

GENDER PREFERENCES AND INSTAGRAM HASHTAG USAGE ON  
#MALAYSIANFOOD

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To my beloved family

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## ABSTRACT

Launched in October 2010, Instagram has become one of the popular mobile based photo-sharing platforms. Hashtags on Instagram are normally used for classifying post category, adding detailed information, building social connection and expressing feeling or experiences. Based on the limited study on hashtag usage and expanding existing online gender behavior literature, this study applied uses and gratification theory to investigate gender difference in hashtag use on Instagram. It also classifies hashtags into informative and emotional, as well as positive and negative hashtags. The population of the study was photo posts on Instagram with #Malaysianfood. Using content analysis technique methods, photos posted using #Malaysianfood were selected as the sample of this study. The results showed a significant difference between male and female in informative and emotional hashtags selection. Compared to female, male uses more informative hashtags in their post. Besides, this study found that compared to male, female uses more positive hashtag in the post. This study found a strong and positive relationship between number of hashtags and number of followers, as well as number of hashtag and number of 'likes'. Academically, this study adds to the limited literature on Instagram and application of hashtags. This study also suggests a new method to measure satisfaction using hashtags from users. From industry perspective, findings of this study could assist the restaurant operators for better understanding of customers' needs and promotional activities.

## ABSTRAK

Dilancarkan pada Oktober 2010, Instagram telah menjadi salah satu platform popular untuk perkongsian gambar mudah alih. *Hashtag* di Instagram lazimnya digunakan untuk mengklasifikasikan kategori pos muat naik, menambah maklumat yang terperinci, menjalinkan hubungan sosial dan menyatakan perasaan atau pengalaman. Berdasarkan kajian yang terhad dalam penggunaan *hashtag* dan peningkatan literatur semasa perlakuan jantina dalam talian, kajian ini mengaplikasikan teori kepenggunaan dan gratifikasi untuk mengkaji perbezaan jantina dalam penggunaan *hashtag* di Instagram. Ia juga mengklasifikasikan *hashtag* kepada informatif dan emosi serta positif dan negatif. Populasi kajian adalah gambar muat naik di Instagram dengan #Malaysianfood. Menggunakan kaedah netnografi dan teknik kandungan analisis, gambar yang dipamerkan menggunakan #Malaysianfood telah dipilih sebagai sampel kajian ini. Keputusan menunjukkan perbezaan yang ketara antara lelaki dan perempuan dalam penggunaan *hashtag* informatif dan emosi. Berbanding dengan wanita, lelaki menggunakan lebih *hashtag* informatif dalam pos muat naik mereka. Selain itu, kajian ini mendapati berbanding lelaki, wanita menggunakan lebih banyak *hashtag* positif dalam pos muat naik mereka. Kajian ini menemui hubungan yang kuat dan positif antara bilangan *hashtag* dengan bilangan pengikut serta bilangan *hashtag* dan bilangan 'suka'. Secara akademik, kajian ini menambah kepada kajian yang terhad dalam Instagram dan penggunaan *hashtag*. Kajian ini juga mencadangkan kaedah baharu untuk mengukur kepuasan berdasarkan *hashtag* dari pengguna. Dari perspektif industri, hasil kajian ini boleh membantu pengusaha restoran untuk lebih memahami keperluan pengguna dan aktiviti promosi.

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## **CHAPTER 1**

### **INTRODUCTION**

This chapter describes the background of study, problem statement, research question, research objectives, significance, scope of study and finally structure of the study.

#### **1.1 Background of Study**

The rapid development of new Information Communication Technology (ICT) and growing accessibility of the Internet made social media become one of the most significant Internet-based connecting tools. Based on Web 2.0 technology, social media includes social networking sites, review sites, community sites and location based applications (Wang et al., 2011).

Social networking site, the largest adopted category of social media, serves as the platform for building social connections among users who share similar interests

(Wells, 2011). Many social network sites with distinctive functions exist and compete to satisfy users' needs (Ruggiero, 2000). For example, YouTube is used as video sharing platform; Facebook primarily serves as social communication platform via sharing information and messaging (Statistic Brain, 2012; Alexandra, Thomas and Beata, 2013) and Twitter acts as micro-blogging to spread 'tweets' about social events or news (Wang et al., 2011).

Launched in October 2010, Instagram becomes one of leading photo-sharing platforms and popular social networking sites. There are over 300 million active monthly users in December 2014, around 60 million photos posted daily and 1.6 billion daily 'like' (Yuheng, 2014; Digital Marketing Ramblings, 2014). Instagram also could be accessed on web. On Instagram, users become friends by 'followee' or 'followers'. Comments, 'likes' and updates are the supportive functions provided on Instagram to interconnect with others and keep track on the latest posts (Naaman, Boasa and Lai, 2010).

Instagram combines multiple functions such as photo capture and photo edition including contrast adjustment, color alteration, texture, saturation and brightness revision together (Yuheng, 2014). Through Instagram, users can post and share photos online instantly with necessary captions, hashtags and comments. Furthermore, Instagram photos could synchronously appear on the other social network sites like Facebook and Twitter (Digital Marketing Ramblings, 2014).

Hashtag, one of the distinctive functions on Instagram, is the non-spaced words, abbreviations, and phrases following the sign #. Hashtags are frequently used for categorizing post, adding information, building connection, expressing feeling or experience (Homem and Carvalho, 2010). Users could easily engage in a specific topic by searching a hashtag online directly. Additionally, users may search the most popular hashtag in ranking system to discover the newest trends (Thiago et al., 2013). For example, users who are interested in the posts about Malaysian food, could search *#Malaysianfood* or *#Malaysiancuisine* online to get information conveniently.

Besides, hashtag are also used to add explanatory metadata for posts and attract attention from other users (Wang et. al, 2011). For example, Instagram encourages users to attach hashtags as photo description to posts in order to link users who share similar interests (Yuheng et al., 2014). Currently, hashtag has been used for tracking visibility of a post (Wang et. al, 2011).

Photos bring richer content than thousands of words by text. While comparing Instagram and Twitter, Jeanine et al. (2014) suggested that Instagram could be used as an important promoting tool in food sector. Yuheng et al. (2014) classified photo contents on Instagram into eight categories, which are ‘selfies’, friends, actives, pet, food, fashion, gadget and captioned photos. Food photos rank at fourth in popularity after ‘selfies’, friends and actives. Reasons for the popularity of food photos on Instagram are the clearer and more straightforward expression of feelings and experiences, as well as the richer food information contained in photos (e.g. food image, ingredient, size and colors), compared to text-based words (Yuheng et al., 2014).

The popularity of photo sharing has attracted researcher to study about photo-based social media (Tussyadiah and Fesenmaier, 2009). Adding to the increasingly popular, but largely unexplored area, this study applied Uses and Gratification Theory to investigate the gender differences in choosing hashtag types on *#Malaysianfood* and identify the relationship between number of hashtags and number of ‘followers’, ‘likes’. Problem statements of this study are discussed in the next section.

## 1.2 Problem Statement

The important role of social media in tourism has drawn sufficient attention from researchers previously. Reviews on published literature on social media from 2007 until 2011 identified 44 articles on tourism entities such as hotel, destination selection, destination image, restaurant customers' review and ranking (Leung, Law, Hoof, & Buhalis; 2013).

Currently, there are few photo-based media sites like Instagram. However, there have been limited studies conducted on this new social networking site (Yuheng et al., 2014). It is important to study Instagram, as nowadays, most of social networking sites combine photos and texts, making it difficult for users to gather the entire images directly from multiple posts. Instagram creates a unique photo-sharing platform with which users can post their 'selfies' or videos within groups freely, and also gratifies the social needs for communication and self-expression easily. Furthermore, as the photo-based site, Instagram provides a very efficient way for tourists to gather direct reflection and detailed visual supports of tourism destinations such as restaurants, places and people dimensions.

However, only one study on Instagram focus on photo-sharing in the food sector has been studied by Jeanine et al. (2014). Study suggested that more research should be conducted on Instagram's impact on the food sector (Jeanine et al., 2014), and highlighted that Instagram is a new trend for food service industries, especially in food promotions, direct communications, performance measurement and customer satisfaction evaluation (Suh et al., 2010; Maynard, 2011). The major reasons are, firstly, photos can be the best presentation of food color, ingredients and category, which are difficult to describe in words. Secondly, photos can be livelier and more powerful than thousands of words, since photos are more eye-catching and attractive when promoting products. Lastly, photos can be the easiest and fastest way to express deeper feelings and emotions.

Maynard (2014) argued that there are limited studies on the functions of hashtags on Instagram, especially regarding customers' emotion and feelings (Wang et al., 2011). Compared with hashtags on Twitter, which act as an information classification or topic management tool, hashtags on Instagram play significant roles in photo classification, feeling expression, topic classification and content description (Yuheng et al., 2014). Besides, hashtags are frequently used nowadays for creating awareness of the event or promotion, such as *#McDStories*, an event hashtag created by McDonald's, is very useful in creating high visibility and awareness among customers and allows customers to feel free while sharing their stories or feelings in McDonald's by posting photos or videos on Instagram. Since the popularity of hashtag using in promotional activities, more studies on Instagram hashtags are needed.

The importance of using popular hashtags in promoting business and increasing awareness has been studied by Pentland et al. (2012), Nikolov (2012) and Eva (2013). Lang and Wu (2011) have mentioned that the number of 'followers' and 'likes' are important indicators of the awareness levels of users, and the popularity of posts. Hashtags play an important role in increasing the visibility of post and gaining awareness (Lang and Wu, 2011; Eva, 2013). However, there are limited studies on hashtags helping to increase the number of 'followers' and 'likes'. There is only one article from Eva (2013) that focuses on this issue to explain the relationship between number of 'followers' and number of hashtags on Twitter. Besides, social networking sites cannot exist without supporting functions such as instant messaging, 'like', 'share', 'follow' and hashtag (Rebecca, 2010; Alexander & Michael, 2009). All these applications interact with each other to make social networking sites more communicable, interesting and interconnected. Therefore, more research is needed to understand the relationship between hashtag and 'follower', 'like' on Instagram (Eva; 2013).

Studies has been conducted to investigate on gender gaps in computer-mediated communications field such as in communication styles, technology uses, and time spent online (Herring and Paolillo, 2006; Ong and Lai, 2006; Sanchez-



Franco, 2006; Chou and Tsai, 2007). Significant gender role result in companies conducting different online marketing promotional practices via different media to reach the target customers based on gender preferences. For instance, companies nowadays prefer to use trendy hashtags in their promotions to attract customers, particularly the young ones (Yuheng et al., 2014).

By understanding the role of gender difference in hashtag use, companies could select suitable hashtags for reaching target customers. For example, if a beauty shop used #fiber or #albumen to introduce new ingredients in its powder in its promotion, then it may generate low awareness and become less attractive to female customers compared to fancy hashtag like #silkskin and #beautifullady. However, to the author's knowledge, gender differences in hashtag use on Instagram have so far been overlooked. It is important to identify the gender gaps in Instagram hashtag uses, as females and males have different preferences for hashtag types, reflecting dissimilar choice of expression and feedback delivery.

In conclusion, to address the research gaps mentioned above and to investigate gender differences of hashtag usage on the popular type of photo-based site, Instagram, this study attempts to examine the gender differences in choosing emotional and informative hashtags, as well as positive and negative hashtags used while posting photos on Instagram. Additionally, the relationship between hashtags and 'followers', 'likes' will also be studied. Lastly, general satisfaction towards Malaysian food will be measured through the total number of positive and negative hashtags used. Research questions and objectives are discussed in the next section.

### 1.3 Research Questions of Study

1. Based on the hashtags used on Instagram, how does gender differ in using emotional and informative hashtags for Malaysian food photos on Instagram?
2. Based on the hashtags used on Instagram, how does gender differ in using positive and negative hashtags for food posts on *#Malaysianfood*?
3. What is the relationship between number of hashtag and number of 'follower', as well as number of hashtag and number of 'like' on Instagram?
4. Based on the positive and negative hashtags on *#Malaysianfood*, what is the overall satisfaction towards Malaysian food measured by positive and negative hashtags?

### 1.4 Objectives of Study

Objective1: To investigate gender differences using emotional and informative hashtags for Malaysian food photos on Instagram.

Objective2: To investigate gender differences in using positive and negative hashtags for food posts on Instagram using *#Malaysianfood*.

Objective3: To identify the relationship between number of hashtag used and number of 'follower', as well as number of hashtag and number of 'like' on Instagram.

Objective 4: To assess the overall satisfaction level towards Malaysian food based on positive and negative hashtags used for the posts on *#Malaysianfood*.

### **1.5 Scope of Study**

Since this study focuses on Malaysian food photos, there is a large amount of Malaysian food photos posted on Instagram using *#Malaysianfood*. By searching Instagram, there are around 118,759 posts with *#Malaysianfood* on Instagram until 13<sup>th</sup> March 2015. Data for this study was collected during five-day time period from March 1<sup>st</sup> to March 30<sup>th</sup> 2015 (March 1<sup>st</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup>, 15<sup>th</sup>, 22<sup>nd</sup> and 29<sup>th</sup>, every Sunday of the week), which is also the sample of study. There are around 1,382 posts on *#Malaysianfood* during five-day period. The reason for choosing Sunday for the data collection is due to the high users' involvement for online activity (Sabel, 2013). Users profile photos were used to differentiate genders.

### **1.6 Significance of Study**

Academically, this study adds to the limited literature on Instagram and hashtag. This study also provides a new method in satisfaction measurement by hashtag. For example, by searching *#Malaysianfood*, customers' feedbacks, food experiences, feelings and suggestions could be easily collected. Performance could be also measured based on the information collected.

This study also contributes to Uses and Gratification Theory in investigating users' behavior on a new type of social networking sites, Instagram. Hashtag and photos on Instagram are the specific media used in current study, which adds the new elements to the media of U & G Theory. Besides, needs of expressing emotion, or presenting satisfaction are also studied in food sector based on U & G Theory.

Besides, findings of study could provide knowledge on the general perception of the Malaysian food sector, which could also be utilized by restaurants to better understand customers' needs, due to a high reliability of User-generated content (UGC) compared to Agent-generated content (AGC) (Chiu, Hsieh, Kao, and Monle, 2007). User-generated contents (UGC)s such as posts, chats, photos, reviews, files and tweets were originally created by individual users (Katona, Peter and Miklos, 2011).

Furthermore, current study helps to categorize hashtags from two different perspectives (positive and negative hashtag, emotional and informative hashtag), which is one of the important contributions of the study. Besides, gender preferences in choosing hashtag types on Instagram were also studied for better understanding of gender differences in computer-mediated communications (CMC) in the future.

From an industry perspective, an understanding of gender differences in hashtag application (emotional and informative) could be used by industries when selecting promotional hashtags. For example, cosmetics shops could target young ladies with more emotional hashtags (e.g. *#slim*, *#skincare*, *#beautiful*, *#comfort*, *#softfeeling* and *#silkskin*) in promotional advertisement in order to motivate customers to purchase. The male-dominated industry, such as computer hardware stores, which could use more informative hashtags for introducing facts and functions (e.g. model or speed) rather than emotional words. If more emotional hashtags used, which could make male customers feel that the product is unreliable, unprofessional or unconvincing.

The findings of this study are also significant for organizations in choosing highly searchable hashtags for promotional purposes in terms of gaining more 'followers' or 'likes'. For example, by using popular and trending hashtags with food posts, restaurants can generate higher visibility and awareness from customers. Therefore, the findings of this study on hashtags associated with Instagram could also be helpful in better understanding marketing practices in customer relationship-building, branding, promotion and communication.

### **1.7 Operational Definition**

Firstly, gender is one of the most important variables in the study, which is identified by the profile photo of user. Gender classification process was presented in flow chart form refer to Figure 3.2 and validated among Malaysians invited. Besides, male and female are the subcategories of gender.

Emotional hashtag is the hashtag, which involves the words for expressing the feelings, mood, sentiment, mind, temperament and motivation. In current study most of emotional hashtags are used for expressing the emotions and satisfaction towards food, partner, service or activities such as *#nice*, *#love* and *#tasty*.

Informative hashtag is the hashtag, which involves no emotional words, and only explain the data, environment, knowledge and object. In current study informative hashtags are normally used for introducing about food category, restaurant location and also activity.

Positive hashtag is the hashtag which includes the words for expressing delighted, optimistic, happy or positive feelings such as #good, #like. Positive hashtags in current study also show the satisfaction from individual users towards Malaysian food on Instagram.

Negative hashtag is the hashtag which includes the words for showing negative, annoyance or anger feelings such as #bad, #sucks. In another words, negative hashtags help in expressing dissatisfaction from users on Instagram towards Malaysian food in current study.

Number of hashtag is presented in account number based on the number shown on Instagram's posts. By accounting the quantity of hashtags used in the captions of photo or video posts on Instagram, number of hashtag could be easily recorded in coding sheet prepared.

Similarly, number of 'follower' could be identified by checking users' profile information at the top of Instagram page. Number of 'follower' is recorded in account number form.

Number of 'like' is presented as heart shape at the bottom of each post, which is also recorded in account number. By clicking heart shaped 'like' button, feeling of enjoying and liking could be shared.

## **1.8 Structure of Study**

This thesis includes five main chapters. Following the Introduction chapter, the second chapter review related theories and literature. The literature review begins with Uses and Gratification Theory, then social media in restaurant hospitality and hashtag application on Instagram. Based on the review, related hypotheses were developed at the end of Chapter 2. Chapter 3 describes the methods, data collection procedures and proposed analysis. The findings and discussions in Chapter 4 focuses on the analysis of results, finally, this thesis concludes with the academic and managerial implications, limitation and recommendation for future studies.

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