of Ireland travel. While it appeared on the forum with the least amount of traffic and fewest registered users, it generated the most comments of any post in the experiment. The number of responses suggests that the PAG truly connected with this post, and their reaction in this forum aligns with two of Gee's positions (2011) about the fuel necessary to stoke passionate affinity groups: 1) They should "offer everyone the opportunity, should they want it, to produce, not just consume, to learn to mentor and lead, not just to be mentored and follow." 2) They "must acknowledge the passion and the people who have it."

Comment Sentiment

An analysis of comment sentiment revealed that 68 percent of comments were positive, taking the form of thank yous (e.g., comments from [Wellsley, Michele Erdvig, EngagingKate](#)), appreciation of the tool (e.g., [Doneraile, Melissa5, algoresrhythm](#)), and anticipated use of the tool for future planning (e.g., Facebook comment: "Hold on to the map. I may need it some day for my trip to Ireland."). Another 14 percent of the comments could be categorized as welcomes and deeper discussion; 11 percent could be classified as neutral responses; and just two comments (7 percent) could be considered negative (e.g., technical issues reported by [brokedgirl](#)). The generally positive reaction did not come as a surprise considering the fact that the posts supported and fueled the interest of this particular PAG.

Conclusion and Implications

This experiment suggests that the Ireland traveler PAG makes room for all levels of expertise and shared experience through the welcome participation of novices. The support of new members in the form of proactively posted positive comments as well as more logged views suggests that participation at multiple levels is supported. Participants need not be the most passionate. In fact, acknowledgement alone that the passion exists among all members may be enough fuel for the PAG not only to survive, but also to thrive. Experts get to demonstrate their accomplishments with respect to the shared passion, and they feed on the contributions and requests made by new members to the forum and less experienced Ireland travelers. In addition, experts' shared knowledge becomes fuel for the new members who will help sustain the PAG in the future.

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