

Abstract

This paper introduces Instagram as a mode of communication and describes the application by providing information on how it is used and the statistics on how widely used Instagram is. The paper then moves on to give examples of how the features of Instagram allow for interaction between its users and how it has brought about changes in text and speech; before ending off by comparing Instagram's features to speech like and text like forms of communication.

Content

In this age of social media, most forms of communications are embedded in these social media in different forms; through chats, picture sharing, status sharing and more. However, with the growth and increased usage of smartphones with well-equipped inbuilt cameras, the idea of photo sharing to communicate your ideas and experience with others have taken flight (Salomon, 2013); supported by the Instagram application. Instagram is a mobile application which allows its users to change their snapshots to more appealing pictures through the use of filters (Salomon, 2013). The popularity of photo sharing and of the Instagram application can be seen through the hundreds of million users- 150 million as of 6th September 2013 as reported on Instagram's website and the extent of its popularity can be estimated through the offering of Instagram in 25 different languages.

The popularity of Instagram can further be emphasised through the percentage of its users among other social media. Instagram users account for 13% of internet users, with the most popular social networking site being Facebook with 67%. Given how new Instagram is, it is impressive how it has garnered almost as much support among internet users in comparison to older and more established social media such as Pinterest and Twitter. It can also be noted that the ratio of younger users to older user of instagram users is much bigger as compared to the other social networking sites which although, as shown in Fig.1, appeal more to those of the same age group as those of Instagram, the 18-29 age group, the difference in the number of its young users to the older users are not as great as those of Instagram's. In addition, Instagram is the second most popular social media after Facebook among the younger age group.

Social networking site	% of internet users who use	Number of users out of 1802 internet users by age group			
		18-29	30-49	50-64	65+
Facebook	67	86	73	57	35
Twitter	16	27	16	10	2
Pinterest	15	19	19	12	4
Instagram	13	28	14	3	2
Tumblr	6	13	5	3	1 ¹

Fig.1 shows the percentage of internet users who use the respective social networking sites and the demographics of the user for each site.

However, the information collected above was gathered in 2012, and based on the information provided on Instagram’s website on the increase in its number of users it has and in Fig.2, it shows that the percentage of Instagram users among the internet users have risen in the two years between 2012 and 2014. Besides the findings shown above, Instagram users upload 60 million photos every day, spending an average of 3.7 hours on the application every month; much more than the amount of time people spend on Twitter and Pinterest (Hempel, 2014) as seen in Fig.2.

Social's Biggest Players

Just four years after it launched, Instagram has become one of the largest and most engaging social networks on the web.

Users of social media services



Time spent monthly on phone apps*

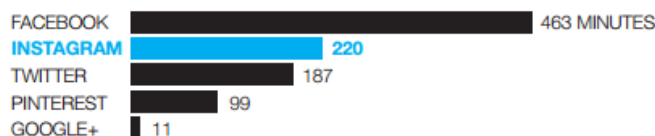


Fig.2 shows the number of users of different social media services and the average amount of time spent by its users on the mobile applications

As shared by Instagram on their website “Instagram is a fast, beautiful and fun way to share your life with friends and family.” Instagram started on the 6th of October 2010 as a platform

¹ Figures obtained from Duggan, M., & Brenner, J. (2013). The demographics of social media users - 2012. *Pew Research Center*, 1-14. Retrieved from <http://pewinternet.org/Reports/2013/Social-media-users.aspx>

² Hempel, J. Instagram is ready to take its shot.

for individuals to share their photos as a form of extending others into their lives by seeing what they see through the photos that they take; as what is mentioned by Instagram on their website- “it’s a new way to see the world”; allowing one to see the world through the lens of others, seeing things from the uploader’s perspective.

Instagram, besides being a sharing and viewing platform, also allows uploaders to provide more information on the picture they are sharing through captions and the tagging features which includes the tagging of other users and geotagging- ‘the practice of using geotags to assign a geographical location to a digital photograph or other item of digital content’ as defined by Oxford English Dictionary. Geotagging then allows users to share and communicate to their viewers or followers viewing the photo, the location where they took the photo. Other than the tagging function of Instagram, the addition and using of hashtags in the posts uploaded allows one to group their photos and view other photos by other users who have uploaded photos using the same hashtag. The idea of hashtags will be further discussed later in the paper.

As mentioned in the previous paragraph, Instagram, like other social media such as Twitter, brings in the idea of following other users; establishing social relations, a follower and followee relationship between the users (Ferrara, Interdonato & Tagarelli, 2014). This then allows the followers of a particular user to ‘like’ photos of their followee and also make comments, encouraging a form of social interaction between the users. Hence, through the use of Instagram, it can be seen that a form of interaction and relationship between users of the application can be forged. With the information provided in the first paragraph on the extent of popularity of Instagram, where the application is available in 25 different languages, it shows that Instagram is also able to connect users of different backgrounds and countries by making the application assessable regardless of the language one speaks.

Through the liking function of Instagram, a sense of agreement is displayed and expresses the liker’s approval of the content shared by the uploader and thus, can be seen as a form of compliment to the uploader. This is similar to one giving another a compliment verbally or through text in real life, but in the case of Instagram, a compliment not through words but through the action of liking. However, besides the action of liking, the comment function of

Instagram also allows compliments to be shared through a more traditional way such as text. Through the amount of likes amassed and the comments made by followers, the user can then gauge and understand what kind of content their followers like, showcasing some kind of interaction and communication between the follower and followee.

Similar to other social media such as Facebook and Twitter, companies and organisations have created Instagram accounts to connect with their audiences; tapping on the growing popularity of visual forms of communication. One such example is UCLA's Powell Library's use of Instagram as a means to connect to their students. As shown in the statistics, Instagram attracts a younger and wider audience as compared to other social networks. Hence, this matches the target audience of the college's library, making the use of Instagram as a form of communication and a point of interaction between the two bodies a very apt and efficient choice.

Through the tagging functions and the hashtags that users can include in their posts, the organisation, in this case UCLA Powell Library, will be notified when they are tagged in a student's post and thus know more about how the library is being used by students; having a deeper understanding of the students' needs in the library. The article³ mentions that the proposal sent to request for additional funding for the maintenance of the 24-hour study space included the student experiences of studying in the library overnight with their friends which they shared on Instagram. Hence this can be seen as a form of student feedback to the library that the additional opening hours are really being used by the students and appreciated. Thus, the library is able to substantiate the extra opening hours and meet students' needs; displaying the interaction and communication between the students and the library through Instagram.

As mentioned earlier, Instagram users are able to make use of hashtags to categorise and group their photo uploads. However, besides being just a way of organising photos and a means to share photos with other users of similar interests, hashtags can also be seen as another form of language. Hashtags, as defined by Gunawardena, Plumb, Xiao and Zhang, are "words, acronyms,

³ Salomon, D. (2013, September). Moving on from facebook. *College & Libraries Research News*,74(8), 408-412. Retrieved from <http://crln.acrl.org/content/74/8/408.full.pdf.html>

or phrases, containing no spaces and preceded by a pound sign (#)'. Hashtags are also categorised into different kinds of hashtags such as rhetorical hashtag, hashtag activism, hashtag marketing, grassroots hashtag or grashtag, hashjacking or tagjacking and bashtag (McFedries, 2013). These various forms of hashtags are the more varied ways of expressing support, like or dislike towards a certain product, company or movement; creating social trends through spreading bite-sized messages relating to a wide range of topics from politics to pop culture.

Hashtags as mentioned in the UCLA Powell Library example, where it showcases that hashtags are not solely used as a way of organising photo uploads but also allows for interaction between the users. Another of such interaction is showcased in the using of the hashtag #CaptureMontana- a photo contest jointly held by National Geographic Travel and The Montana Office of Tourism to promote Montana (Raphael, 2014). This is a form of hashtag marketing which allows for potential visitors of Montana to have a glimpse into what Montana has to offer and provides a more local and less touristy touch to the whole marketing effort as it features places where the locals go and would like to recommend to tourists. This shows that Instagram allows for a more 'personal' form of communication where foreigners are able to communicate with the locals by looking through the hashtag to see what is recommended and make comments to ask for more information or 'like' the photos as a form of thanking the uploader for sharing the information.

The use of hashtags and the popularity of Instagram have led to the introduction of more acronyms into daily speech; examples include acronyms such as 'ootd' which translates to 'outfit of the day' and 'tbt' which could either mean 'throwback Thursday' or 'truth be told' but more commonly used as the former. The ability to share photos with others is one of the main drivers of the popularly and widely used ootd hashtag. This is because the sharing of the outfit that you are wearing is difficult through text and hence, the photo sharing platform allows others to view the outfit that one is wearing for that day visually without having to guess and imagine the outfit through one's own interpretation of the wearer's description of their outfit.

This then allows for more topics, such as fashion, to be discussed more efficiently online, widening the topic of discussion between individuals.

The creation of acronyms is also more efficient because a long string of words without any spaces between them used as a hashtag can be confusing and troublesome for the users which would then affect the popularity of the hashtag. This can be seen in the online list of popular hashtags where it is shown that hashtags of the acronym is more popular than the longer version; one such example is the ranking of #tbt as compared to #throwbackthursday. Based on the data compiled by Instagram's management platform- Webstagram, #tbt is used in 254,746,643 posts whereas #throwbackthursday is used in 42,733,774 posts, showing how the shorter form is a more popular choice. This then translates to more conversations made through such acronyms which can then be seen as an in-group language where only the users of Instagram, and specifically the users who regularly take part in this movement of throwback Thursday, will understand what the hashtag means.

In addition, as shared earlier, hashtags do not have any spacing between the words and punctuations. Hence, although it has been mentioned above that longer hashtags are not as popular as shorter acronyms, online users will occasionally speak in hashtag forms where they do not include any spaces between the words. This is similar to verbal speech where the breaks between the different words are not very clear, but unusual of text. Thus, due to the popularity of hashtags and the structure of hashtags, there has been a growing style of typed text where no spaces and punctuations are inserted into a sentence, changing the conventions of typed text. This growing popularity of typing words without spacing in between might be a result of the popularity of Instagram among the younger users who tend to create more new terms and are open to changes in language; driving language changes.

Therefore, as mentioned by Crystal (2011) and as shown above, internet language cannot be identified solely with either spoken or written language and that it shares features with both forms of languages. In this case, Instagram not only brings in features from spoken language- the lack of spacing between words in hashtags, and written language- the ability to comment

and caption photo uploads, it also brings in the visual aspect of language by expressing ones thoughts and perspectives through the pictures they upload.

Speech like	Text like
Time bound	Space bound
Spontaneous	Contrived
Face-to-face	Visually decontextualized
Loosely structured	Elaborately structured
Socially interactive	Factually communicatively
Immediately reversible	Repeatedly reversible
Prosodically rich	Graphically rich

Hence, it can be seen from the text above that as shown in the table above, Instagram, as a form of communication, is spontaneous yet contrived at the same time as it depends a lot on how the user decides to upload its content. Instagram may be spontaneous in that the content shared is purely based on the spontaneity of the uploader to show what was happening at that point of time. However, at the same time, it may be contrived because as a means to amass more likes from ones followers or to attract more attention to the post, one may put in more thought and effort in phrasing the caption and the hashtags and in the choice of the photograph used for sharing. Hence, Instagram can also be seen as a mode of communication that is elaborately structured and loosely structured depending on whether the upload was spontaneous or contrived. Spontaneous uploads would tend to be more loosely structured like speech; with more spelling or grammatical mistakes, whereas contrived uploads will be more elaborately structured like text with more attention paid.

Instagram is also socially interactive as it has been mentioned many times above, that interaction between the followers and the followee is possible, even between strangers, through the action of following, tagging, liking and commenting. In addition, content on Instagram is repeatedly reversible in that one can modify its content repeatedly before and after the uploading depending on which content the uploader wants to change; photos can only be repeatedly revised before it is uploaded and the revision of a photo after it has been uploaded requires the deletion of the post. On the other hand, text content can be repeatedly

revised before and after the uploading of the content, without requiring any deletion of the post.

Instagram was not classified as being time bound or space bound as there is no limit towards the amount of text one can include in the comment space and it does not require both the addressee and addressor to be online at the same time for the interaction to take place.

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