



# Forming Group Identity through Shared Hashtag on Facebook: A Preliminary Study on Malaysian Universities

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## Abstract

The hashtag has become an essential part of communication for those who Tweet and use Facebook. It allows media users to share information and interact with each other as part of a series of overlapping social networks. This article examines how Malay, Chinese and Indian Malaysian universities students use the hashtag to form a group identity. The analysis is based on the used and sharing of hashtags by students in Facebook during several catastrophic events which took place between 2014 and 2015 in Malaysia. Social categorization, social identification, and social comparison were analysed in this research. This study analysed data from a survey of 255 Malaysian universities students. Findings disclosed that most of the Malay, Chinese and Indian students were aware of the official hashtag used on Facebook and majority they agree that it shows their support to the group when posting with the official hashtag. Most of the Malay, Chinese and Indian students felt that they are part of the group when they use the official hashtag, and as the in-group, the use of official hashtag was part of the shared information, being supportive, and cooperative to the community.

*Keywords:* Hashtag, Facebook, Group Identity, Social Identification, Social Comparison

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## 1. Introduction

Research on communication technology is growing over the years. It has been proven that one does not have to be physically present in order for a fruitful communication or community building to take place [1]. In order for social media to work, it has to incorporate "collective efforts and interdependence between two or more people" [2]. Today, the social media provides people across the world a space to express themselves in forms of communication, enjoyment and also political expression [3]

As the world moves towards a more technological advancement era, social networking sites such as Facebook has up their effort for "collective action" as it enables their subscribers with similar ideals and values to come together on a platform that is not only cost-efficient but also efficient for both communication and information dispersion [4]. Facebook has a tremendous presence online. By August 2013, Facebook also known as (FB) showed a record of having 1.5 billion users [5]. That goes to show the vast reach and popularity of the gigantic social networking site. A large number of its users (approximately 90 percent) belong to the age group of 18-29 years old (a safe

indication of most of them being students [5]. Hence, this information reveals that a huge percentage of students in their tertiary education are extremely familiar with Facebook and its users. Students have seen login into the social networking site several times in a day with most of them "practically" living with Facebook [6].

The various activities carried out by Facebook users, such as getting connected to others, updating their status or stating their preference out loud virtually has opened doors to researchers to study how people get abreast with one another, the diffusion of the social network as well as how are identities disclosed can now be investigated. Critics argue that these social networking sites do not reflect a sense of the "real world", but this cannot possibly be true when millions of people across the globe has integrated their online and offline world so much so that that their online world now reflects their offline world [7].

In 2013, hashtags were introduced in Facebook as a new feature that allows its users to "follow specific topics of conversation within a social network's ever-changing stream of user comments" [8]. The efficiency, affordance and interesting nature of hashtags enable users to engage in hashtags on the daily note. Hashtags allow users maximized organization and navigation through tons of information available on the Internet to a specific topic of

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their liking or interest. Apart than serving as a social bookmark, researchers [9,10,11,12] also realized that the hashtag serves as a community badge. Hashtag allow its users to “identify and participate in online chats designated by the tag” [12]. In other words, it brings a community of same liking and background together. All a user got to do is include the hashtag in his or her conversation to identify that he or she is a part of that community or group. Hence, the duality of a hashtag allows it's to be both a "tag of content and also the tag of a community". The community role of a hashtag presents in its functionalities to identify a community, form a community, and allow users to join a community – "a role never played by traditional social tags" [13].

This research examines the formation of group identity through shared hashtags on Facebook among Malay, Chinese and Indian Malaysian universities students. The analysis is based on the usage and sharing of hashtags by respondents in Facebook during several catastrophic events which took place between 2014 and 2015 in Malaysia. Social identity theory is applied to analyse the 3 important stages in the formation of group identity; social categorization, social identification, and social comparison. The research will reveal the norms and social practices that guide behaviour in social media environment when media users participate in the mass performance of hashtagging in Facebook as being part of a particular group.

## 2. Literature Review

Social identity theory was developed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner [14] in 1979 and has grown into a demanding study across discipline ever since. The underlying definition of this theory is a sense of belonging to an individual towards a group she belongs [15,16] and in defining "who we are" [17]. Tajfel and Turner [14] proposed that the groups (e.g. social class, family, football team etc.) which people belonged to were an important source of pride and self-esteem. Groups give us a sense of social identity: a sense of belonging to the social world.

The theory provides an insight of group relations and how each group forms its unique identity. It is how we see us as similar and others as different (i.e. “in-group” and “out-group”). What makes a group different is the identity it carries and acclaimed on mutual symbiosis that bond them with specific determinants of collectively shared features created and accepted by the members [18,19,20]. Our exploration of the literature of real and virtual group identity unfolded extensive empirical researches and theoretical approach associated with the three components of social identity theory on social categorization, identification, and comparison [15,20,21,22,23,24]. These three components described people consciously or subconsciously create or join any group they have the interest or benefit them [19].

In search for a common ground, information explosion has extended the researchers’ interest to social media and other social networking sites, a virtual space for users to

widen their networks with the deliverance of messages instantaneously and form virtual group aggressively to gratify their needs and justify their motives [25,26,27,28,29]. Jenkins [30] illustrates the empowerment of social media strongly stimulates “participatory culture” which allows users to update status and news in real time that interest them. How the message is perceived, influenced, and have impacted on the users is coined by McLuhan as “the medium is the message” which permit social media users to interact simultaneously and participate actively.

The focus of this research is to investigate how university students shared hashtag on Facebook to form the group identity. Born on Twitter, the use of hashtags has now spread to other social media sites (like Instagram and Google+ in 2001, or Facebook in 2013) [31]. According to Caleffi [31], hashtags are no longer used as a categorization method (easier to find tweets related to a specific subject) but also a tool that facilitates spreading of information which fosters affiliation with the related values and communities. Facebook groups and Facebook pages offer users interaction opportunity to connect with people, the group keep track of news or issues, display news, pictures, videos, comment, respond, follow, or sharing information with other members outside the group or different group, promoting business product, services by organizations, corporations, private business, and so forth [19,32]. Needless to say, this show that people can belong to more than one group with multiple identities [15,19] in six different social identities on family, friendship, lifestyle choices, nationality, professional identity, team spirit and shared interests [17] while Deaux [33] proposed five types of social identification on ethnic and religious identities, political identities, vocations and avocations, personal relationships, and stigmatized groups that differentiate us from others. These multiple identities can be energized concurrently [23].

As a discussion platform and a virtual meeting place, Facebook, Twitter, and other social media provides a new wave of interaction for those who have the interest in or base on the topic/issues of discussion or political messages which favour the followers to engage in the discussion of retweeting or response.

## 3. Methodology

This study employed quantitative research method. A total of 255 university students aged 18 and above were surveyed, of which all are required to have a Facebook account. This is to ensure that they have participated and used the hashtag on Facebook.

The questionnaire for this study has been segmented into three main sections in order to achieve the research objectives. Section A focused on respondents’ profile where questions were related to demographical profiles such as gender, age, race and academic qualification. Section B analyses the duration of Facebook usage by the

respondents and the frequency the respondents shared hashtag on Facebook.

Section C asked questions related to the formation of group identity base on the 3 stages in the Social Identity Theory; Part A: Social Categorization, Part B: Social Identification, and Part C: Social Comparison. In Part A, respondents were asked about the hashtags that they used and shared in Facebook during several during several catastrophic events which took place between 2014 and 2015 in Malaysia, for example, #MH370, #LowYat, and others.

In Part B, the questions were focused on social identification where respondents were probed about how they feel when they shared hashtags with other Facebook users and if the respondents identified themselves as part of the in-group. In the last section Part C, the respondents were asked how they feel about other users on Facebook that shared similar hashtags and if they viewed or categorize the other users as part of the in-group or the out-group. The data was collected and analysed using *Statistical Package for Social Sciences* (SPSS) version 20.0.

## 4. Findings and Discussion

### 4.1 Demographic

From the demographical profiles, we have interviewed 255 respondents via survey questionnaires where 64% is female. Among the highest percentage of the respondents who are studying at the local universities, 53% of the respondents aged between 18 – 22 years old.

We have interviewed 59% Malay respondents, followed by the Chinese 31% and Indian 10% respectively. It is noted that 59% of the respondents have used Facebook more than a year. 61% of the respondents spend frequent time on Facebook mainly for communication purposes (43%). The period of using the hashtag on Facebook shows that 93% have used it more than 3 years. However, the frequency of respondents using hashtags on Facebook shows modest results with 50% ranging from occasionally to very frequent hashtagging.

### 4.2 Ethnic and Social categorization

The majority of the respondents, 69% is familiar with the hashtag associated with MH370 incident compared to other incidents for example MH17, Low Yat, and the East Coast flood. Respondents from the 3 main ethnic groups, Malay 57%, Chinese 34% and Indian 8% rated #MH370 as the most seen hashtag on Facebook. However, only 46% respondents actually used and shared hashtags on Facebook and #MH370 is rated as the most used hashtag on Facebook with 40%. Those who used and shared the hashtags on Facebook can be regarded as those who potentially see or categorize themselves as part of a group.

Table 4.1  
Demographic Information of sample (N= 255)

Items	Information	n	%
Gender	Male	91	36
	Female	163	64
Age	18-22	135	53
	23-27	118	46
	28-32	2	.8
Ethnic	Malay	150	59
	Chinese	80	31
	India	25	10
Period using Hashtag in Facebook	Less than 1 year	7	3
	1 year	6	2
	2 years	5	2
	More than 3 years	237	93
Hashtagging on Facebook	Very Frequent	15	6
	Frequently	37	15
	Occasionally	75	30
	Rarely	43	17
	Very Rarely	85	33
Period using Facebook	Less than 1 year	104	41
	1 year	32	12
	2 years	28	11
	More than 3 years	91	36
Time spend on Facebook	Very Frequent	58	23
	Frequently	97	38
	Occasionally	66	26
	Rarely	18	7
	Very Rarely	16	6
Activities when using Facebook	Share post on own thoughts	45	17.6
	Share other people's post	53	20.8
	Communication	110	43.1
	Share pictures/videos	34	13.3
	Plan/join event	7	2.7
	Join groups	6	2.4

Table 4.2  
Most seen and use hashtag on Facebook between ethnics

	Ethnic	#MH 370	#MH 17	#lowyat	#prayforpantaitimur	None of the above
Hashtag most seen on FB	Malay	101	1	0	4	44
	Chinese	61	4	2	4	9
	India	15	0	3	0	7
Hashtag most use on FB	Malay	67	1	0	2	80
	Chinese	24	3	4	2	47
	India	12	0	2	0	11

#### 4.3 Ethnic and Social identification

In analyzing the social identification, there were several statements that reveal the students' understanding based on the shared and usage of hashtags among the students on Facebook. 31% of Malay students disagree that they feel they should use the official hashtag only because they are part of the group. However, 41% of Chinese and 36% of Indian students agree that they would use the official hashtag to show they are part of the group. As a result, most of the students agree that by using the official hashtag on Facebook, it shows that they supported the group. This can be seen by 45% of the Malays, 64% Chinese and 40% of Indian students agree on the use of an official hashtag.

Table 4.3  
Shaping Group Identity using Hashtag (#) on Facebook between ethnics

	Ethnic	Disagree (n)	Neutral (n)	Agree (n)
Use only the official hashtag because I am part of the group	Malay	31% (47)	39% (59)	29% (44)
	Chinese	30% (24)	29% (23)	41% (33)
	India	36% (9)	27% (7)	36% (9)
Use only the official hashtag because I support the group	Malay	29% (43)	26% (39)	45% (68)
	Chinese	25% (20)	11% (9)	64% (51)
	India	36% (9)	24% (6)	40% (10)
Use official hashtag so people will not be confused	Malay	25% (38)	31% (47)	43% (65)
	Chinese	25% (20)	26% (21)	49% (39)
	India	20% (5)	36% (9)	44% (11)
Constantly updates using the official hashtag	Malay	33% (49)	39% (58)	29% (43)
	Chinese	45% (36)	34% (27)	21% (17)
	India	32% (8)	40% (10)	28% (7)
Posts with the official hashtag are more recent/ updated	Malay	18% (27)	46% (69)	36% (54)
	Chinese	25% (20)	39% (31)	36% (29)
	India	24% (6)	44% (11)	32% (8)
More cooperative to the community when posting with official hashtag	Malay	24% (36)	39% (58)	37% (56)
	Chinese	31% (25)	33% (26)	36% (29)
	India	32% (8)	40% (10)	28% (7)

When asked whether using the official hashtag would help people not to get confused, the results show the majority (43% of Malay students, 48% Chinese and 44% of Indian students) agree on it. This study also found that among 255 students, the majority of Malay (32%) and Chinese (45%) students disagree that they constantly update only using the official hashtag. However about 40% of Indian students being neutral on this matter.

On the other hand, both Malay (36%) and Chinese (36%) students agree that posting with the official hashtag by the in-group is more recent and/or updated. About 44% of Indian students being neutral on this matter. This is also supported by the results of 37% of Malay and 36% of Chinese students agree that they feel it is more cooperative to the community when they post with the official hashtag on Facebook.

#### 4.4 Ethnic and Social comparison

When comparing with the in-group, the results revealed that most of the out-group disagree that posting with an official hashtag is more trustworthy and/or honest. 53% of them were Chinese students while 25% were Malay and 20% Indians. On the other hand, when analysing whether posting with the official hashtag is more relevant and/or appropriate, the results show 34% Malay, 41% Chinese and 24% Indian students agree on this matter.

This study also found that most of them felt that posting with the official hashtag is more recent and/or updated. This result strongly shows that they are in-group with 41% of Malay, 40% Chinese and 24% Indian students. It also indicated that 30% Malay, 36% Chinese and 28% of Indian students felt that the person is more cooperative to the community when he/she posts using the official hashtag.

Both Malay and Indian students (40% and 52%) were not sure if the person has more confidence when postings with the official hashtag. This is in contrast with Chinese students (40%) which disagree that the person has more confidence postings with the official hashtag. However, when asked whether postings with official hashtag shows that particular person is more supportive of the fellow group, the results indicated that 36% of Malay, 50% of Chinese and 44% of Indian students agree that it shows their support as the in-group.

Table 4.4  
Comparison between the in-group and out-group on Shaping Group Identity using Hashtag (#) on Facebook

	Ethnic	Disagree (n)	Neutral (n)	Agree (n)
Feel the person that posts with official hashtag is more trustworthy/honest	Malay	25% (37)	51% (77)	24% (36)
	Chinese	53% (42)	29% (23)	19% (15)
	India	20% (5)	64% (16)	16% (4)
Feel the person that posts with official hashtag is more relevant/appropriate	Malay	25% (38)	41% (61)	34% (51)
	Chinese	34% (27)	25% (20)	41% (33)
	India	16% (4)	60% (15)	24% (6)
Feel the person that posts with official hashtag is more recent/updated	Malay	26% (39)	33% (50)	41% (61)
	Chinese	35% (28)	25% (20)	40% (32)
	India	8% (2)	68% (17)	24% (6)
Feel the person is more cooperative to the community when posts using official hashtag	Malay	22% (33)	48% (72)	30% (45)
	Chinese	33% (26)	31% (25)	36% (29)
	India	20% (5)	52% (13)	28% (7)
Feel the person has more confidence when posts using official hashtag	Malay	30% (45)	40% (60)	30% (45)
	Chinese	40% (32)	35% (28)	25% (20)
	India	24% (6)	52% (13)	24% (6)
Feel the person is more supportive to the fellow groups when posts using official hashtag	Malay	30% (34)	41% (62)	36% (54)
	Chinese	23% (18)	28% (22)	50% (40)
	India	20% (5)	36% (9)	44% (11)

## 5. Discussion

Understanding the use of the hashtag is an essential on how group shaped the identity using the official hashtag on Facebook that upholds the uniformity and integrity of the group postings on the predicted patterns of group behaviour. The results show that most of the Malay, Chinese and Indian students were aware of the official hashtag used on Facebook besides other hashtag shared on it. They also identified other familiar hashtag used on Facebook for example #prayforMalaysia. Postings with official hashtag on Facebook helped the in-group to be more supportive and cooperative; hashtag allows it users to "follow specific" topics of conversation [8].

The majority of the students agree that it shows their support to the group when posting with the official hashtag, hence, it is undeniable that hashtag has become an essential part of communication for Facebook users. It allows us to share information with each other. As this indicated by Feitosa and Salazar [15], and Hogg and Williams [16], it defined the sense of belonging of an individual towards a group he/she belongs. Most of the Malay, Chinese and

Indian students felt that they are part of the group when they use the official hashtag. The findings for this study is also similar to Tajfel & Turner's theory on social identity that indicated which people belonged to were an important source of pride and self-esteem and how they form its unique identity.

Although most of the respondent felt that they are part of the group and they will use the official hashtag to show their support, the result shows that it did not indicate that they should constantly update only using the official hashtag. Nevertheless, almost all of Malay, Chinese and Indian students agrees that postings with official hashtag are more recent and/or updated. This is similar with Jenkins [30] which illustrated the empowerment of social media strongly stimulates "participatory culture" that allows the user to update their status or other information that interest them.

The social comparison suggests the differences of intergroup relation in processing the communication or discussion whether to agree or disagree with the opinion of others. This can be seen when the out-group respondents namely Malay, Chinese and Indian disagree that only official hashtag is more trustworthy and/or honest. Users can still get related information from another hashtag on Facebook. How a group differed from others is based on the distinct features that a group has set on the social behaviour of emotions, beliefs, values, culture, and attitudes on mutual understanding and social acceptance that are agreed upon. From these comparisons emerge group norms, group structure, and intergroup relations" [34] that shape group identity. The results show that Malay, Chinese and Indian students agree that the person who used the official hashtag explained that he/ she is more cooperative to the community.

On the other hand, the results show that only Chinese students disagree about the confidence using the official hashtag. While both Malay and Indian students were not sure on this matter. In short, the in-group knows well the use of official hashtag as shared information, being supportive, and cooperative to the community. Students aware that hashtag allowed it, users, to "identify and participate in online chats designated by the tag [12].

## 6. Conclusions

In a nutshell, Hashtag on Facebook is more likely used as a platform for information and knowledge sharing, and trending. By adopting the favourable behaviour, the study shows the in-group shared common goals and values that shape the group identity with the ability to work together and feels the strong bond between members. They shared unique characteristics in which they identify strongly.

In priority order, the in-group highly advocate characteristics of self-help and support group, recent/updated information, relevant/appropriate information, and lastly cooperative to the community. As Beaupre and Hess [35] aptly put it, "People hold more positive views towards members of their own group and them, therefore, attribute more positive traits to in-group members than to out-group members".

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