

Hashtag usage and user engagement on Instagram: The case of #foodfestivals

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Abstract:

In events and festivals, social media has emerged as a platform for co-creating value and enhancing engagement. In particular, the use of hashtags on social media enhances impressions, raises awareness towards a brand, and helps reach a broader audience. As such, this study aims at uncovering the extent to which hashtags influence user engagement on Instagram. It also provides an overview of how festival experiences are communicated on social media via hashtags. As different types of events and festivals are unique in nature, this study takes food festivals as the research context. Based on Instagram posts captioned with #foodfestivals, collocation analysis, linked analysis, and word trees were applied to visualize hashtag usage. A spearman correlation was conducted to assess the interplay between hashtags and user engagement. The findings reveal sweets and desserts to be the most popular feature, gaining attention for further investigation in food festivals. Furthermore, grounded in the notion of information overload, the findings suggest that the number of hashtags might not necessarily influence user engagement, whereas the length of hashtags and captions seems to have a negative impact on engagement rate. On the whole, this is a cross-disciplinary study that bridges data science, digital marketing, and applied psychology with events and festivals. Although this study is based in the context of food festival, the same notion can be replicated to other types of event. This research highlights the use of hashtags as one of the subtle yet persuasive factors in influencing user engagement when it comes to festival experiences.

Key Words: *food festivals; Instagram; hashtags; information overload; engagement*

Introduction

The “camera eats first” notion refers to a global phenomenon in which society takes pictures of every meal and uploads them to social media platforms before they eat. In the era of digitalization, interactions with others have evolved from physical places to digital environments (Laurell & Björner, 2018). Apart from the general tourism field, advanced technologies are also embraced by event and festival practitioners to create immersive and participatory experiences (Laurell & Björner, 2018). Unlike other festival genres (e.g. music, film, sport, and art), gastronomic events are considered the core of culinary tourism and lay the groundwork for next-level social, cultural, and creative experiences (Yang et al., 2020). Essentially, food festivals pack cultural identity, lifestyle (Lau & Li, 2019), and local themes (van Niekerk, 2017) into one. Their uniqueness can be spotted in earlier literature, suggesting that visitors are motivated to taste local cuisine, seek novel food experiences, and understand culture through gastronomy (López-Guzmán et al., 2017). Despite the importance of understanding consumers’ motivations and satisfactions, information and communication technologies are the essential vehicles driving to stimulate event experiences (Singh, 2020). The use of social media, in particular, has transformed multiphasic experiences into shareable and long-lasting ones (Wong et al., 2020). Since gastronomy has evolved from the idea of pure sustenance to a star attraction, social media serves as a new resource for food festivals to engage with consumers (Belenioti et al., 2017).

Apart from posting in a typical way (e.g. captions with pictures/videos), hashtags create an online community by enabling users to interact with each other (Hays et al., 2013). Hashtags make a post more discoverable (Hays et al., 2013) and maximize the engagement rate of a post (Tiago et al., 2017). In recent years, businesses have applied hashtags as a means to engage target consumers and label the service/product (Kim & Hyun, 2019; Pilař et al., 2018). Yet, while it appears that hashtags should reach more consumers, marketers also need to bear in mind the effects of information overload (Sthapit, 2019) - one’s difficulty in processing content which contains too much information. In digital marketing, longer messages might decrease potential consumers’ interest and eventually drive them away (Mariani et al., 2016).

Nevertheless, specific to events and festivals, the current knowledge remains dominated by attendees’ motivations and satisfaction (Gallardo et al., 2017; Lis & Tomanek, 2020; López-Guzmán et al., 2017). Although studies related to event experiences and digital engagement are emerging (Kharouf et al., 2020; Laurell & Björner, 2018), little is known regarding social media content and, specifically, the effectiveness of hashtag usage with respect to food festivals. As such, this study aims to uncover the role of hashtags (i.e., number of hashtags, length of hashtags, and length of the posts) in influencing user engagement on Instagram. Moreover, it

also provides an overview of how food festival experiences are communicated through hashtags on social media. This study crosses the disciplinary boundary by implementing applied psychology and data science to the events and festivals sector. Taking information overload into account, this research presents a holistic view on hashtags in digital marketing for event/festival management.

Literature review

Food festival experiences

Food has a direct relationship with a destination's image and plays a critical role in marketing strategies (Seo et al., 2017). Culinary experiences further facilitate brand differentiation and create emotional bonds with visitors (Mason & Paggiaro, 2012). Its value is expected to reach US \$1.8 billion in the year of 2027, with an annual growth rate of 16.5%, due mainly to the impact of digital media and the increasing number of food festivals (Research and Markets, 2020). Essentially, gastronomic experiences function as sensory stimuli to influence consumers' behaviors and create memorable experiences. Due to the importance of food in the event industry (Kim et al., 2009), several studies have assessed people's motivations for participating in gastronomic-related events. For instance, in the case of the Old Town Spring SpringFest, Chang and Yuan (2011) discovered that escaping and novelty-seeking are the main reasons why people attend food festivals. In the case of the international food festivals in Guayaquil, social and educational purposes seemed to contribute significantly to eventgoers' satisfaction (López-Guzmán et al., 2017). Furthermore, a more recent study suggests that food tasting, socialization and cultural experiences are the fundamental motives in food tourism (Su et al., 2018).

Nonetheless, the measurements of motivations and satisfaction are somewhat insufficient for providing a holistic view on how participants experience food festivals since culinary activities include both tangible and intangible products (Mason & Paggiaro, 2012). Eventgoers' perceptions can be influenced by festivalscape (Mason & Paggiaro, 2012), referring to the interplay between physical environment, event atmosphere, and other tangible objects. Examples include facility aesthetics, lighting, ambience, and equipment, amongst others (Raajpoot, 2002; Ryu & Jang, 2007). Additionally, festivalscape is often associated with consumers' behavior, emotion, and loyalty (Gration et al., 2011). However, previous literature has mostly investigated festivalscape at wine events. For example, Bruwer and Kelley (2015) identified that attendees' experiences are influenced by the quality of the facilities at a wine event, with the amenities indicating the perceived service quality. Moreover, festivalscape has positive impacts on participants' perceived value, satisfaction, and visiting intentions (Choe et al., 2018). Yet, as summarized by Choe et al. (2018), previous literature has mainly applied a deductive technique to examine festival experiences; therefore, it is restricted by the methodological approach and limited number of participants (Bruwer & Kelley, 2015).

User-generated content and the usage of hashtags

Recent research underlines the potentials of using social media to enhance human interactions (Sung et al., 2016) and festival/event experiences (Park & Dittmore, 2014; Singh, 2020). In events and festivals, social media has emerged as a platform for co-creating value and enhancing engagement (Kharouf et al., 2020; Laurell & Björner, 2018). It transcends experiences beyond the physical festivalscape by allowing consumers to share their feelings and experiences with an online community (Varkaris & Neuhofer, 2017). This form of user-generated content (UGC) can be presented in texts, pictures, and/or videos. Specifically, event organizers have gradually started to recognize Instagram as an effective tool in fostering involvement with festivalgoers (Aramendia-Muneta et al., 2020). The analysis of UGC not only discloses hidden insights from consumers but also enables researchers to reach a wider population (Yu et al., 2020). For marketers, one of the latest trends in boosting the effect of advertising campaigns is through the use of hashtags as it allows for a customized search based on consumers' interests (Hays et al., 2013; Kim & Hyun, 2019). Popular platforms accommodating hashtags include, but are not limited to, Instagram, Twitter, TikTok, Snapchat, and Facebook.

Effective hashtags enhance impressions, raise awareness towards a brand, and help reach a broader audience (Doktoralina et al., 2020). Ma *et al.* (2013) predict the popularity of hashtags on Twitter to offer holistic insights into the success of marketing and advertising campaigns in Singapore. Moreover, Leonhardt (2015) stresses that effective hashtags can create and maintain user engagement within social communities. Other studies suggest that hashtags play a critical role in increasing awareness (Doktoralina et al., 2020), promoting word-of-mouth effects (Lever et al., 2017), and revealing consumers' value towards a brand (Pilař et al., 2018). Pilař *et al.*'s study (2018) analyzed Instagram hashtags so as to reveal consumers' interests. They identified six main hashtags in the case of #farmersmarket; namely, organic, fresh, food, local, began, and healthy (Pilař et al., 2018). However, previous studies have normally investigated hashtag usage on Twitter, whereas research on Instagram is still at an infant stage. By retrieving information (Small, 2011), hashtags provide marketers with information on how to understand the shared value of Instagram communities (Pilař et al., 2018). Notably, Instagram only allows a maximum of 30 hashtags per post, leading to an interesting question regarding the interplay between user engagement and hashtag usage.

Consumer engagement and information overload

Structuring content in a visually appealing manner is critical for social media (Villamediana-Pedrosa et al., 2018). In addition to visual materials (e.g. photos and videos), the length of a post may serve as a visibly instantaneous way of developing one's first impression. Malhotra et al. (2012) suggest that the length of a post

negatively correlates with engagement rate. Apparently, a post of around 200 characters seems to be the most effective in encouraging user engagement on Tweeter (Mariani et al., 2016), while a post with 80 characters leads to a higher engagement rate on Facebook (Sabate et al., 2014). Nonetheless, another study argues that post length does not necessarily contribute to how users engage with the content (Villamediana-Pedrosa et al., 2018). Although lengthier posts appear to be more informative, one needs to be cautious in this digital age as users find themselves having to constantly keep up with the flood of information (Sthapit, 2019). This phenomenon, in the field of psychology, is referred to as *information overload* (Feng et al., 2015; Sthapit, 2019). Information overload has made it difficult for businesses to boost their competitive advantage (Scholtz & Kruger, 2019) because consumers might be driven away when information exceeds their ability to process (Feng et al., 2015).

Understanding consumer engagement with UGC is a valuable asset for marketers in order to strategically boost purchase intentions (Lin et al., 2017) and ultimately increase business revenue (Kumar & Mirchandani, 2012). In a nutshell, factors influencing user engagement in UGC include informativity, timeliness, vividness, and interactivity, among many others (Vries et al., 2012; Yu & Sun, 2019). Specific to Instagram, topics related to engagement have gained momentum in retailing (Oliveira & Fernandes, 2020) as well as in marketing and advertising (Phua et al., 2018). Yet, only recently have scholars started to introduce Instagram into the context of tourism marketing (Yu et al., 2020; Yu & Sun, 2019). In fact, Yu and Sun (2019) have already highlighted hashtags as one of the salient factors in influencing the way users engage with Instagram posts. Given the importance of hashtags in marketing, literature in this domain has been predominantly focused on one single platform (e.g. Twitter) (Ma et al., 2013; Tiago et al., 2017). Surprisingly, hashtag marketing on Instagram and consumer engagement in festival management has been rather scarce.

Material & methods

To unveil the interplay between hashtags and user engagement and to provide an overview of festival experiences presented through hashtags, this research used food festival-related Instagram posts as its reference point. The first step was to crawl Instagram posts captioned with #foodfestivals. Since Instagram users often include similar hashtags in one post so as to increase exposure, synonyms of #foodfestivals (e.g. #foodfestival or #foodfestival2019) were not considered in order to avoid duplication. In total, 3,669 public posts published in 2019 were extracted using Octoparse. Octoparse is an open source web scraping tool which has been used by tourism scholars to extract Instagram content (Yu et al., 2020) along with other social media data (Bodnár et al., 2020). The extracted data included number of likes, post date, post URL, captions, and user information (i.e., number of followers). Notably, this research did not differentiate between whether the posts were published by festivalgoers or event organizers. In fact, consumers alone are not the only segment to share content online because value and experiences are co-created together with marketers and other stakeholders (Camilleri & Neuhofer, 2017).

Data collection was conducted in the first week of December 2019. Yet, since some additional posts may appear around the same time as when data extraction takes place, the number of likes could progress after a couple of days. For this reason, and to reach a higher accuracy level, the researchers proceeded to complete a second round of data collection three weeks after. A total of 59,399 hashtags were identified based on the 3,669 public posts. Data was then pre-processed in which non-English hashtags and emoji hashtags were removed. Thereafter, the final dataset was imported into Voyant Tool, a scholarly software for visualization and text mining (Bodnár et al., 2020; Nukhu & Singh, 2020). Voyant Tool identified 55,423 words with a total of 14,236 unique terms. Based on the identified terms, this study continued with (1) collocation analysis, (2) linked analysis, and (3) word trees. Collocation analysis identifies co-occurring words which have statistical significance (Nukhu & Singh, 2020), while the linguistic technique of semantic linked analysis finds the relation between texts (Almela, 2011). The word tree tool, on the other hand, aids in presenting an overview of how terms are used in different phrases within the dataset (Nukhu & Singh, 2020). Note that #foodfestivals and #foodfestival were excluded from the analysis since the terms appeared in almost every post.

Ultimately, the number of hashtags in each post was identified, and the characters were calculated in Excel. To provide more valuable insights, this study also considered the length of the hashtags as a whole and the total length of the posts (i.e., with and without hashtags). The effect of length and engagement rate was analyzed using a Spearman correlation in SPSS (Zarei & Mahmoodi Pachal, 2019), in which the engagement rate of a post was computed by taking the number of followers an account has and dividing it by the number of likes from a given post (Jaakonmäki et al., 2017). In this stage, 427 video-posts were removed since Instagram fails to provide the number of likes for posts containing videos, rendering the calculation of engagement rate infeasible. As a result, analysis was conducted based on 3,248 posts captioned with #foodfestivals.

Results

Collocation analysis

Table 1 provides the top 30 frequently used hashtags in posts captioned with #foodfestivals. For example, #foodie, #foodporn, #food, #foodfest, #foodphotography, #foodies, #streetfood, #festival, #foodgasm, and #foodtruck. Subsequently, the semantic collocate analysis is presented based on the top two hashtags “foodie” and “foodporn”. Table 2 illustrates that the word “foodie” has the highest co-occurrence frequency with hashtags

such as #dessert, #sweettooth, #dessertporn, and #icecream. Similarly, the word “foodporn” frequently co-occurs with hashtags such as #foodphotography, #foodgasm, #sweettooth, and #icecream. As the terms closely related to “foodie” and “foodporn” are dominated by sweets and desserts, the results yield a high interest towards sweet foods, such as ice cream, cookies, and fruit.

Table 1. Top hashtags in food festival posts

Hashtags	Count	Hashtags	Count	Hashtags	Count
#foodie	822	#foodstagram	255	#festivals	123
#foodporn	582	#foodlover	210	#foodiesofinstagram	121
#food	532	#instafood	172	#dessert	120
#foodfest	386	#foodaholic	166	#dessertporn	115
#foodphotography	381	#foodblogger	157	#sweets	112
#foodies	370	#vegan	153	#foodevents	107
#streetfood	322	#icecream	148	#sweettooth	106
#festival	280	#foodlovers	138	#azfoodie	103
#foodgasm	270	#yum	136	#candy	103
#foodtruck	267	#foodworkshop	129	#queencreek	103

Table 2. Semantic collocate analysis: #foodie and #foodporn

foodie	Collocate	Count	foodporn	Collocate	Count
#foodie	dessert	185	#foodporn	foodphotography	148
#foodie	sweettooth	182	#foodporn	foodgasm	112
#foodie	sweets	181	#foodporn	sweettooth	103
#foodie	foodstagram	128	#foodporn	icecream	103
#foodie	foodphotography	111	#foodporn	dessert	103
#foodie	dessertporn	104	#foodporn	dessertporn	102
#foodie	icecream	103	#foodporn	cookie	102
#foodie	fruitloop	102	#foodporn	candy	102
#foodie	cookie	102	#foodporn	foodforthought	81
#foodie	candy	102	#foodporn	foodforlife	80

Data visualization: linked analysis and word tree

Figure 1 visualizes the links between higher frequency hashtags that appeared in proximity to each other. Keywords are presented in blue, whereas collocates (words in proximity) are presented in orange. A graph as such is particularly useful to demonstrate patterns through presenting keywords that tend to occur together or separately. Take #foodtruck as an example, Instagram users often mentioned it together with #foodporn, #foodgasm, #icecream, #candy, #yum, and #dessertporn. In addition, word trees show the interrelation between the core attributes of food festivals (Figure 2). For instance, the hashtag “foodfestivals” exhibits branches of terms, such as local food, sweets, street food festivals, and small chops. Within the “outdoors” branch, word trees are extended to attributes such as burger and Christmas festival.

Figure 1. Linked analysis using #foodtruck as an example

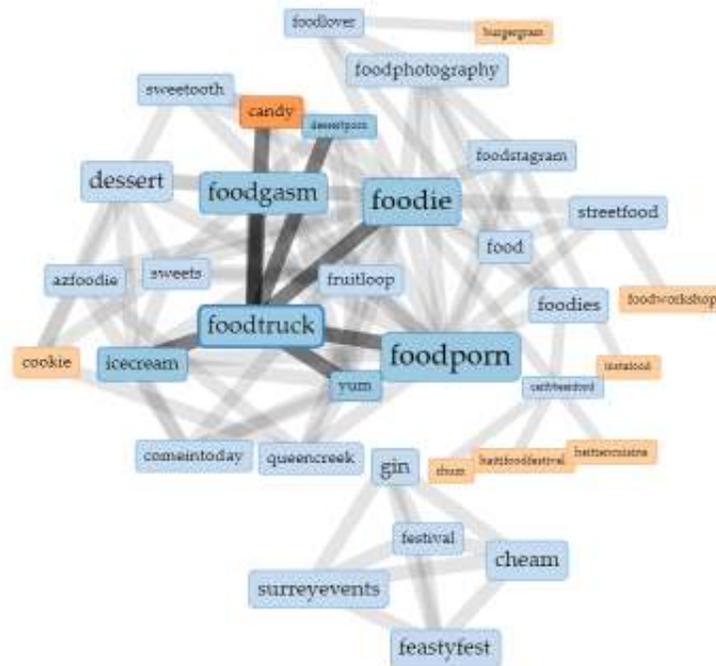


Figure 2. Word trees based on #foodfestivals



Main analysis: Spearman correlation

Finally, the findings show that #foodfestivals posts have an average of 15 hashtags ($SD=9.36$) with a mean value of 177 characters each ($SD=113.32$). Regarding the length of captions without hashtags, the posts average at approximately 236 characters in length ($SD=259.88$). Altogether, the results reveal that the total length of posts accumulates to about 412 characters ($SD=293.71$). Regarding the engagement rate and the number of hashtags, based on a Spearman correlation (Yan et al., 2019), the results suggest that there was no statistically significant correlation between the two factors, $r_s(3246) = -.009, p = .594$. Nevertheless, the findings reveal a statistically significant, yet weak, negative correlation between the engagement rate and the length of hashtags, $r_s(3246) = -.031, p = .011$. Moreover, significant and strong negative relationships exist between the engagement rate and length of captions without hashtags ($r_s(3246) = -.069, p < .000$) as well as a very strong negative relationship between the engagement rate and the total length of a post ($r_s(3246) = -.087, p < .000$).

Discussion

From a broader marketing perspective, hashtags are words or phrases considered to help increase the engagement rate, reach the target (and potential) audience, and deliver a brand image (Doktoralina et al., 2020; Tiago et al., 2017). In the context of food festivals, it is interesting to note that #foodfestivals’ co-hashtags frequently appear in relation to sweets and desserts (e.g. #icecream, #sweets, #cookie, #candy, #sweettooth, #dessert, and #dessertporn) despite the diversity of food choices available at festivals. Additionally, sweets and desserts are rarely discussed in previous literature in the events industry field. In fact, the existing studies appear to be one-sided, focusing on either local food experiences (Organ et al., 2015) or general food consumption at festivals (Ding & Lee, 2017). One possible explanation for this may be due to the fact that studies related to food festivals are case-specific in nature (Bruwer & Kelley, 2015; Choe et al., 2018), thereby limiting the scope of the findings. Nonetheless, in a slightly different context, Yu and Sun (2019) discovered pastries as one of the popular topics shared amongst Instagram users in the case of a gastronomic city. Furthermore, the results imply that dessert-related hashtags have a closer link to #foodtruck. Slightly different from the modern practice of offering American food (e.g. burger) (Wallsten & Rhyan, 2014) or Cuban food (Hrdlicka et al., 2017), the findings reveal that festivalgoers still demonstrate a high interest in dessert trucks (or, more specifically, ice cream trucks). Surprisingly, hashtags related to American food (e.g. #burgergram) appear to be isolated from most of the interconnected hashtags.

While it is critical to gain insights into the current practice of hashtags, including more hashtags might not necessarily prompt user engagement, potentially because of the excessive word counts in a post (Malhotra et al., 2012). Different from earlier studies that foresee the effectiveness of using hashtags to encourage consumer engagement (Leonhardt, 2015; Tiago et al., 2017), this study presents opposite viewpoints. More precisely, the findings suggest that the number of hashtags included in a post does not influence how users engage with the content. That is, while incorporating more hashtags might make a post more discoverable (Hays et al., 2013), it does not necessarily encourage users to process the post content. Instead, first impressions based on post length might serve as an influential factor for an either closer or more detached user engagement (Feng et al., 2015). This assumption is also demonstrated through the findings, suggesting that the total length of hashtags, regardless of the number of hashtags, negatively correlates with engagement rate. Similarly, this study unveiled a strong negative relationship between user engagement and the length of the whole post. Consistent with previous literature, since Instagram users spend extra energy processing the massive amount of information input, a post with short to moderate length encourages consumers’ engagement the most (Mariani et al., 2016; Sabate et al., 2014). Nevertheless, it is still worth mentioning that recent research argues the irrelevance between the length and user engagement (Villamediana-Pedrosa et al., 2018).

All in all, at events and festivals, marketers need to be aware of the system on Instagram. While it is generally accepted that hashtags contribute to exposure rate (Hays et al., 2013), it does not guarantee a higher user engagement rate. Especially when it comes to visually-centered media sites (e.g. Instagram), a lengthier post could lead to information complexity and negative consequences concerning consumer behaviors (Malhotra et al., 2012). Finally, although this research placed a particular focus on the length of posts, it is important to note that many other factors could potentially lead to a low engagement rate (e.g. the poor quality of captions, photos/videos, or the behavioral characteristics of Instagram users).

Conclusions

By bridging the disciplines of data science, digital marketing, and applied psychology to events and festivals, this study is novel in that it zooms in on the practice of Instagram hashtags. Specifically, this study incorporates information overload, which has been commonly investigated in regards to website usability and, more recently, social media (Fu et al., 2020). Although Instagram hashtags are everywhere, little is known regarding the effectiveness of using hashtags to maximize value. By making food festivals the central context, this research has opened new avenues of investigation in event and festival marketing/management. It goes beyond the scope of well-known factors, including the extent of informativity and vividness identified in the broader field of tourism and hospitality (Yu & Sun, 2019), by highlighting hashtag usage as one of the subtle but influential triggers of user engagement. Methodologically, the data-driven nature of this study advances the understanding of how food festival experiences are communicated on Instagram. Furthermore, popular trends that may not have been recognized otherwise, such as the feature of sweets and desserts in food festivals, have been revealed. Finally, although applying visual programming software is not new in the broader field of service marketing, this study offers a new means of generating insights through applying hashtag analysis to events and festivals.

This study acknowledges several observations for event marketers and practitioners. Marketers might consider incorporating popular hashtags to increase exposure rate. For instance, when marketing local food festivals, strongly related hashtags could be #burgers, #burgerporn, #blackchef, and #foodstalls. In street food festivals, suggested hashtags for marketers could include #outdooreating, #foodworkshop, #farmersmarket, and #sundowner. When using a more general yet popular term (i.e., #foodporn), co-hashtags such as #foodmaniac, #colorfull, #foodexplorers, and #foodplating are highly recommended. Although the number of hashtags might not necessarily influence user engagement, one should pay particular attention to hashtag length. For example, a combination of “#foodclubculinary #foodphotography #foodforfoodies #foodiesofinstagram #famousfoodfestival” potentially discourages users to engage with a post, compared to a combination of “#culinary #foodphoto #foodies #foodstagram #foodfestival”. Furthermore, when considering the post as a whole (hashtags plus main text), keeping the length at around the average characters identified in this study (412 characters) is suggested. Presuming that the main text already takes up 300 characters, event practitioners could consider creating shorter, yet unique, hashtags. The hashtag #festivalfarmersmarket2019, for example, accounts for 25 characters. Therefore, event practitioners should opt for shorter options such as #farmersmarket19 to remain transparent and memorable. Alternatively, although there is an emerging trend to include hashtags in the first comment in order to keep the caption neat, recent market research suggests that hashtags in posts generally have more engagement than hashtags in comments (Ayres, 2018).

Note that this research is not without its limitations. First, while non-English hashtags were removed in the analysis, other English hashtags may be incompatible since they derived from its original language (e.g. pinyin in Chinese or Japanese). Additionally, this research presumes information overload to be one of the reasons resulting in lower engagement rate. Yet, it has been noted that the length of posts is not the only factor influencing user engagement. An extension to this study could consider other variables such as text sentiment and pictorial content. Meanwhile, this study did not separate business/official accounts and private accounts. It would be interesting for further studies to analyze the differences between projected and perceived images generated by users with different needs. One solution could be to apply word-embedding techniques (e.g. Word2Vec) to identify potential business accounts based on usernames with terms such as “festival”, “planner”, and “organizer”. With the rapid changing behavior of Instagram users, comparison between hashtags in posts and hashtags in comments also merit attention in future research. Finally, since the nature of festivals are considered different from other tourism offerings (e.g. hotels, restaurants), another recommended prospect would be to extend these methods to other tourism contexts.

Conflicts of interest - None

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