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Using Instagram Hashtags to Recruit Asian Youth Travellers

Social media has attracted a growing number of users over the past two decades. In response to this trend, academics have become interested in using social media as a sampling tool in their empirical research. This paper explores the use of Instagram as a sampling tool, given its increasing popularity among young people in particular. To investigate the practicality as well as the advantages and the challenges of adopting this tool, a qualitative study recruited Japanese and Korean youth travellers was used as an example. This paper makes a methodological contribution to tourism research and is expected to encourage discussions on the use of Instagram and other emerging social media tools for sampling in the field. Due to the diversity of social media usage for different generations and cultural settings and its continuous development, future studies are also suggested to extend the current discussion.

Keywords: Instagram, Sampling, Social media, Youth travellers

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Introduction

Identifying an appropriate sampling method is critical to collecting primary data for an empirical research project. Researchers in the tourism field have used various sampling methods, such as purposive sampling and snowball sampling, to conduct both qualitative and quantitative studies (Veal, 2011). Challenges are common in recruiting participants from target populations that are small and/or difficult to access; however, the development of the internet has provided researchers with alternative ways of collecting data (Baltar & Brunet, 2012). For instance, the number of social media platforms has increased worldwide, and they can be useful recruitment tools as they allow researchers to access hard-to-reach populations in a time- and cost-effective manner (Paris, 2013; Wolfe, Phillips, & Asperin, 2014). Among them, Instagram has become one of the world's most popular social media platforms (DataReportal, 2021), but there have been limited discussions on the practicality of using it as a sampling tool in tourism research. To fill this gap, by using a qualitative study recruited youth travellers from Japan and South Korea as an example, this paper explores its practicality as well as the advantages and challenges of utilising Instagram as a tool for research. The objectives of this paper are to provide methodological implications for future tourism research and to encourage discussions on this topic that may advance the research methods used in the field.

Literature Review

The emergence of the internet has provided alternative methods for collecting primary data. In particular, researchers have made extensive use of online surveys as a data collection tool since 2000 as they are faster and more economical than conventional methods (Fricker & Schonlau, 2002; Hung & Law, 2011). Beyond standard online tools, such as e-mail, online forums and blogs, social media is now also considered a useful alternative for recruiting study participants (Jennings,

2010). For example, despite reporting a lower response rate than that from onsite surveys, Paris (2013) successfully recruited backpackers through Facebook to participate in an online survey. Other researchers, such as Baltar and Brunet (2012), Wolfe et al. (2014) and Lim and Loh (2014), have also demonstrated the usefulness of Facebook as a sampling tool. In a recent study, Ma, Hardy and Ooi (2020) used WeChat, a popular social media platform in China, to recruit Chinese tourists for online interviews.

According to DataReportal (2021), the number of social media users worldwide has now exceeded four billion—more than a half of the world's total population. While Facebook is the most popular social media platform worldwide, Instagram, whose defining feature is a focus on sharing user photos and videos, reached one billion monthly active users in 2018, representing one of the fastest growing social media platforms in the world (Hartmans & Price, 2018). Notably, Instagram has significantly expanded its user base among younger generations (Anderson & Jiang, 2018; Huang & Su, 2018; Na & Kim, 2020). In fact, users aged between 18 and 34 represent the major share of Instagram's global advertising audience (DataReportal, 2021). In DataReportal's (2021) ranking of the world's social media platforms based on active user figures, Instagram is ranked fifth, with 1.221 billion active users after Facebook (2.74 billion active users), YouTube (2.291 billion active users), WhatsApp (2 billion active users) and Facebook Messenger (1.3 billion active users).

Given the expansion of the platform, several researchers in the field of tourism have focused on Instagram to explore various topics, such as destination images and branding and gender-based differences in hashtag use (e.g. Fatanti & Suyadnya, 2015; Gulbahar & Yildirim, 2015; Ye, Hashim, Baghirov, & Murphy, 2017); however, there have been limited discussions on the practicality of using Instagram as a sampling tool.

Recruitment Process Using Instagram's Hashtags

To explore the practicality of using Instagram as a sampling tool, a qualitative study conducted by the authors which recruited youth travellers from Japan and South Korea participating in a bilateral working holiday visa programme was used as an example. Instagram use in Japan and South Korea has increased significantly in recent years, especially among young people, and the number of users is expected to grow in the future (Kim, 2018; Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, 2018). The data suggest that Instagram would be an effective tool for sampling amongst young travellers.

To recruit participants for face-to-face interviews, purposive sampling was performed using Instagram's hashtags. A hashtag is a function within Instagram that allows users to peg their posts to a specific topic. This function allowed the researchers to identify posts relevant to the study topic. The younger generation on Instagram tends to use hashtags to describe everyday life, including interests related to social interactions, shopping and any information they seek (Chen, 2017; Lee, Lee, Moon, & Sung, 2015; Rauschnabel, Sheldon, & Herzfeldt, 2019; Sheldon, Rauschnabel, Antony, & Car, 2017). Due to the dispersion of the working holiday demographic, working holiday makers (WHMs) staying in the capital cities (Seoul and Tokyo) were targeted.

To begin the recruitment process, relevant hashtags in Japanese and Korean were identified through extensive observations of posts related to working holiday experiences. On Instagram, users can control their visibility by setting their accounts as either private or public. In private mode, only users who have been previously approved by the account holder can see her or his posts, whereas public accounts can be seen by anyone. Therefore, during the recruitment process, only Instagram posts created by public account holders were observed. The following hashtags were identified and used to recruit Japanese participants: 'wākinguhoridē' (meaning 'working holiday'), 'kankoku wāhori-chū' ('on working holiday in Korea') and 'hangug-wokinghollidei'

(‘Korea working holiday’). To recruit Korean participants, the hashtags ‘ilbon-worhol’ (meaning ‘Japan working holiday’) and ‘dokyoworhol’ (‘Tokyo working holiday’) were used.

After identifying users employing the selected hashtags, the researchers reviewed their posts, including photographs, and sought potential participants who appeared to meet the study’s selection criteria. To identify potential participants, the researchers examined not only the photographs and texts they posted but also their social interactions, such as their comments left on other people’s posts. These activities helped the researchers identify account holders who may meet the selection criteria.

The researchers then contacted the identified users through Instagram’s direct message (DM) function. DM is a private messaging feature in which only the sender and recipient can see the messages. In each message, an introduction to the researchers and an overview of the research project were included with a question seeking confirmation that the recipients were currently on a working holiday and staying in Seoul or Tokyo. To avoid language issues, the messages were written in the recipients’ native languages (i.e. Japanese or Korean). When messages were received from the contacted individuals, the researcher explained the research project again where required and ensured that the individuals met the selection criteria. Other questions received from them were also answered promptly. Once the contacted individuals agreed to participate in the study, interview dates and times were arranged. These processes took place using the Instagram application installed on the researcher’s smartphone. The interviews with the Japanese participants were conducted in March 2018, and the interviews with the Korean participants were conducted in May and June 2018. Figure 1 summarises the recruitment process used for this study.

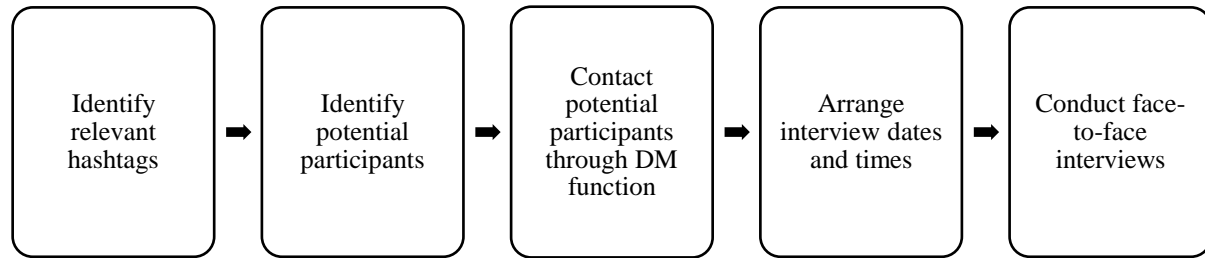


Figure 1. Instagram-based participant recruitment process

Outcome of the Instagram-Based Sampling

In total, the researchers sent DMs to 33 potential Japanese participants, and 18 individuals (54.5%) responded with interest in being interviewed. Among them, seven did not meet the sample criteria; they had already completed their working holiday or were living in cities other than Seoul; however, one participant introduced a friend on a working holiday visa, thereby increasing the sample size to 12. All Japanese interviewees were female. Care was taken to recruit both genders, but women outnumbered men among Japanese WHMs in Korea (Korean Statistical Information Service, 2019). The Japanese interviewees were aged between 18 and 32 years old, and the majority was aged mid-20s. Using the same method, DMs were sent to 26 potential Korean participants. Ten individuals (38.5%) responded and agreed to be interviewed, but one did not meet the sample criteria. A few respondents recommended friends, increasing the sample size to 12. In the Korean sample, two participants were male, and the others were female. The Korean interviewees were aged between 22 and 26 years old, and the majority was aged early 20s. Table 1 summarises the outcome of the Instagram-based sampling.

Table 1. Summary of Instagram-based sampling

| | Japanese | Korean |
|---|----------|--------|
| Number of DMs sent | 33 | 26 |
| Number of responses | 18 | 10 |
| Number of respondents who met the sample criteria | 11 | 9 |
| Number of respondents who participated in the study | 11 | 9 |

Note: One Japanese and three Korean WHMs were introduced by the participants recruited through Instagram, so the total number of study participants increased to 12 for each group

Advantages and Challenges of Using Instagram as a Sampling Tool

Although there was no initially set specific number of participants that the researchers aimed to recruit, 10 participants for each group were expected. As discussed in the previous section, the successful recruitment of target populations through Instagram in this study demonstrates the usefulness of the hashtag function to obtain a worthy sample size in a qualitative study as well as the overall practicality of using Instagram for sampling hard-to-reach travellers. There were several observable advantages of using Instagram as a recruitment tool.

The first was the ability to extract specific targets needed for the research by using the hashtag tool. The study targeted both Japanese and Korean youth travellers on the working holiday programme. In addition, the sample was limited to individuals who were staying in the capital cities (Seoul and Tokyo). The hashtags helped the researchers identify targets, as they often indicate the user's location, and the photographs provided additional information in relation to the hashtags. Researchers employing other social media platforms, such as Facebook and LinkedIn, have often used the site's group function (e.g. Brickman Bhutta, 2012; Leighton, Kardong-Edgren, Schneidereith, & Foisy-Doll, 2021; Paris, 2013). Although this method is regarded as effective, it

is possible that a researcher investigating hard-to-reach populations may not be able to find a relevant target group within the platform's group. Conversely, the researcher may receive too many responses for a study that only requires a small sample. Considering these shortcomings, Instagram's hashtag function has the potential to provide researchers with an alternative or supplemental sample recruitment tool. Additionally, as the current study demonstrated, this method can be useful when finding an initial contact from the target population, which may allow researchers to conduct snowball sampling.

The second advantage is that this method allows researchers to perform additional sampling in a relatively easy and timely manner. Given the ease of contacting potential participants individually, a researcher can follow the same steps to contact potential participants until the required number of participants is recruited. This approach provides considerable flexibility in recruiting participants, especially when follow-up interviews are required and/or there are time and budget constraints.

The third is that Instagram enables prompt communication between a researcher and potential participants, which may shorten the time spent on recruitment. A large percentage of Instagram users accesses the site on a smartphone (Anderson & Jiang, 2018). As Lim and Loh (2014) emphasised, recruitment via a mobile phone application allows both parties to respond to messages in their spare time and while on the move. In fact, all recruitment in the study took place on smartphones, and the researcher received a reply to the initial DM from many of the contacted individuals within two days.

An additional advantage is the method's broad applicability. As with other social media platforms (Baltar & Brunet, 2012), recruiting via Instagram is not limited by geographical constraints. In this study, although different hashtags were used for recruiting Japanese and Korean

participants, the same recruitment process was used for both groups. This suggests that Instagram's hashtags could be useful in international comparative studies, especially when different locations are involved, as they offer a consistent recruitment method.

Despite the advantages, there were some challenges as well. Face-to-face interviews were conducted in a real setting. Due to the anonymous nature of online communication, the researchers assumed that respondents would not readily trust them and might suspect a scam or some other malicious activity (Evans & Mathur, 2005). Thus, the researchers made several efforts to gain the trust of potential interviewees. As an interview is a social interaction, it is essential to develop trust and rapport between the interviewer and interviewee (Hiller & Diluzio, 2004). The researcher's Instagram account was set to public before contacting potential participants so that the contacted individuals could investigate the researcher before interacting. Second, the researcher posted photographs representing her academic activities, such as conferences, in addition to photographs of her daily life. Third, the researcher's scanned business card was attached to each direct message. The researcher's profile was available on the university's researcher database, so this allowed the contacted individuals to check the researcher's profile. These strategies were expected to help potential participants trust the researcher's identity and the legitimacy of the research. In fact, several participants acknowledged that these approaches had encouraged them to respond to the initial DM and to participate in the study. This approach may apply to a recruitment process using other social media platforms, such as Twitter; however, it should be noted that more than half of the individuals whom the researchers contacted did not respond. Although the researchers did not expect to receive responses from all individuals, this outcome highlights the need for the continuous development of superior methods for approaching potential participants.

Additional challenges were caused by the users of social media. Although the number of young users is increasing, not all young people use social media, and different users have their preferred social media platform (Anderson & Jiang, 2018). In the case of the current study, although the Instagram user base has been growing in Japan and South Korea, not all Japanese and Korean WHMs use Instagram. As online sampling methods may suffer from a lack of representativeness (Evans & Mathur, 2005), the particular social media platform requires careful consideration so that the platform is relevant to the research project. It is worth noting that trends in social media change rapidly, including the popularity of a given platform and the emergence of new platforms (Anderson & Jiang, 2018; Rajendra-Nicolucci & Zuckerman, 2021); therefore, combining multiple social media platforms would allow researchers to cover a broader target population.

Conclusion

In this paper, the practicality of using Instagram as a sampling tool has been explored by presenting a study in which Japanese and Korean WHMs were recruited to participate in face-to-face interviews. Based on the outcome of the recruitment, this study suggests that Instagram can be a practical tool for recruiting study participants, including hard-to-reach populations, and offers an alternative sampling tool for tourism researchers. While researchers who have adopted social media platforms for sampling have most often used Facebook, Instagram was used, which has a rapidly growing user base of young people. Due to Instagram's global popularity, the sampling process used for this study can be applied to different research topics and locations for recruiting study participants.

Although the study contributes to the methodological discussion in the tourism literature, it must be noted that social media usage patterns are different in other countries and for different

generations, and the global environment of social media changes rapidly. In addition, the discussion in this paper is based on a small-scale qualitative study. Thus, evaluating the method's effectiveness for a large-scale qualitative study or quantitative study requiring a large number of participants was beyond the scope of this research. This paper highlights the need to utilise social media for sampling both for qualitative and quantitative studies to extend the current findings and to encourage more discussions on the effectiveness of Instagram and other social media platforms as sampling tools. Moreover, researchers in specific cultural settings are encouraged to use other growing and popular social media platforms, such as Twitter, Weibo, WeChat, Line, LinkedIn and WhatsApp, to further extend the discussion

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