

Famous Social Media Application and Use of Hashtags in Pakistani Context: A Survey

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Abstract

Observing the latest practices on social media applications, role of hashtags have become a major concern to talk about. The emergence of social media has put huge impact on people of different age groups; thus, it is bringing a change in the pattern of communication and interaction (Kamran and Mansoor, 2017). Social media applications allow interaction while following new features and trends; for example, the use of hashtags. Emerging trend of hashtags is considerable and worth studying the perception of social media users in Pakistan. The study aims to analyze the popularity of social media application in Pakistan, and to what extent social media users are aware about the usage of hashtags. Four social media applications i.e. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Snapchat were considered in the study depending upon their accessibility in Pakistan. Data was collected quantitatively and qualitatively. Quantitative data was collected through questionnaire where 55 Pakistani social media users participated. Results of the survey reveal that Pakistani users are more inclined towards using Facebook and Instagram than Twitter or Snapchat. The study further collected qualitative data from 8 Facebook users in an interview. Findings of the study show that hashtags are used on Facebook as fashionable trend to catch attention.

Keywords: social media applications, Facebook, Instagram, hashtags, Pakistan

Introduction

Technological advancement has made people connected all around the globe (Wooley, 2013). They are able to support interpersonal communication and collaboration with the help of Internet supported social media applications (Kane et al. 2012); also, they are more engaged and connected (Poell and van, 2015). Social media in modern world has showed great dominance over societies and people; it has become a place where people share their thoughts and ideas (Tsur and Rappoport, 2012). It has put great impact upon interaction and communication among people of different countries in the world. There are endless uses of social media (Adler et al. 2012) as mentioned by Zemmels, (2012) that it is itself a common method of communication because of its ability to constantly generate new information. From the act of updating a status to posting photos and videos, social media has made a digital footprint in our society and within the last decade and hundreds of social media applications have been created for Internet savvy people. (Ike, 2017). Applications such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Snapchat are now free and easily accessible to every person who has access of Internet and technological devices, laptops, computers, tablets, notebooks or mobiles phones etc. It further enables people to follow or to add each other; and to share posts on their personal accounts once they are created or signed up by following easy and quick steps. These applications are different from traditional social setting of communication and sharing as they represent relationships and interactions. Such platforms quantify and formalize relationships after interactions beyond the boundaries. According to the research made by (Gilbert and Karahalios 2009), people can attribute to labels such as friend or follower. Whereas Boyd and Ellison, (2007) mentioned that users of social media applications establish new social connections while maintaining existing ones which enable them to communicate and interact.

Social media applications have further developed the trend of hashtags in which word or phrase is used right after the # sign and that is called as hashtag. Chang (2010) defined hashtags as “prefixed by # symbol with a keyword”. Whereas Caleffi, (2015) added to this definition by calling hashtags “topic markers”; also a word or string of words preceding by the # sign. It is made up of two different words hash and tag, officially added in the year of 2010, to Oxford English Dictionary. These tags convey information under the specified keyword. For example, if user wants information on Internet, he or she can simple take advantage of sign # following the keyword Internet, without any space. After searching through this sign, all categorized information will appear in the search engine. Lakarnchua and Wasanasomsithi, (2014) stated that social networking helps to produce “short and spontaneous communication” which further helped Adamska (2015) to state that hashtag is a new model of communication, which can serve various purposes and can contribute to “fast and easy communication” done on the social media applications. Lomicka and Lord, (2016) stated that one must remember the fact that all social media applications have one purpose and that is to interact. Social interaction develop connection among people of all communities. Hashtags are considered as “mini narratives” and “searchable talk”. Shapp (2014) stated that

hashtags were used for tagging “concrete entities” and further claimed tweets and hashtags as “mini narratives”. According to Vasquez (2007), functions of such narratives include: entertainment, expression of solidarity, establishment of social relationships, highlighting and resolving tensions and building social and cultural identity. Shapp’s 2014 discussed in her research that all such functions can be accomplished with the help of hashtags. Furthermore Zappavigna, (2015) linked social media discourse to the “searchable talk” because hashtags can be clicked and searched to know what information they convey. Also, this hashtagging practice has made conversations easily searchable for the people who show interest in it. Murtagh, 2013 also stated that hashtags make conversations searchable with just one click; also this click will enable users to reach audience with similar interests. Caleffi, (2015) mentioned that usage of hashtag is a “social media generated fashion” which is spreading online and offline.

On every application, role of hashtags is different due to various reasons. It is different on Facebook because hashtags are used beyond their rules set by the experts (Borgini, 2014); also, settings of the posts are usually limited to friends only, which restricts hashtags to appear in “searchable talk” (Zappavigna, 2015). One of the social media agency named RadiumOne conducted a study and found that almost 75% of people on social media use hashtags. It further raises a question that how many of them know the usage of correct hashtags. According to the mentioned study, a small number of people actually know how to gain the maximum benefits after using hashtags correctly. Kietzmann et al, (2011) mentioned that social media has become a source to develop company’s reputation and publicity of products. In Pakistan, there is a need to find out people’s inclination towards four major social media applications which have emerging users of hashtags. The purpose of the study is to explore the popularity among four social media applications (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Snapchat) in Pakistan. Also, it will analyse users’ perception regarding the usage of hashtags. The present study is an initial attempt to find answers to the following questions: a) Which social media application is famous in Pakistan? B) To what extent social media users understand hashtags? C) What is the perception of Facebook users about hashtagging?

Background: Definitions of Terminologies

During recent years, four major social media applications Facebook, twitter Instagram and Snapchat have got immense popularity all around the world. The present study will provide a brief introduction of users’ hashtagging behavior while reviewing the previously done research on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Snapchat. According to Kolowich (2017), hashtags on Twitter, Instagram and Facebook link discussions of various users into one stream. If they are not connected with each other but using the same hashtag, their posts (containing that hashtag) will appear in the same stream.

Facebook, a major social networking site, was launched in 2004. Here, users register and create their profiles to interact with other users. It allows users to join and follow groups and page also they can also interact and take benefits from other applications such as social games and Instagram. Noticing the worldwide reach and total active users, Facebook is the major social networking application which has 2.07 billion monthly active users, till the 2017. (Statista, 2017). On Facebook, practice of hashtagging was started in the year 2013. According to the report of Stelzner (2016), Facebook is the most important social network for marketers, and around 55% of marketers chose it and create hashtags to use for the growth of their businesses.

Another one is Twitter, it must be noticeable that hashtags were first used by twitter users. Twitter is significant to mention here because, hashtags were originated here. The first hashtag was posted by American social technology expert, Christopher Reaves Messina, when he used hashtag on his twitter account in 2007. According to the Statista 2017, Twitter has 330 million monthly active users. Twitter is a social networking platform which enables registered users to read and post short messages, called as tweets, with strict character limit of 140. One or multiple word hashtags maintain to have context behind them. Here on Twitter, users follow each other and get able to receive all the messages (called tweets. On twitter, user can retweet also known as RT, to spread the information unlike Facebook that allows users to “share”. Common practice with regards to reacting to a tweet has multiple ways, either to reply or retweet. The tag ‘@’ followed by a user identifier address the user, and ‘#’ followed by a word represents a hashtag are common observable features in tweets (Kwak et al 2010). On Twitter, hashtags are powerful enough and they flourished to other social networking sites such as Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest and Snapchat. Instagram has become popular in using hashtags with images. Whereas, Twitter, Facebook have set this practice in both ways.

Instagram is a social media application which allows it’s users to share photos or videos publicly or privately. Users can add location with “geotags” and descriptions with hashtags while posting their pictures and videos. They use hashtags to describe pictures, videos and location too. According to Statista 2017, Instagram has 800 million monthly users. It shows the popularity of this photo and video sharing application and the usage of hashtags with images. It has gained rapid popularity just like Twitter and Facebook. In United States, Instagram users mostly belong to 24 years or even younger in age (Statista, 2017). According to Hu et. Al. (2014), Instagram is a popular video and photo capturing and sharing application which offers its’ users 16 filters

to transform the appearance of an image. Sharing through Instagram further makes its' users able to share their posts instantly on other social accounts such as Facebook and Twitter.

Hashtags were added to Instagram in January 2011 to add captions and to describe pictures and videos; and from 27th April 2015 users are able to use emoji as hashtags (Giannoulakis & Tsapatoulis, 2015). Along with this, Hu et al (2014), mentioned that there is a need to explore hashtags on the Instagram. Researchers highlighted that Instagram has showed rapid growth where people communicate, share photos, videos and use hashtags to reach wider audience. But, still this application is neglected by the researchers. The purpose of using hashtags is fully achieved by the public figures, who promote their latest shoots and also use hashtags while uploading them. This way, hashtags help their visual posts to reach wider audiences. Instagram is an application which is successfully managing both and getting a lot of popularity in different countries.

Snapchat is "image chatting application", which was launched in 2011. Now, it is constantly gaining popularity among younger generation and according to one blog, 86% of Snapchat users are between 13 – 37 years old. Billings et al (2017) mentioned that Snapchat has ascended rapidly, and quickly becoming the third most utilized platform of millennials. Whereas, according to Statista 2017, daily active Snapchat had 178 million users. It also mentioned that Snapchat is the most important network for U.S. teenagers because, of its exciting features. Also, it is giving tough competition to Instagram and other networks such as Twitter or Facebook. This is another photo sharing application which supported the use of hashtags for limited time. Currently, this application has stopped them. Hashtags were used to catch the attention on the images so users were conscious enough to pick their hashtags efficiently. The connection between hashtags and "snap" was exciting for the users; they took selfies, applied filters and effects available on Snapchat, put Snapchat hashtags and sent it to their story board. According to the report of Stelzner (2016), Snapchat is on a growth path and can be beneficial if users properly strategize. On the other side, Ike (2017) mentioned that Snapchat has prevailed as a power force among social media application which holds vital creative components.

Methodology

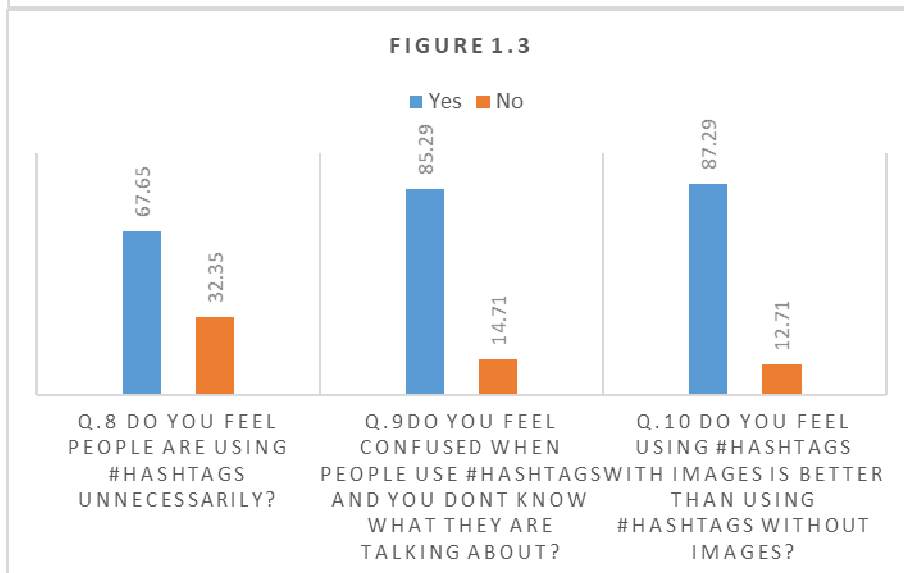
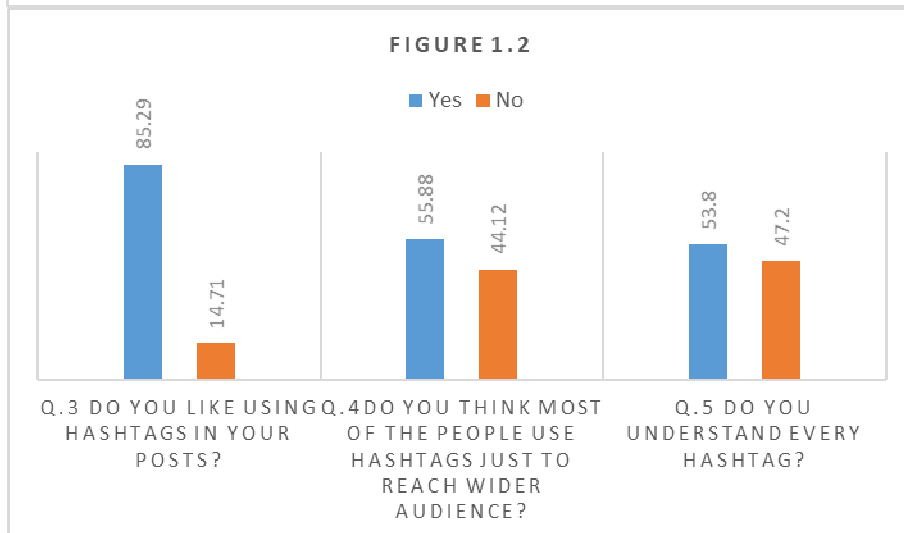
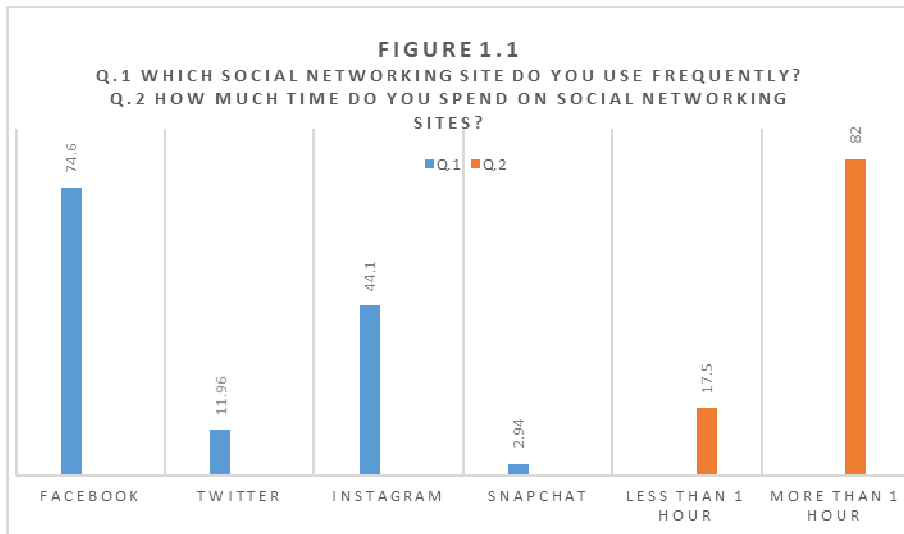
Survey and Data Collection

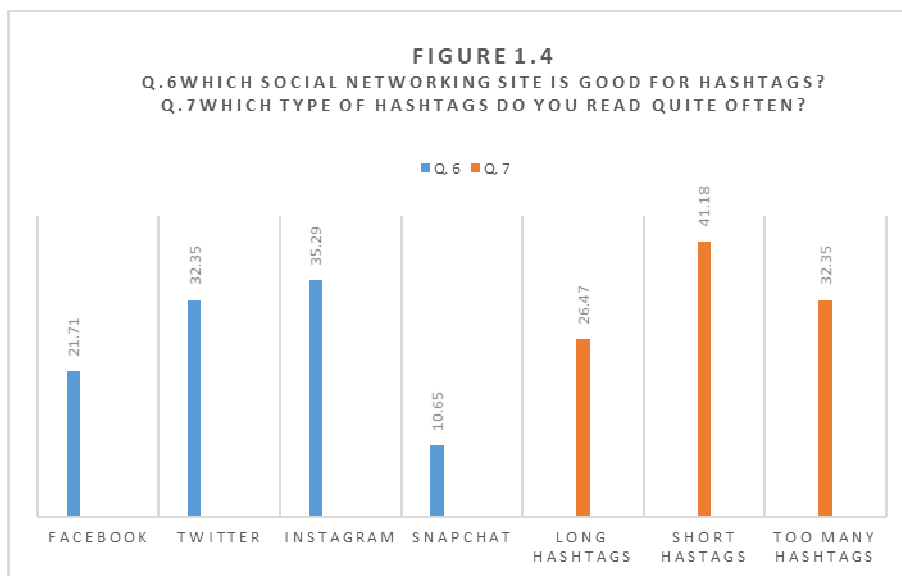
In the study, data was collected quantitatively and qualitatively. A survey questionnaire was administered by the researcher consisting ten questions about the social media and hashtags. After that, interview was conducted only for the Facebook users to know more about their hashtagging experience. In the survey questionnaire, 55 social media users participated. In structured interview, only 8 conveniently available Facebook users were examined. They were asked questions regarding their perception about hashtagging.

Results and Findings

Survey Results: Results of the study show that 74.6 % Pakistani social media users frequently use Facebook whereas Instagram is at second place with 44.1 % results. Second question showed that 82.6 % users spend more than one hour a day on these sites (Figure: 1.1). These two results answer first research question of the study and indicate that users in Pakistan are spending sufficient time on their favorite social media applications, and those are Facebook and Instagram. These results further indicate the users' likeability for the easily accessible social networking sites in Pakistan which allow them to interact and communicate. Here, the interesting factor is the connection between Instagram and Facebook. Instagram authorities are smart enough to link their users' accounts with Facebook which is widely accepted by Pakistani users. Another question was related to the usage of hashtags by Pakistani users and 85.29 % of the responses show that users like using hashtags in their posts and only 53.8 % responses show that they understand every hashtag (Figure: 1.2). 35.9 responses show that Instagram is good social networking site for using hashtags, while twitter stands second with 32.35%. Here, the perception of Pakistani users reveal that although they like Facebook but, presence of hashtags is good on Instagram and Twitter. 41.18 % show that they read short hashtags quite often (Figure: 1.3). 67.6% responses show that social media users feel that many people are using hashtags unnecessarily. 55.88 % responses show that people use hashtags to reach wider audience. 85.9 % responses show that users get confused when they read hashtags without the awareness of background knowledge of those hashtags. The last response directs the attention towards describing photos with the help of multiple hashtags. According to the results of the study, 87.29% responses show that using hashtags with images is better than using hashtags without images (Figure: 1.4).

All these results have paved the way to study further about the role of hashtags in different social media applications. The present study further explored the perception of Facebook users about hashtagging.





Interview Findings: Findings of the study confirmed that Facebook is the most popular social media application according to the 90% users who were examined. Also, the same percentage of users show that they are aware of hashtags and use it as fashionable trend to catch attention to their posts. Facebook users in Pakistan are enjoying it as latest style of writing. In interview, when asked why they use hashtags? Four participants answered that it is a latest trend on Facebook, their friends use hashtags so they also do the same. 50% that they use hashtags because they want to get attention as using hashtags make their posts accessible to audience who use the same hashtag. One participant answered that hashtags allow him to share his opinion with others. Another question about the Facebook as platform to use hashtags was asked. Three participants stated that it is a good platform that is still improving the hashtag styles as compared to Twitter. One of them further added that “Twitter is much organized and clear in the usage of hashtags whereas Facebook shows lack of clarity” in the meaning conveyed through hashtags. Two participants said that Facebook with hashtags is getting annoying as mostly people are using it commercially to promote their brands. One of them further added that famous brands create hashtags and also ask their customers to use same hashtags so that their brand get access to wider audience. When asked about clicking on hashtags only three agreed that yes they click on hashtags to know more information about the topic. Other participants said that they do not click on hashtags. One of them stated that on Facebook clicking on hashtag does not provide any extra information as it does on Twitter. So, he does not click hashtags on Facebook anymore. Participants were also asked about their understanding of every hashtag. Two of them answered that to understand every hashtag is impossible because of their limited vocabulary and knowledge. Two participants stated that people use different language words which makes them unable to understand hashtags completely. One participant stated that abbreviations and lower casing is horrible and creates misunderstanding most of the times. One participant said that one word hashtags without proper background information or any picture are difficult to understand. Because, they leave him clueless what to think and understand about single word. 80 % of the responses show that there is confusion among the users of Facebook about hashtags.

Discussion

Born as “topic marker”, hashtags have become a product of social media applications and writing practices (Caleffi, 2015). Increasing popularity of social media applications and usage of hashtags shows technological advancement in Pakistani context. The study explored famous social media application and perception of users about hashtagging in Pakistani context. The study shows that Pakistani users have started using hashtags for style and interaction on social media applications. Here, consideration about the several purposes of the hashtags’ usage is necessary because, social media users in Pakistan are using hashtags without complete understanding. It will help users to understand and to take full advantage of the hashtags. Several purposes such as “organizing information” is neglecting. Chang, (2010) stated that hashtags “pertain to information organization tasks and serve as a bottom-up user-proposed tagging convention” while Zappavigna’s purpose to make talk searchable is also ignored by Facebook users in Pakistani context. Another purpose to reach wider audience for popularity and interaction was discussed by Lomicka and Lord in 2016 which is justifiable by the users of Facebook. Whenever the hashtags are used on the Internet, one basic factor that is linked with them is “searchable talk”. Online hashtags should always be able to serve or function as searchable talk. Otherwise it would not justify the capacity or capability of online hashtags which are developed as Computer Mediated Communication.

Considering particularly the practice of hashtags on Facebook, it is still developing from various aspects. On Facebook, hashtagging is more of a matter of style and content often limited to “friends only” which are private posts. People use content hashtags while tagging one word to add style and capture the audience which specifically interests in that word. On Facebook, post is not restricted to 140 characters like twitter. Overall, in Pakistan, role of hashtags is still struggling to maintain its usage on Facebook. According to the users’ perception, the purpose of using hashtags is limited in Pakistani context. The study supports Shapp’s study (2014) about twitter hashtags and observing the similar stance in Pakistani context, it is strongly recommended to explore pragmatic function and writing style of Pakistani users. It will definitely help to develop strong understanding and to achieve multiple purposes through hashtags. If purposes are not fully achieved from various aspects then there is a risk of the extinction of such trends. According to the findings of the study, users responded confusion while asking about understanding hashtags. Also, the conventional purpose of searchable talk is also being neglected and ignored by the users of Facebook. The findings show Facebook users’ ambiguity with regards to their understanding of pre-defined rules set by Messina and twitter authorities. Usage of multiple and longer hashtags was warned by the authorities still, people are using it. Overall, the study confirms that usage of hashtags is definitely a “social-media generated fashion” and users in Pakistan are following this fashionable trend.

Implications and Future Work Suggestions

In Pakistan, the nation is developing craze for hashtags but to the best of researcher’s knowledge, role of hashtags in Pakistani context still needs to be explored from various aspects. The present study is limited to the perception of 50 active social media users of Pakistan. It cannot be generalized and needs to be explored for more comprehensive analysis. Facebook has mainly developed three types of hashtags short, long and mixed, each of them creates misunderstanding and confusion among users depending upon the way they are created. Thus, there is a need to explore pragmatic functions’ misinterpretation of Facebook hashtags.

Conclusion

Users are multiplying on Facebook and Instagram on daily basis which has made Facebook and Instagram most popular social media application in Pakistan. They follow latest trends on these sites and hashtagging is definitely one of them. The present study shows that there is a lack of understanding about hashtags which requires thorough investigation from multiple perspectives. The purpose of using hashtags should not be limited because it can cause ambiguity. Users of social media in Pakistan should be alert about the hashtag writing rules for the improvement in their hashtags and social media communication.

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Table 1. The capitals, assets and revenue in listed banks

	Total capital stock	Income of main business	Total assets
Pudong Development Bank	39.2	214.7	5730.7
Bank of China	459.4	3345.7	59876.9

Description for the above table.