

## *Engagement and Outreach: A Content Analysis of Students' Instagram Postings*

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The Asian Conference on Society, Education & Technology 2015  
Official Conference Proceedings

### **Abstract**

Instagram, a social media tool designed for photo and video sharing, is increasingly being used as an outreach and engagement tool by companies and individuals. This paper reports a study on the content analysis of Instagram updates. The study was inspired by the need to incorporate the use of Instagram in English lessons in a Summer School Program in Malaysia which involves students from Japan. The objectives of the study are to identify the subjects of photos posted and the information written in the photo captions by the Instagram users. The data of this study are seven-day Instagram updates of 30 final year TESL students. These data were analyzed using thematic analysis by triangulating the photos and their captions. The finding shows students are keen to post photos of their food, friends, and fashion. Based on the conclusions of the research, a new lesson plan is recommended for the future Summer School Program.

**Keywords:** Instagram, Social Media, English, Computer Mediated Communication, Summer School, Content

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## **Introduction**

Instagram, in a simple definition, can be described as a photo or video sharing app on mobile platform. The app can also be synced to other popular social media applications such as Facebook, Twitter and Tumblr. Together with the photos and videos, users usually write a caption to give a little explanation to their followers. The Instagram app is very popular among Malaysian young adults as a platform for expression. It seems to lend itself nicely as a tool to practice a target language. Universiti Teknologi Malaysia offers a Summer School Program which focuses on English language course together with cultural exposure. In preparing the program to students from Japan, we saw that the Instagram app might be suitable tool to enhance learning and to trigger the need to use the target language. Nevertheless, before adapting Instagram as a medium for learning several aspects Instagram postings need to be studied. One of it is to determine what do users post on Instagram.

## **Objective**

This paper reports a small scale study on the content analysis of Instagram updates. The study was inspired by the need to incorporate visual communication elements in English lessons in a Summer School Program in Malaysia which involved students from Japan. The objective of this study was to identify the subject of photos being uploaded by students on their Instagram account.

## **Literature Review**

The Instagram is a form of micro blog app. A blog can be defined as a frequently updated websites on the internet. There are blogs on photos, news, videos and just plain journal entries. Meanwhile, Java et. al. (2007) stated that micro-blogging is a new communication tool where users update their statuses in very short posts. Twitter and Instagram fall under this genre. Twitter limits itself to 140 characters per entry. Meanwhile, Instagram focuses on photo and video updates. Instagram limits itself to videos of 15 second duration. These two platforms are widely used throughout the world because of the simplicity of their functions and features.

The main feature of Instagram is photo-sharing. Hu, Manikonda and Kambhampati (2014) explained that Instagram enables users to capture, edit and share their life moment visually and instantaneously. Users can take pictures using applications or using existing photos in their mobiles and share them to world in split seconds. This feature encourages users to share many great things that happen in their life with others. User can also upload short video clips up to 15 second duration. This short duration might look like a drawback but logically, it fits the overall principle of Instagram as a micro-blogging tool.

Usually, users publish their photos together with a simple explanation or image caption. The caption assists in explaining the photos and to point out what readers or followers should focus on when looking at the photos. Ordonez et. al. (2011) in his article stated that, “producing a relevant and accurate caption for an arbitrary image is an extremely challenging problem, perhaps nearly as difficult as the underlying general image understanding task.” Describing a complex image into simple words can be very challenging. One needs to be media literate to come up with effective updates.

Livingstone (2004) describes media literacy as the capacity to access, study, evaluate and compose messages across different context. In order to survive the digital age, people need a set of skill that will help them to tackle everyday challenges. Heins and Cho (2003) states that media literacy education teaches students how to analyze messages that may involve commercial advertising, ethnic and gender stereotypes, violence, or other complex issues. Some Instagram postings are interesting and draw many “likes” from viewers. Perhaps, these are posted or handled by users who have the high media intelligence.

Hu, Manikonda and Kambhampati (2014) wrote a paper on “What We Instagram: A First Analysis of Instagram Photo Content and User Types.” They studied what type of photos do people post on Instagram, how do the users differ based on the type of images they post and the relationship between the users’ photo content and the number of their followers. Their data analysis was collected based on the Instagram Application Programming Interface (API), a qualitative categorization of Instagram photos and a quantitative examination of users’ characterization with respect of their photos.

This present study did not attempt to replicate the study above. The only similarity is that both studies were interested to do a content analysis of Instagram updates. The similarity stops there as this present study had a homogenous subjects and Hu, Manikonda and Kambhampati (2014) had a general and random samples. And this present study was motivated specifically to understand the Instagram content in order to come up with lessons, in particular a language related lesson. While Hu, Manikonda and Kambhapat (2014) were motivated by the need to acquire deep insights about social, cultural and environmental issues about people’s activities as evidence through their photos.

A blog is a very good tool to be used by teacher for language teaching since it can promote active participation from students and interactive learning beyond the four walls of a classroom. Dunlap (2009) argues that the use of blog can help students express their ideas and perspective, make their thinking noticeable while at the same time build their confidence in communication. There are many features that make a microblog like Instagram suitable for education system. It is easy to set up and being cost effective are just some of them. It also encourage students to communicate their ideas and at the same time interact with others. As Instagram focuses on photo sharing, students in cultural exchange programs might benefit a lot from it. Nevertheless, first and foremost educators need to know the nature of Instagram postings before designing suitable lessons.

### **Method**

The data for this study were photos and their captions. In order to determine the subject of uploaded photos, the researcher manually looked at photos and read captions written by the users. Then, the data were categorized based on a checklist prepared.

These data came from Instagram accounts belonging to 30 final year Malaysian TESL students. 27 were females and three were males. A total number of 74 photos were collected. These were a week worth of postings made by these students from 22 to 28 March 2015.

The instrument used was an observation checklist. The checklist was adopted from Hu, Manikonda and Kambhampati (2014) who did a research on What We Instagram: A First Analysis of Instagram Photo Content and User Types. The main categories listed were 'Selfie', 'Nature', 'Fashion', 'Friends', 'Food', 'Activities' and 'others'. This checklist was used to identify the category of contents of the collected data. Both the photos and the captions were triangulated in order to determine the main subject of the photos. The data were then analyzed using frequency count and percentage calculation.

### **Findings and Discussion**

The findings show that the 'Food' category had the highest number of photos at 27%. This was followed by 'Friends' at 17.6% and 'Fashion' at 14.9%. In the middle, 'Activities' and 'Selfies' appeared 13.5% and 9.5% respectively. Meanwhile, at the bottom, 'Nature' charted 1.4%.

In this study we found that the top three categories were 'Food', 'Friends', and 'Fashion.' Meanwhile, Hu, Manikonda and Kambhampati (2014) found that 'Selfies', 'Friends,' and 'Activities' led the top three. These differences could be due to age gap, cultural differences and preferences. Hu, Manikonda and Kambhampati (2014) had general, random and diverse data. They analyzed 1000 photos chosen from 50 users out of 95343 randomly chosen users. As for this research, the photos came from 30 homogenous users, final year Malaysian TESL students.

It was the agenda of this study to discover the tendencies of young adults because the research itself was inspired by the need to prepare lessons which utilize the Instagram app for college level students or the participants of a summer school program.

### **Recommendation**

As this study was motivated by the need to create a visual based lesson for visiting students from Japan who come to Malaysia to learn English in a summer school program, the findings from this study are essential in assisting the design of the lesson. In our summer school program, the students will certainly visit some interesting places in the host country and at the same time experience some cultural events which are different from theirs. Hence, topics for the visual based language lessons can include 'Selfie', 'Nature', 'Fashion', 'Friends', 'Food', and 'Activities'. Nevertheless, the top three subjects are 'Food', 'Friends' and 'Fashion' should be given priority as these are the top three popular subjects of Instagram postings.

Students are required to capture photos based on the popular topics we discovered from this study. Along with the photos, they have to write suitable captions. Basically, the students will take photos of whatever interest them under the scope of the topic provided. These photos then trigger the need to use the target language when writing the captions to further explain the photos. The classmates can then interact by clicking "like" or write comments under the photos.

## **Conclusions**

In conclusions the popular subjects of photos being uploaded Instagram are 'Selfie', 'Nature', 'Fashion', 'Friends', 'Food', and 'Activities'. Nevertheless, the top three subjects are 'Food', 'Friends' and 'Fashion'. From here, English teachers can design Instagram mediated lessons for language learner. For example, teachers can ask students to capture photos of 'Food' for dinner that they had and write a suitable caption for that photo.

While it is interesting to proceed with the lesson, continued exploration of the nature of Instagram postings should be made. The questions of the ethics postings and privacy of people being captured on photos, for example, need to be addressed. As part of our future works, we plan to extend the research by analyzing other features of Instagram namely users' profile, profile photos, number of followers, number of followings and interaction between users and followers.

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