Hashtag Marbled Monday: A Webometric Analysis of Academic Special Collections Outreach on Instagram

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Introduction

Increasingly, scholarly communication in the field of libraries and special collections evaluates the use of social media platforms to promote resources and collections. Most studies involving special collections and social media have been published in the last ten years, with more publications occurring in 2016 and 2017 than in past years. Many reports reflect the importance of social media as a platform to create broader online visibility for special collections and access to their collections. Much attention has been given to blogs, Facebook, Tumblr, and especially Twitter. However, relatively little research has been conducted on the use of Instagram as a social media platform for academic or other special collections. Instagram engages a younger, more diverse audience than other social media platforms (Salomon, 2013), making it an ideal candidate for academic special collections looking to engage their institution's student body.

This study used webometric analysis to assess the most successful strategies for engaging Instagram users in academic special collections. Data were collected from five academic special collections Instagram accounts to analyze their activity during the month of April 2018. Data considered in the study include average number of likes per post, average number of hashtags per post, and most common hashtags and content. The results of this analysis may serve as a recommendation for best practices for academic special collections interested in, or already using Instagram as a platform, to engage students and other Instagram users in their collections.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this webometric analysis is to identify successful academic special collections' Instagram outreach strategies by analyzing content and follower engagement.

Research Questions

R1. Which academic special collections' Instagram accounts have the most followers?

R2 On what day of the week do these special collections post content?

R3. Of these special collections, what types of visual content are most common?

R4. Of these special collections, what types of hashtags are most common?

R5. What Instagram activity, including number of posts and hashtags, generate the most likes?

Definitions

Instagram: "the brand name of a photo-sharing and social media software application, launched in 2010" (Dictionary.com, 2019).

Quantitative Methods: Babbie (2010) and Muijs (2010) explain that "Quantitative methods emphasize objective measurements and the statistical, mathematical, or numerical analysis of data through collected polls, questionnaires, and surveys, or by manipulating pre-existing statistical data using computational techniques. Quantitative research focuses on gathering numerical data and generalizing across groups of people to explain a particular phenomenon" (USC Libraries, 2017).

Social Media: "websites and other online means of communication that are used by large groups of people to share information and to develop social and professional contacts" (Dictionary.com, 2019).

Delimitations of the Study

The study analyzed Instagram activity of selected academic special collections in April 2018. The study does not attempt to determine whether Instagram is the best choice of social media platform for academic special collections, nor does it argue the benefits of social media platforms in general. The value of creating an Instagram account should be at the discretion of individual special collections. Furthermore, the study was limited to the Instagram platform. Sharing of special collections Instagram content on other social media platforms, or the use of "regram" applications, were not considered.

Assumptions

It is assumed that number of followers and average number of likes per post can be accurately determined and is a fairly reliable indicator of degree of success.

Importance of the Study

Among the articles found during the research process for this study using *Library & Information Science Source* and *Library, Information Science & Technology Abstracts* databases, no previous study of special collections Instagram activity was located. While a few studies mention Instagram as a potential social media platform for special collections, none of these measure successful strategies for sharing special collections content on Instagram. This study builds on previous literature that points to the benefits of social media platforms for special collections and aims to provide a model for best practices for other academic special collections seeking to engage online users through Instagram.

Literature Review

Scholarly literature in the last decade has examined the role of social media platforms in increasing the visibility of libraries and special collections. Many of these publications focus on Facebook and Twitter, with some others considering Tumblr and Flickr as useful platforms for libraries and special collections. Augustyniak and Orzechowski (2017) report on the Othmer Library's participation in various social media platforms. The authors emphasize the importance of social media platforms contributing directly to the institution's mission statement. Furthermore, it is important that special collections select social media platforms that best serve that institution's user demographics, as well as provide the best platform for the institution's content. According to the authors, "Each platform and its user community have specific expectations and standards when it comes to posts" (para. 12). Length of text and visual components in posts should vary according to the platform being used.

Salomon (2013) examines the usefulness of Instagram as a platform for engaging students in library resources. Salomon reports that the UCLA Powell Library chose Instagram as a social media platform "because it reaches a young, urban, and diverse demographic" (para. 1). Unlike other platforms, which rely more heavily on text content, Instagram posts should be foremost visually engaging (Augustyniak & Orzechowski, 2017; Salomon, 2013). Relying primarily on a post's visual appeal, Instagram content should also make use of brief textual components to engage students by encouraging their input (Salomon, 2013). Instagram is an ideal platform for engaging young, diverse audiences and for displaying visual content.

Review of Published Research

Recent case studies in the field of special collections report on the use of social media to promote collections.

Garner, Goldberg, and Pou (2016) published a case study detailing a collaborative social media campaign by the New York Academy of Medicine Library. The campaign #ColorOurCollections was launched using platforms Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and Pinterest. Responding to the popularity of adult coloring books, the Library engaged social media users by inviting them to print, color, and share digital images from the collection. Using Twitter Analytics, Facebook Insights, Hashtracking, and WordPress Analytics, Special Collections analyzed the campaign and found that some of the most important factors in the success of the campaign were timing, early recruitment of participating institutions, ease of participation, and interactivity (Garner, Goldberg, & Pou, 2016).

Lawrimore (2017) reported on a similar case study that examined efforts at the University of South Carolina at Greensboro's Special Collections to engage students on social media platforms Twitter, Tumblr, and Facebook. Twitter was identified as an ideal platform because of the young age demographic of its users, and because the University had a Twitter presence. Through carefully planned implementation, and with the cooperation of the University's social media specialists, Special Collections successfully used these platforms to engage a broader community of users.

Lawrimore (2017) reported that Special Collections found social media to be "an essential resource if archives and special collections wish to reach and grow our audience and our audience's understanding of the valuable work we do" (p. 16). Both Garner, Goldberg, and Pou (2016) and Lawrimore (2017) case studies reported on the key role social media played in engaging students and online users in their special collections.

Empirical research reports also indicate the importance of a social media presence for special collections. Griffin and Taylor (2013) conducted a study in May 2012 that analyzed publicly available data from the social media profiles of 125 special collections units of American Research Libraries member libraries. Platforms analyzed in the study were blogs, Flickr, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, iTunes U, Google+, Pinterest, and HistoryPin. The authors calculated the success of ARL special collections by calculating Return on Investment (ROI) and found that moderate success was achieved in advertising events and collections, but that special collections had little success using social media to engage external users (Griffin & Tomaro, 2013).

More recently, Anderson (2015) conducted a quantitative analysis to discover how United States libraries and special collections are using Tumblr. Rather than weighing the benefits of Tumblr as a platform, the study collected data at three points during a one-year period on library type, start date, number of posts, average posts per day, type of post, and other descriptive information. The findings of the study showed a growing presence of all types of libraries and special collections on Tumblr (Anderson, 2015).

This study takes a similar approach to collecting quantitative data concerning special collections' use of Instagram. Like Anderson's study, this study does not seek to make recommendations on the usefulness of adopting social media platforms but rather investigates how special collections engage Instagram users with posts, hashtags, and other activity. Apart from Salomon's 2013 news article, which reports on the benefits of adopting Instagram to engage a younger, more diverse group of online users, no articles or studies focusing solely on Instagram were found in the literature. Furthermore, those articles and studies that do mention Instagram as a possible social media platform did not investigate the most successful strategies special collections can implement in using Instagram as a platform for their collections.

Building on Salomon's (2013) recommendation of Instagram as a successful platform for a student demographic, and adopting similar methods used by some studies to analyze other social media platforms, this study analyses successful Instagram activity by academic special collections. The results of the study may be used by other special collections who are currently using or interested in using Instagram as a platform to engage students and other Instagram users.

Methodology

The study used webometric analysis of selected academic special collections Instagram accounts. Data collected includes average number of likes per post, average number of hashtags per post, and most common hashtags and content. The results of the study indicate successful strategies for academic special collections seeking to engage Instagram users in their collections.

Data Collection

An initial search was conducted using the Instagram Application Programming Interface (API) with search terms "special collections" and, separately, "archives." Results showing profile accounts, not hashtags, were selected for consideration. Results were further refined to include only those profiles that linked to their academic special collections home page, or that could be verified as an extension of an academic special collection using an online search.

Of the profiles located using search terms "special collections" and "archives," twenty-five were verifiable as belonging to academic special collections. Five accounts were selected from these results as having the highest number of followers. These accounts were @fitspecialcollections of the Fashion Institute of Technology Special Collections and College Archives; @uispeccoll of University of Iowa Special Collections at the Main Library; @um_spec_coll of University of Miami Special Collections at Merrick Library; @unlvspeccoll of University of Nevada, Las Vegas Special Collections and Archives at Lied

Library; and @jeffarchives of Thomas Jefferson University Archives and Special Collections at Scott Memorial Library. Data were collected from these five accounts measuring activity for the month of April 2018. Average number of likes per post, average number of hashtags per post, and common hashtags and content were collected for analysis.

Data Analysis

The five special collections' Instagram accounts were analyzed to determine Instagram activity over a one-month period. Data produced by the special collections during April 2018 were collected on May 6, 2018, to allow time for Instagram users to find posts using hashtag searches and to like posts. Collecting data on each post as it was published would have yielded much lower numbers. Average number of likes per post for each account was measured and compared to each account's average number of hashtags per post and total number of posts. Data were also collected to discover the most common hashtags, content, and days of the week to post among all five special collections accounts. The content of each post was analyzed based on two categories: visual content and type of post.

Visual content was further described using the following categories: bookbindings (cover, spine, fore-edge, endpapers, and fold-outs); ephemera covers; event photos; event posters (digital and photos of posters); illustrations (sketches and print); maps; manuscripts; archival photographs; and snapshots of people (special collections professionals and visitors).

Type of post was described using the following categories: collections; event or exhibit; holiday (holidays, days in history, national calendar days); reposts; professional spotlights (library professionals, students, and visitors); university archives; and posts featuring weekday-themed hashtags. Categories within visual content and type of post were not mutually exclusive. For example, a post might feature an ephemera cover with a print illustration. Likewise, holidays and weekday posts were used to highlight items from collections.

Limitations

The study was limited to the search capabilities of the Instagram API and search terms "special collections" and "archives." Some academic special collections, repositories, or archives may not use the terms "special collections" or "archives" in their Instagram profiles and therefore were not retrieved for this study. Other factors that may have impacted the study are how long a special collection has had an Instagram account and the size of an institutions' repositories and student bodies. Those institutions with longstanding Instagram accounts and large repositories and student bodies may have more followers than smaller institutions or those with newer Instagram accounts. Furthermore, the results of this study are contingent on when data were collected. Over the course of only a day or two, an already popular Instagram account will likely grow in followers and its older posts receive more likes.

Results

R1. Which academic special collections' Instagram accounts have the most followers?

The Fashion Institute of Technology (FIT) Special Collections and College Archives' @fitspecialcollections had the highest number of followers at 13,400 with a total of eighteen posts and average number of hashtags per post of 12.67. The University of Iowa (UI) Special Collection's @uispeccoll had 9,537 followers with a total of twenty-two posts and average number of hashtags per post of 12.67. The University of Miami (UM) Special Collections' @um_spec_coll had 3,461 followers with a total of ten posts and average number of hashtags per post of eleven. The University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV) Special Collections' @unlvspeccoll had 3,346 followers with a total of nine posts and average of 7.18 hashtags per post. Thomas Jefferson University (TJU) Archives and Special Collections' @jeffarchives had 3,317 followers with an average of 7.4 hashtags per post.

FIT Special Collections and College Archives had the highest average of likes per post at three percent of total followers. The remaining four special collections' accounts each had an average of likes per post of two percent of total followers.

R2. On what day of the week do these special collections post content?

Among all five accounts, Monday through Thursday were the most popular days for posting content, Monday holding the highest number of posts at thirteen (Figure 1).
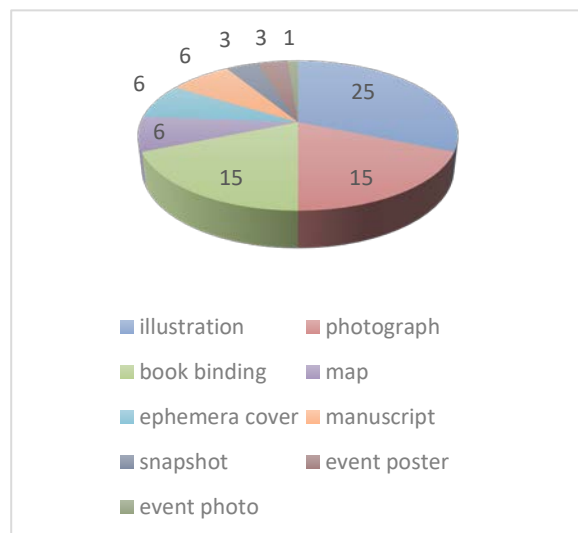
Figure 1. Number of Posts per Weekday
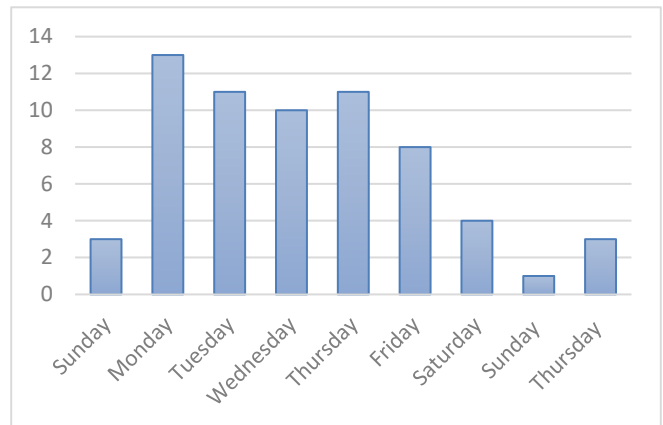
R3. Of these special collections, what types of visual content are most common?

The most popular visual content (Figure 2) among all five special collections accounts were illustrations at thirty-one percent, followed by bookbinding and archival photographs at nineteen percent each.

**Figure 2. Types of Visual Content**

R4. Of these special collections, what types of hashtags are most common?

The most popular types of posts (Figure 3) were those featuring collections items at fifty-four percent and posts featuring weekday hashtags at fifteen percent.

Weekday hashtags included #marbledmonday; #maniculemonday; #manuscriptmonday; #miniaturemonday; #typetuesday; #worldofwednesday; #publishersbindingthursday; #foldoutfriday; #foreedgefriday; #sundayfunday; and #endoftheweekpapers. Only #marbledmonday occurred more than once among all five archives with a total of four hashtags. The most popular hashtags among all five accounts were #specialcollections totaling fifty-four hashtags, #iglibraries totaling twenty-nine hashtags, and #librariesofinstagram totaling twenty-two hashtags.

Figure 3. Types of Posts
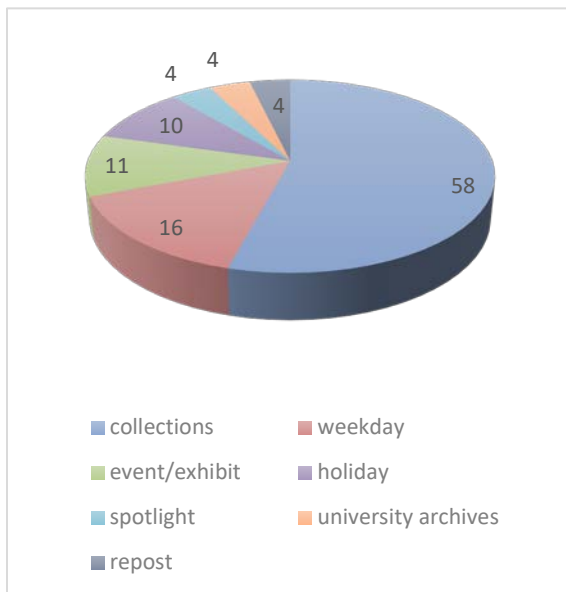
R5. What Instagram activity, including number of posts and hashtags, generate the most likes?

As indicated in Table 1, the greatest number of posts is not related to the greatest percentage of likes. Sites with the lowest number of posts generated the same or greater percentage of likes than sites with the highest number of posts.

Table 1. Number of Posts and Percent Likes

Account name	Total # posts	% likes
uispeccoll	22	2%
fitspecialcollections	18	2%
um_spec_coll	10	2%
unlvspeccoll	9	3%
jeffarchives	5	2%

As indicated in Table 2, the greatest number of hashtags is related to the greatest percent of likes. Sites with the highest number of hashtags generated the highest percent of likes.

Table 2. Number of Hashtags and Percent Likes

Account name	Ave. #hashtags	% likes
unlvspeccoll	13.56	3%
fitspecialcollections	12.67	2%
um_spec_coll	11	2%
jeffarchives	7.4	2%
uispeccoll	7.18	2%

Discussion and Conclusion

Instagram was designed for photo sharing, so it has a stronger visual element than other social media platforms that incorporate more textual content. Its visual nature makes Instagram an ideal platform for special collections to showcase attractive items in their collections. Illustrations, book bindings, and archival photographs comprised sixty-nine percent of total visual content analyzed in the study. These posts are eye-catching and likely to attract an audience who may not already be familiar with a special collections repository.

"Snapshot" posts featuring photos of special collections professionals and visitors received only four posts among all five special collections accounts and an average of 42.75 likes, relatively few compared to the overall average of 143.33 likes per post.

On one hand, keeping these posts to a minimum may sustain the interest of followers who are not affiliated with special collections. However, none of the four snapshots included current students.

The University of Iowa Special Collections' @uispeccoll published a "spotlight" post on April 19th celebrating a student worker's thesis defense but the post did not include a photo of the student. Photos of students might encourage them to follow special collections' Instagram accounts and engage with special collections in general. Still, there is something to be said for aesthetics. Like it or not, an illuminated manuscript or vintage photograph will draw more attention than a snapshot of a librarian at work.

Consistency of aesthetic is something FIT Special Collections, UNLV Special Collections and Archives, and TJU Archives and Special Collections share. FIT Special Collections' @fitspecialcollections featured strictly vintage fashion photographs, design sketches, and catalog advertisements. UNLV Special Collections and Archives' @unlvspeccoll featured mainly vintage materials related to Las Vegas travel and entertainment. TJU Archives and Special Collections, traditionally a medical university although it now offers some other academic programs, posted only vintage and antique items from their university medical collections. While many special collections may not own illuminated manuscripts or vintage Christian Dior, frequently highlighting certain collections may boost visibility.

The findings of this study suggest that using a variety of hashtags, thoughtfully selecting visual content, and engaging in hashtag trends may be some of the most useful strategies special collections can employ when using Instagram as a social media platform. The study found no correlation between higher numbers of total posts and average likes per post (Table 1). However, the average number of hashtags per post seems to be related to the average number of likes per post since UNLV Special Collections had both the highest average number of hashtags per post (13.56) and the highest average of likes per post based on total number of followers (Table 2).

Popular hashtags #specialcollections, #iglibraries, and #librariesofinstagram may be widely used among many libraries and special collections on Instagram so using these hashtags alone may not help posts stand out in Instagram searches. Since hashtags function as metadata, assigning a variety of hashtags to every post makes posts more findable using Instagram's API search capabilities. The five special collections Instagram accounts analyzed in this study used a range of hashtags that not only described posts as special collections or library content, but also used hashtags with a variety of information such as regional themes, holidays, and institutional names to make their content discoverable to Instagram users who may not be searching specifically for special collections.

Using hashtags and content with calendar day and weekday themes was another common strategy among the five special collections accounts analyzed in the study. Calendar days featured in their April posts included Easter, national pet day, national siblings day, and the anniversary of Abraham Lincoln's assassination. Each of these "holidays" was hashtagged accordingly: #easterbonnet; #easterbunnies; #retroeaster; #abrahamlincolnassassination; #nationalpetday; and #nationalsiblingsday. The visual content of these posts, of course, fit the occasion. For example, UNLV Special Collections and Archives' @unlvspeccoll published an April 2nd post of a cover of Fabulous Las Vegas from 1954 featuring an illustration of two "bunnies."

While holiday hashtags did not comprise a significant percentage of the five accounts' total posts, weekday hashtags made up fifteen percent of total posts and combined, calendar day and weekday hashtags made up nineteen percent of total posts. Hashtag #marbledmonday was tagged by each of the special collections accounts except for @fitspecialcollections.

Tagging #marbledmonday allows special collections an opportunity to showcase old and rare books with attractive marbled endpapers or fore-edges. Like most of the weekday hashtags used by the five special collections, #marbledmonday is specific to special collections.

Other weekday hashtags specific to special collections included hashtags like #endoftheweekpapers which featured attractive endpapers. The only weekday hashtag that was not specific to special collections was @um_spec_coll's #worldofwednesday which had no apparent relationship to the post, a ca. 1850 map of the Franklin Expedition. However, using weekday hashtags that are not specific to special collections may draw new followers.

Apart from weekday hashtags, another trending hashtag was #mapsinthelibrary, occurring a total of seven times. Hashtag #mapsinthelibrary is a trending Instagram "challenge" associated with #librariesofinstagram. Following current trends in library and special collections' hashtags is an excellent strategy for special collections looking to increase the visibility of their Instagram content. Capitalizing on visually engaging collections and utilizing the power of hashtags as metadata are strategies that all five of the successful special collections Instagram accounts took advantage of effectively.

All five special collections accounts follow one another on Instagram. Following other special collections on Instagram encourages interaction, sharing followers, and helps archives keep abreast of the latest trending special collections hashtags and activity. Connecting with other special collections on Instagram creates an online community with similar interests and goals and makes reaching Instagram users more achievable.

Future studies in special collections on Instagram might explore how smaller special collections are connecting and reaching their student bodies and other Instagram users. Smaller institutions might also shed light on how special collections divide social media responsibilities among staff and manage time devoted to posting on social media. The larger institutions evaluated in this study may have fewer challenges in these areas because of larger budgets and staff resources. Nevertheless, their content and hashtagging may offer a model for special collections of any size interested in using Instagram as a platform for outreach.

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