

Expression through Hashtags on Social Media: #TellUsHowYouFeel

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## **ABSTRACT**

This pilot study was conducted to examine if respondents will report using hashtags relating to brands in the creation of social media content to express feeling. Since the hashtag phenomenon, hashtags can be found not only on social media platforms, but in print, on billboards and on television. Hashtags have allowed users to become digitally connected with one another. Many sources provided information about the growth of hashtags on social media and its effect on networking.

Students were surveyed on Spring Hill College's campus to answer 15 questions regarding online interaction and presence. Once data was collected, the figures were input into the SPSS Statistics software. Four tests were run on the collected data to analyze what respondents answered. The collection of results varied for many questions, resulting in inconsistency. Cronbach's Alpha coefficient supported the relationship between questions asked on the surveys. Unfortunately, crosstabs that were performed did not yield strong enough results to support the hypothesis.

## INTRODUCTION

The Internet has become an essential way for people to communicate with one another. Originally, the internet was serving as a means of finding information. With the social media craze taking over internet usage, companies and brands have become interactive with the general public on social media. Yet, will brand interaction with consumers on social media send off an unprofessional vibe to others?

To support why consumers feel a specific way towards brands on social media is the elaboration likelihood model. The elaboration likelihood model is a model of attitude change based on decisions and behavior. Elaboration is when a person uses a cognitive process to evaluate a situation. This means that a person will analyze a situation and what the best approach to take is when confronting a scenario. There are two different routes that attitude change follows. Typically, the central route is taken when elaboration is high, while the peripheral route is taken when elaboration is low (Petty & Cacioppo, 2010).

The central route takes more consideration, as a person will more carefully observe a situation before developing a judgment or attitude. The peripheral route is based more on instinct. A person will not assess a situation and will act based on initial judgment or their current mood. Whether a person will take a central route or peripheral route is influenced by motivation and capacity. As humans, we are more motivated to react centrally to situations of personal relevance. Sometimes, even though people want to react centrally, they may be mentally incapable. The reasons for this inhabitation could be factors within the situation or factors relating to the individual (Magee, 2012).

While Facebook is still actively used by brands, Twitter has started to become a major part of brand interaction with consumers. The audiences that brands are reaching through Twitter

are active social media users, interested in this hip and connective platform. Roditi stated that, “While 67 percent of Internet users use Facebook, only 16 percent used Twitter as of the end of last year- but it was the fastest growing social media platform” (2013). This means that Twitter’s overall activity is continuing to grow at a more rapid speed than Facebook and other social media platforms. Overall, each social media platform has its benefits and advantages that brands focus on to more effectively interact with and persuade consumers.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Through social media, consumers are able to more easily interact with brands in a positive way. Results and feedback can be instantly seen from brands that are actively engaging with their customers on social media. This engagement not only shows followers that the brand is active with their customers on social media, but also that the company is willing to network with its customers and hear customer feedback (Dumenco, 2013).

Some people find that digital communication is becoming a substitute for personal communication. Today, a simple “like” or “favorite” serves as one person telling another that they endorse or approve of whatever has been posted. These actions are equivalent to a person simply giving another a “thumbs up” to a statement or action they endorse. Through the use of “likes” and “favorites,” human interaction is almost robotic and impassive. Social media was developed for people to connect with one another, so why aren’t people commenting and using words to express their likes and dislikes? It is natural for humans to interact with one another, and verbal communication is essential (Emory Wheel, 2013). Hausberg (2013) states that, “At the end of the day, it does not really matter what you throw down on that social network, it just

matters how many likes you get,” confirming the lack of communication happening on social media (p. 2).

The absence of words to interact with one another has diminished the urge to read large paragraphs or even long sentences. People tend to search for answers to results in headlines or pictures rather than dissecting an article to find information. Twitter’s limited amount of characters per tweet works in their favor because digitally, people want to see information in the least amount of words as possible. Since fewer words are used, Twitter worked to find a way for users to access a network that could somehow link their tweet to others. By linking tweets, extended information could be found on the particular topic being posted (Chang & Iyer, 2012).

Social media sites have been trying to figure out a way to allow users to more easily locate information of their interest. When Twitter started to gain popularity among social media users, the symbol formerly known as the number sign or pound symbol was given a new identity: the hashtag (Chang & Iyer, 2012). Hashtags are an essential part of searching for one’s interests and helps connect numerous users digitally (Hausberg, 2013). Because of hashtags, brand tagging, and word choice on Twitter, statistics on national trending hashtags and the amount of tweets over time can be more accurately studied by researchers (Chang & Iyer, 2012).

In June of 2013, Facebook made a major announcement for social media users. Facebook was officially on the hashtag bandwagon, allowing its users to find content more easily. This also helps, “brands to better integrate it [content] into their wider social marketing activity” (Shields, 2013a, ¶1 ). Adding hashtags to Facebook allows users to connect with others who are not in their network. “The introduction of hashtags means marketers can better integrate Facebook to wider marketing activity on other social networks where they are already an established way of discovering content” (Shields, 2013a, ¶2). “Twitter Hashtag applications turn Twitter into

research and archive tools especially when it is integrated into applications that provide structured directories, advanced search, content organization, content presentation, and analytics. These functions are useful for people or businesses that need to organize and keep track of tweets that mention specific names, hashtags, keywords, or topics” (Chang & Iyer, 2012, p. 253). With the addition of hashtags to Facebook, Facebook is now part of the social media movement. The social media platform will receive all benefits that Twitter has found in hashtags.

While Facebook has an emphasis on the word “friends” to create a network, Twitter and Instagram create their network based on “followers.” As stated by Roditi (2013), Twitter has become form of social media that “...informs users on topics they’re interested in” (p. 2). Still, both of these platforms establish connections with consumers. Through social media, more international prospective students are able to interact with colleges and universities. A US non-profit research agency called World Education Services performed a study researching if social media reaches more international students than recruiting agents. Results showed that, in fact, social media reaches more students internationally than recruiting agents (Gibney & Grove, 2012). “Among respondents to a survey of nearly 1,600 prospective students from 115 countries, 56 percent follow social media accounts managed by US institutions before making application choices and 32 percent use social media to source information. Just 16 percent use agents” (Gibney & Grove, 2012, p. 2).

Hashtags are not only becoming popular on social media, but also verbally. Social media is slowly forming a new way for people to communicate both on the internet and face-to-face. In a recent skit done on *Late Night with Jimmy Fallon*, host Jimmy Fallon and special guest Justin Timberlake took hashtagging to a new level. The two were mocking social media users who have started using internet slang in their daily conversations. “Our lives, and our language,

have become dominated by social media” (Cimarusti, 2013, p. 2). Just as terms like “omg” and “lol” (originated from instant messaging) have become a part of many people’s vernacular, it is highly likely that the word “hashtag” will become a part of daily conversation.

Different companies will use hashtags to promote a particular product. Some of these campaigns even pay to have their hashtag as a promoted hashtag on the top ten trending list. For example, McDonald’s Twitter account uses #BigMac to promote their product to customers. By promoting this hashtag as a trending hashtag, consumers will hopefully see the campaign and join in promoting or giving an opinion (Roditit, 2013). Dumenco (2013) states that through the use of hashtags and brand tagging, he was able to interact with a company. He compares his interaction with the pancake house, IHOP, to an interaction he attempted to have with a Popsicle company years earlier. Dumenco explains that he mailed a hand written letter to the Popsicle Company about a minor complaint he had relating to a joke printed on the Popsicle stick. He waited for any form of feedback from the company, but never received news. Although Dumenco received no response from the company, this did not affect his brand loyalty, as he continued to purchase the product. Years later, Dumenco was checking trending topics on Twitter, and clicked on “#WhyIDidntTextYouBack,” to see what was filing into this hashtag. The first tweet he saw was from IHOP, and Dumenco responded to the tweet in a joking fashion. A few moments later, he received a tweet back from the company, playing along with his joke (Dumenco, 2013). Without social media, there would have been no immediate interaction with the brand. This casual engagement shows that the company is actually reading what consumers say instead of disregarding comments.

Companies also interact with consumers through call-to-action campaigns. Mercedes-Benz launched an adverting campaign that asked consumers to remix a song using only car

engine noises. People who made mixes were then able to share their completed project on social media with the hashtag #soundwithpower. The person who had the best track would have their mix featured in future Mercedes-Benz commercials. Using the hashtag allowed the company to listen to all of the mixes submitted. The marketing director at Mercedes-Benz, Andrew Mallery, stated that, “The campaign taps into some of our consumer insights that people [who own Mercedes’ vehicles] feel a strong emotional connection about their cars when they hear the engines start” (Shields, 2013b, p. 1). Mercedes-Benz used social media to promote their campaign, but was able to involve other media to the project. Both television and an online music mixing software helped consumers participate in this campaign and competition.

Hashtags can also be seen as a negative addition to social media. Hashtags followed by “problems” or “life” are examples of negatively used hashtags that are commonly seen (Emory Wheel, 2013). Another way that hashtags can be negative is through the use of poor promotion. Guinness beer decided to promote a new social media campaign through a television advertisement. Guinness purchased each advertising time slot during one commercial break to promote a new study that proved the importance of male bonding. The three and a half minute commercial was set up as an interview where UK talk show host, Jonathon Ross talked with author Danny Wallace and respected Oxford professor, Robin Dunbar. The three men talked about the research that was discovered. After the interview, Ross told the viewers to tweet using #RoundUpYourMates in their tweet. Unfortunately for Guinness, their plan for positive posts backfired. Twitter feeds were filled with negative comments about the interview, the length of the commercial, and the overall message. Some viewers even found the campaign sexist, considering it was only based on the concept of male bonding (O’Reilly, 2013).



Due to the information found regarding social media and hashtag expressions, it can be assumed that if a consumer uses social media to express an opinion about a product or brand, the consumer will use hashtags in social media posts. Social media posts are used by many as a public journal or an archive of thoughts that are sometimes not verbalized.

The Elaboration Likelihood Model helps to explain why consumers would post on social media and use hashtags to express how the consumer feels about a brand or product. There are two different routes that the brain can take when a person analyzes a situation using this model. Both the peripheral route and the central route are possible ways that the consumer could analyze a situation before taking action. The peripheral route would be a social media post that is based mostly on instinct, while the central route is logically thought through. Social media post can develop from either route, yet many users will post off instinct (peripheral). Posts that develop from a peripheral route will be less censored and more opinionated in regards to expression towards a brand or product. Perhaps the peripheral route allows brands to better understand how a consumer truly feels about a product (Magee, 2012). Although posts may be rash and aggressive about disliked products, impulsive posts written about favored products are positive promotion at a time of high customer satisfaction.

## **METHODOLOGY**

There were 55 students on Spring Hill College's campus surveyed in the cafeteria and library. Paper surveys were handed out through convenience sampling. Each student was asked to take the survey in one sitting and respond to the questions without talking with others. This allowed surveys to be unaltered by opinions of peers.

The majority of the questions asked were focused on hashtags and the participants' thoughts on their connection to others through social media and hashtags. The breakdown of the questions included three related to expression (Q1, Q9 and Q10), three related to linkage through hashtags (Q3, Q5 and Q6), two related to company connection (Q2 and Q8) and two related to everyday social media usage (Q4 and Q7). Each of these questions were selected to try and find results to support the hypothesis inquiring if consumers use hashtags to express their feelings towards a brand. Q1, Q9 and Q10 each focused on how or if the respondents express opinions on social media. Q3, Q5 and Q6 focused on whether respondents notice a linkage or feel digitally connected to others through hashtags. Q2 and Q8 asked about interaction with companies and brands on social media. Q4 and Q7 asked about basic social media activity to better understand how the respondent is using social media.

In a separate section were question that regarded the respondents, in general. The respondent was asked to identify classification and gender as basic inform. Then, the respondents were asked about social media activity: naming preferred social media, reporting years of activity on social media and noting the amount of time spent on social media daily. It was important to understand if the respondent was an active social media user since the research is focused on how people interact with social media.

Questions were asked in a scale, nominal, and ordinal format. All of the scale questions included Q1-Q10, and were ranked as follows: strongly agree (5), agree (4), neutral (3), disagree (2) and strongly disagree (1). Nominal questions were Q11-Q13, asking about classification, gender and preferred social media. Ordinal questions were Q14 and Q15 which increased in time from answer one to answer four. Although different formats were used throughout the survey, each was appropriate for the particular question being asked.

With all of the questions answered, four separate tests were run to analyze the results of the surveys. These tests included frequencies, descriptives, crosstabs and Cronbach's Alpha testing. Frequencies are tested to determine which questions were answered and if any of the questions went unanswered. The data also shows how respondents answered each question, displaying results in percentages and numbers. Descriptives are run to help the research make sure data was not enter incorrectly in regards to the scale. The minimum and maximum responses are given. This helps the researcher notice if the minimum is lower than one and the maximum is higher than five. If that is the case, the data entry needs to be fixed. This also allowed the researcher to view the average response and standard deviation. Standard deviation calculates the variety of responses to each question. When standard deviation is high, respondents answered differently, hence, when standard deviation is low, respondents answered similarly. Crosstabs are used to help the researcher understand how two different questions relate to or affect one another. These are typically used to determine if race, age, gender, education, etc., affect the respondents' answers. Finally, Cronbach's Alphas are run to determine which questions are similar and should be grouped together. The idea is to measure how the questions match up in relation to one another.

## **DATA ANALYSIS**

Data was collected through convenience sampling; therefore, the data cannot be applied to a population. The students surveyed were a majority sophomores and juniors, being a total of 69.1% of the questionnaire participants. Individually, juniors were 38.2% of the respondents, 30.9% sophomores, 16.4% freshmen and 14.5% seniors. The gender selection was similar to the male to female ratio at Spring Hill College, ending up with results of 67.3% female and 32.7%

male respondents. Instagram was favored by 43.6% of respondents, with Facebook following with 29.1%, Twitter with 23.6% and other social media (such as LinkedIn, Tumblr, Vine, etc.) with 3.6%. Most respondents were active on social media for one or two hours daily registering 43.6% of respondents. The respondents had a variety of answers and fit different social demographics.

Each question was answered by all respondents, so no questions were left with blank responses. Many of the questions had a wide range of responses. When it comes to tagging others in social media posts, 56.4% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the respondents will include a company or person in a post. Although, 49.1% of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with using hashtags in hopes that the company would read the post. Questions focused on respondents expressing opinions on social media, results were very different for expression of positivity verses expression of negativity. Respondents answered with 65.5% agreeing or strongly agreeing that the respondent uses social media to express opinions about liked products or people. On the other hand, respondents were not consistent when expressing opinions of dislike towards a product or person on social media. Almost half, 49.1%, of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed about posting negative opinions. Still, 25.5% of the respondents agreed with expressing dislike of a product or person on social media. Results varied among the different questions and some were not consistent.

The descriptive statistics that were run showed that nine out of ten questions had a minimum response of one (strongly disagree) and a maximum response of five (strongly agree). One question, regarding the use of Smartphones and social media, had a minimum response of two (disagree). The average for the majority of the questions was between a high two and a low three. This means that the average respondent disagreed or felt neutral about each question. After

analyzing the results, researchers can see that many questions were answered inconsistently. Responses varied from respondent to respondent. The standard deviation for nine of the ten questions ranged between 1.285 and 1.561. Again, the question regarding Smartphone social media usage differed from the rest of the results with a standard deviation of .686.

Crosstabs were run using gender, time spent on social media per day, posts based on disapproval, and posts based on approval. Specific crosstabs that were run were gender and disapproval posts, gender and approval posts, disapproval post and approval posts, time spent on social media and disapproval posts, and time spent on social media and approval posts. Only one of the crosstabs run resulted in mathematical connections. When a crosstab was run on the use of social media to express opinions about products or people liked and opinions disliked, Chi-Square tests produced positive results. These two questions are related, resulting in a .000 Pearson Chi-Square. This means that these questions are significant to one another. The other crosstabs run yielded a Pearson Chi-Square that did not mathematically connect the two questions together.

Finally, Cronbach's Alphas were run to determine the relationship between all of the questions. After running this test on all ten scale questions (Q1-Q10), the results yielded a .852 alpha coefficient, supporting the idea that the questions asked in the survey are related to one another.

## **RESULTS**

After convenience sampling, research and testing, results did not fully confirm the hypothesis: Respondents will report using hashtags relating to brands in the creation of social media content to express feeling. Data analysis showed that social media users favor tagging

brands to connect in social media posts, yet, users do not use hashtags to connect with brands. This is interesting, considering users do have an urge to connect with companies. Perhaps if users both tag brands and use hashtags to connect with brands, there would be more results in connecting. This links to the results showing that many users do not feel digitally connected to others through hashtags. The hypothesis also focuses on how users post on social media to express opinions about brands. Respondents stated that they only expressed opinions on social media for products or people that users favored. About half of the respondents stated that they do not post about products or people in a negative manner.

Some responses were surprising, such as preferred social media site. Considering that Facebook and Twitter seem to dominate in social media promotion and involvement from brands, it is interesting that Instagram was selected as the preferred platform from respondents. Also, most respondents do not use hashtags on promoted television shows. Considering many people are actively on cell phones or computers during commercial breaks, it is interesting to note that these people are not expressing opinions on social media platforms through promoted hashtags.

The alpha coefficients supported the survey questions' relevance to one another, which yielded a higher chance of determining if the hypothesis was plausible. But, crosstab relationships ultimately determine if a hypothesis can be supported. Since only one crosstab produced an effective result, the hypothesis was not supported through the data collected.

## **CONCLUSION**

From data analysis and results, researchers can conclude that the hypothesis was not fully supported. Although there were some responses on the surveys that could have led to a plausible

hypothesis, the tests run did not produce results that supported the hypothesis. There are many secondary sources that provide examples and information showing that consumers actually do use hashtags to express feelings towards a brand. Unfortunately, data collected could not support the cited information documented through research.

Much can be learned from this pilot study. If the researcher was to test this hypothesis again, perhaps more questions specifically focusing on social media expression could be used. Although it is important to know what the respondents think about hashtags, thoughts differ from actions. More questions need to be asked that relate to action and how respondents act on social media.

Over time, it is likely that this hypothesis can be easily proven. With the progression of social media over the years, it is only a matter of time until users understand the monumental successes in the creation of the hashtag. Hashtags have given social media a new way to organize, study, and archive information. Through hashtags, social media has created a network that links each user to one another through common interests. This network will continue to go as more users become active on social media.

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## Appendix A: Blank Survey

## Appendix B: SPSS Data