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Linguistic Landscapes on Instagram Around Campus

Introduction

Inspired by the article “The Study of the Linguistic Landscape as a New Approach to Multilingualism” written by Gorter and the book “Introducing semiotic landscapes” by Jaworski and Thurlow we have read and discussed about in class, I have been thinking about how people interact within both physical space (geological locations) and virtual space (online platform), and with others in those spaces. Today, 88 percent of U.S. adults use the Internet, 77 percent own a smartphone, and 69 percent use social media (Smith 55). These numbers have increased remarkably over the past ten years with the development of technology and increase of accessibility and are likely to continue increasing in the future. With the popularization of internet, people nowadays share their feelings and thoughts not only on meetings in person, but more often on social medias like Facebook and Instagram every day. Interestingly, 30 percent of these social media users have tagged their location in a post (Zickuhr 20). This practice has a term called location-based social media, which is a subset of volunteered geographic information and has become the principal means by which people share locational information online (Goodchild 35). I traced the posts including sentiments and emoji people use on their Instagram posts and see whether there is correlation between the physical space and sentiments and the change of sentiments when they move around

geographically. The range of the physical space is University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign campus area and the sample population are Instagram users who live on campus, students mostly. As part of the sample population and familiar with campus landscapes, I am able to understand the posts with an inside view.

Methodology

My original plan is to grasp data using Natural Language Processing technique, to collect data from Instagram, and to analyze them. But I realize that the sample size is too small for the collection and modelling since limited access to all Instagram users on campus (some of the users would set their account private) and lack of words in the post. Some users of Instagram including myself just post photos but do not write description of the it. Therefore, it is hard to analyze the sentiment of the users when they were posting the picture only from the content and filter used on the photos. At the end, I decided to browse over the original posts to gain a more rounded understanding of the users' posts.

Instagram allows users to search for posts at the various locations and hashtags(geotags) and I searched for more than thirty places on campus, including Main Quad, Grainger Library, Undergraduate Library, and Illini Union and et., where events were held frequently, and people would gather together, and snapshot the photos with caption and comments(Fig 1.). In addition to pin the locations, I traced the posts of several users and observed their mobile patterns around campus and relate the content to the sentiments. Learning from the format of Social Media in Northern Chile, I include several photos in this research paper to provide direct visualization.

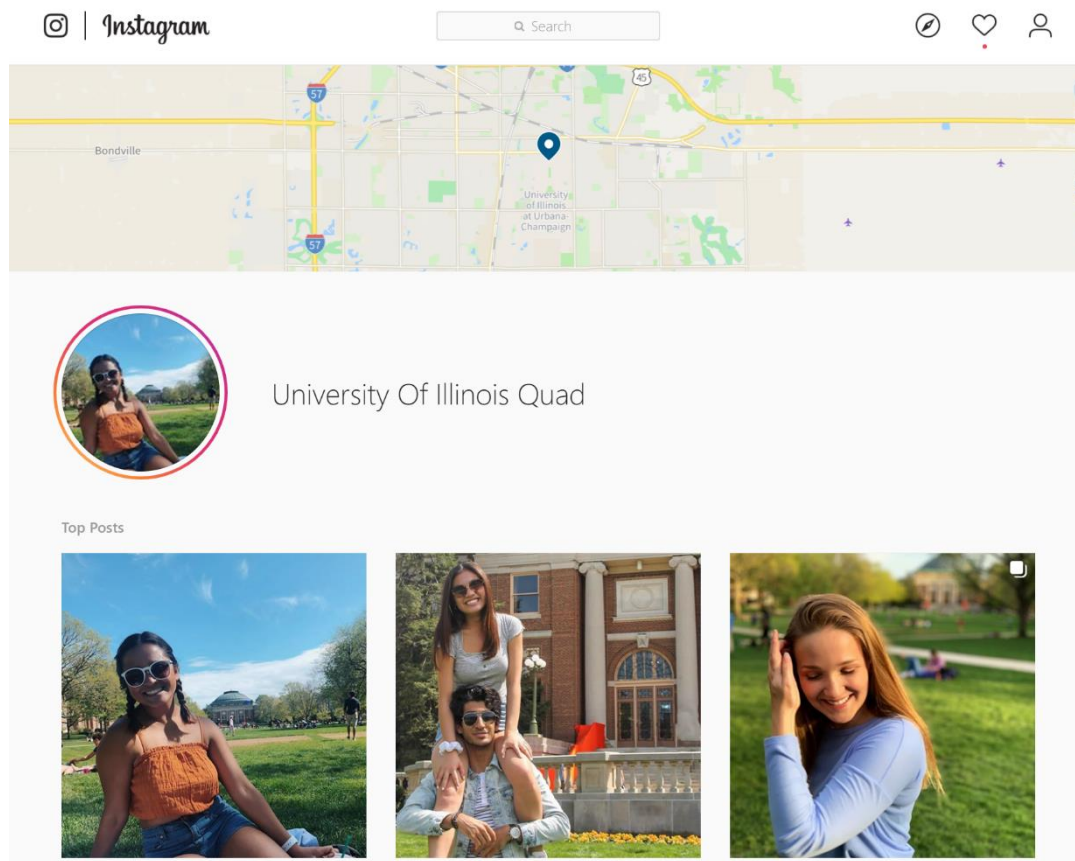


Fig 1. The web page I use for tracing the location of posts.

Content



Fig 2. The left side of the photo was taken in March when the weather is warming up while

the right side of the photo was taken two weeks before. The obvious contrast between the weather conditions and the population sitting on the Quad demonstrates the impact of the weather on the students' behaviors.



Fig 3. The advertisement of Moon Gala on the quad before Mid-Autumn Festival, which is a Chinese traditional festival during the September for the fullest moon viewing in a year. Due to large number of Asian students and inclusive environment on campus, there are many foreign events and activities from time to time.

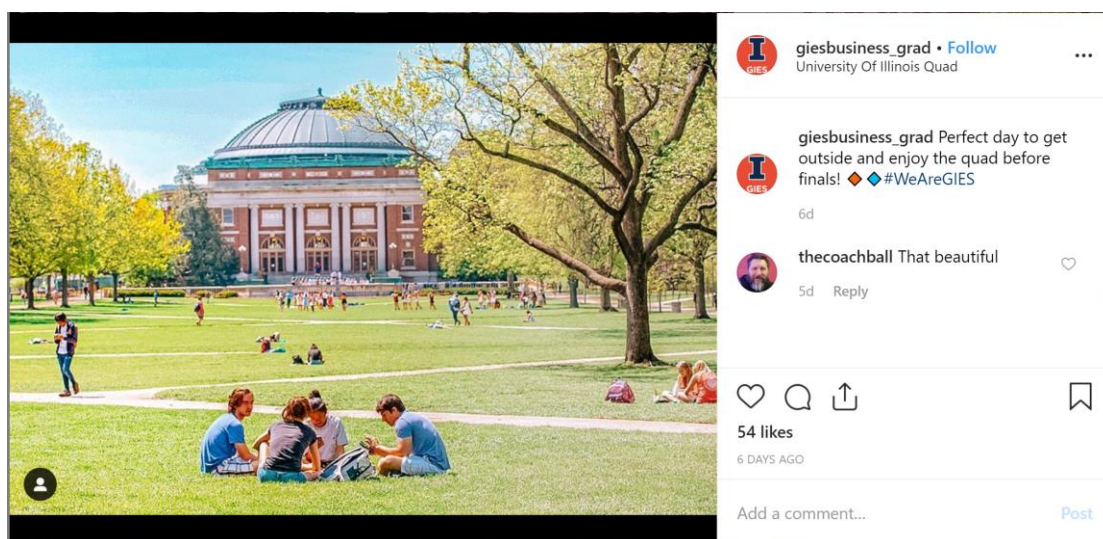


Fig 4. Sunny day on Main Quad. Students sitting together on grass and chat under the sun.



Fig 5. Grainger Library at a Grey Day on the Engineering Quad.



Fig 6. Photo of a kid with two skulls on the second floor of the Davenport Hall on Main Quad.

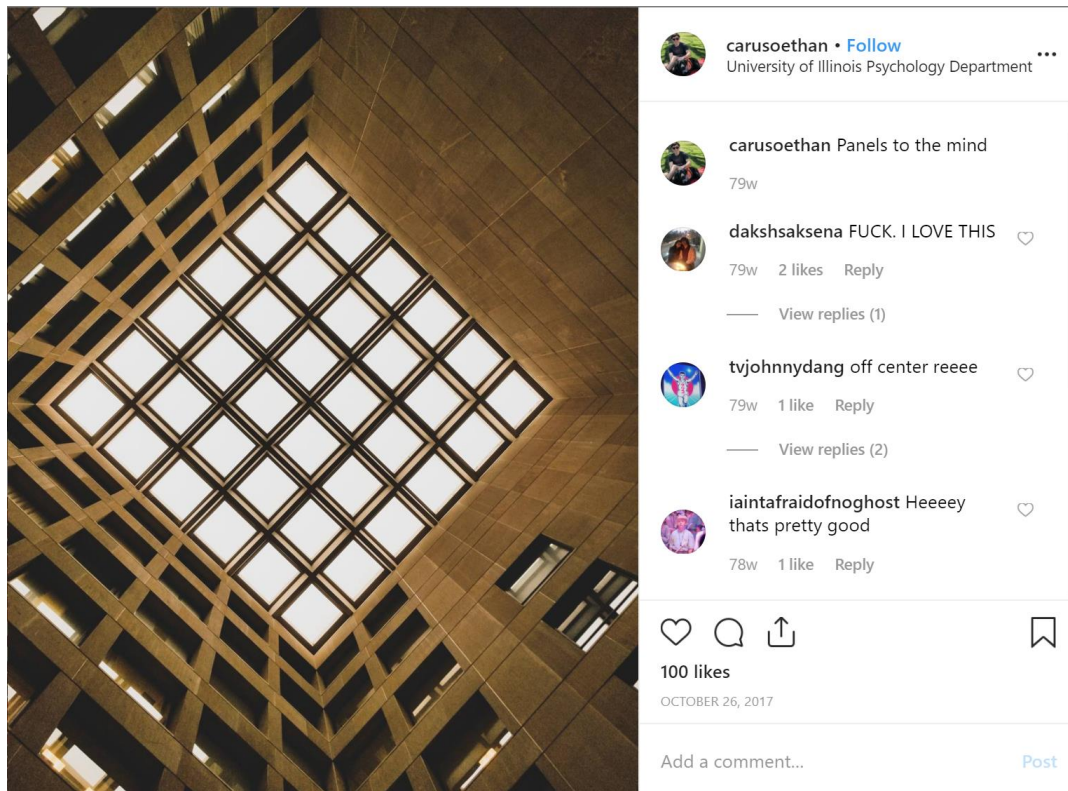


Fig 7. The roof of the Psychology building. The outside of the psychology building is plain and made of concrete. I have never been in the Psychology building before but the special design of the roof is delightful and attractive.



Fig 8. The elevator's sign in the Illini Hall, which is the Statistics building. As a statistic

major student often go to the Illini Hall, the elevator sign marks the location of mailbox where statistics students hand in homework and papers. From the perspective of an insider, I read and understand the photo differently from those who are not statistics major students.

Analysis

At the very beginning, I assumed that engineering students overall would be more stressful than students in other colleges because of the overheard heavy workload. And then I intentionally compared the posts about similar topics like class, relaxation, natural environment, shared at the engineering college and at the LAS college to find evidence for support of the hypothesis. But unexpectedly, there is barely difference between posts in these two areas. There are several possible explanations for the lack of difference. First of all, my assumption of engineering students suffer more than other students could be wrong, and generalization of sentiments based on majors is not accurate. There are many other factors affecting the sentiments of the posts like weather illustrated in Fig 4 And Fig 5. Secondly, it is possible that students are posting their routines selectively. Thinking of the motivation to share own location on Instagram, Instagram users are showing part of their daily life to others and construct an identity on social media. So, the posts only demonstrate part of their life which they are willing to disclose to others and may not be representative. Thirdly, each photo tells a story maybe only the photographer could read. Implicit meanings behind the photos are hard to decrypt and empathize with. Thinking from the perspectives of the users, each photo is related to the things one experienced before or experiencing at this moment.

After that, I looked over several public users' posts on campus without any assumption of their majors, genders, ethnicity, or year. I found that the posts of one individual are mostly

consistent around specific topics tracing the timeline. I followed a UIUC student who is a food blogger and often shares photos of food around campus with the location. The sentiments of the posts are mostly delightful and optimistic. The way people interact with the virtual space mirrors part of how they interact with the physical space and the moment they pin the location when sharing the posts is the overlap of physical space and virtual space.

In the Gorter's article "The study of the Linguistic Landscape as a New Approach to Multilingualism", the definition of linguistic landscapes varies according to the context. With the help of technology, we are able to see the location, content, and size of the linguistic landscapes where satellite could observe. However, various platforms where people can say things freely adds complexities to concept. The language online is much more volatile than physical concrete structures and people can change the online linguistic landscape much more frequently and easily. Instagram users are able to edit their posts after and change the description and could be changed or deleted at any time.

According to the article "Location-Based Social Media Behavior and Perception: Views Of University Students", Location-based social media, like Instagram, a specific type of volunteered geographic information, is increasingly being used as a spatial data source for researchers in geography and related disciplines. "Many questions have been raised about volunteered geographic information data in terms of quality and contributors. The online space are much more dynamic and social media does not require identification for the account. Thus, the reliability and truthfulness of data is not guarantee. While a number of studies have explored users' demographics and motivations for contribution to explicitly geographic forms of volunteered geographic information, such as OpenStreetMap and

Wikimapia, few have focused on these aspects with implicitly geographic forms of VGI, such as location-based social media(for example, Twitter and Instagram).”(Haffner 206) This study assesses the Location-based social media behavior and perceptions of 253 university students, noting differences found in gender, race, and academic standing, using online survey. Their conclusion is that “since the fundamental geotagging behaviors of each group are different, we could not confidently compare location-based social media perception to behavior by group”. (217)

But the study has several notable findings. First, Haffner and Mathews etc. found that females and underclassmen are the most likely users of location-based social media, and few statistically significant racial differences exist in their survey. Instagram are one of the most popular platforms for tagging location content for all groups. Second, location-based social media users are believed to be the representative of each social media platform’s user base overall since the addition usage of location. Lastly, few people were found to use general location on platforms for the sake of privacy. But for researches, precise location is more useful and valuable for analysis.

Conclusion

Combining the students posts from Instagram and the research of location-based social media behavior and perceptions, it is found that students are motivated by various factors to share their locations in public space, including self-promotion and uniqueness. It is also difficult to generalize their behaviors and perceptions based on classifier like gender, major, and academic standings. For the posts with geotags, locational content is much more important than the linguistic content since the geotags record a locational journal to keep

track of places visited. This finding aligns with Frith's notion that "locative media influences how place is both perceived and experienced" (135). Location is a thread linking experiences and perceptions together and weave them into memory and record. Admittedly, bias and privacy issue still exist in virtual space but there are still many researches and development to be done with regard to the interaction between geography and location-based social media.

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