

**NANYANG TECHNOLOGICAL UNIVERSITY**

**SCHOOL OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES**



**#SG50ShadesOfGrey – The social life of a hashtag**

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## **Abstract**

“Hashtags that straddle its multiple uses (tagging *and* paralinguage, narrative *and* the informality of speech) are most likely to be successful.” (MacDonald, 2015). To better understand the workings of the hashtag, how it evolved and even becoming a form of online interactive action, this study investigates a hashtag that went viral in Singapore last year. The #SG50ShadesOfGrey hashtag was created using the combination of two domains – the popular western erotic story ‘*50 Shades of Grey*’ and Singapore’s 50 year of independence ‘*SG50*’. Notably, the studied is a prime example of a global-turned-local product where Singaporeans perpetuated the hashtag with their dash of local experiences that were relatable and engaging

By analysing the #SG50ShadesOfGrey content produced from February to August 2015, particularly the tweets, this discourse study showed that the #SG50ShadesOfGrey phenomenon was largely successful due to the production of sexually-charged jokes. The study also demonstrated how the sexual innuendos are formed within these jokes and how the Singapore reference at the end made the punchline. Additionally, this phenomenon exemplified the creative side of Singaporeans as there were #SG50ShadesOfGrey-related content produced on both online and offline platforms (i.e. official #SG50ShadesOfGrey clothing); ultimately depicting the vibrant social life of the hashtag.

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## 1 Introduction

Singapore 50 – or *SG50* in short – was a nationwide campaign to celebrate Singapore’s 50th birthday in 2015. This led to many different trends and movements on both online and offline platforms. Notably, the #SG50 hashtag had more than 52,000 mentions on social media<sup>1</sup> alone before the *jubilee weekend*<sup>2</sup> (Adobe Digital Dialogue, 2015).

Coincidentally, *50 Shades of Grey*, a movie adaptation from the popular book by E. L. James, was set to premiere on 12<sup>th</sup> February 2015 in Singapore. It tells the story of a budding love relationship between university student Anastasia Steele and successful billionaire Christian Grey. This romantic storyline<sup>3</sup> captured global attention because it contained explicit sexual themes – particularly sado-masochism. *50 Shades of Grey* was the top-selling paperback book in many countries upon its initial release (Singh, 2012). Garnering unprecedented hype, it sparked parodies on various platforms, including Youtube videos, parody books and a musical production<sup>4</sup> in the United States.

Back in Singapore, local writer Alvin Pang introduced the #SG50ShadesOfGrey hashtag via his Facebook page on the day of the movie premiere – “#SG50ShadesOfGrey go go”. Pang subsequently posted the identical post on Twitter to propagate the #SG50ShadesOfGrey hashtag. The hashtag was reportedly used more than 60,000 times on Twitter within a span of five days (Straits Times, 2015; BBC, 2015). Interestingly, there was no explicit instruction or rule on the usage of the hashtag but many understood its intended meaning:

- (1) She leaned back, closed her eyes and let a soft moan escape her lips. The air-conditioning felt so good in this heat. #SG50ShadesOfGrey

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<sup>1</sup> According to Merriam-Webster’s online dictionary, it is defined as “forms of electronic communication (as Web sites for social networking and microblogging) through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content (as videos)”  
Source: <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/social%20media>

<sup>2</sup> It refers to 7 to 10 August 2015.

<sup>3</sup> For more information: [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/10/business/media/an-erotic-novel-50-shades-of-grey-goes-viral-with-women.html?\\_r=3](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/10/business/media/an-erotic-novel-50-shades-of-grey-goes-viral-with-women.html?_r=3)

<sup>4</sup> For more information: <http://50shadesthemusical.com/about/>

- (2) It was a tight fit. It was hard to go in. Finally when he was in, he gasped in relief. A day in the MRT @ peak hour. #SG50ShadesOfGrey

Singaporeans, by and large, possess a stereotypical image of being conservative, uncreative and “somewhat boring and grey” (Straits Times, 2015). My study explores how the #SG50ShadesOfGrey phenomenon disagrees with the above assertion by examining the creative sides of Singaporeans through this suggestive hashtag. Framed within the field of computer-mediated communication (CMC), the study investigates the virality of the hashtag on the Singaporean Twittersphere and the spillover of content to other platforms. I used a hybrid of quantitative and qualitative approaches to examine the tweets<sup>5</sup> posted from February to August 2015 and discussed how it reflects hashtagging as a social practice in Singapore.

The growing functions of a hashtag (Zappavigna, 2015) were observed in this phenomenon. Beyond its conventional ‘meta-data’ (Caleffi, 2015: 48) role, the #SG50ShadesOfGrey hashtag is a ‘site of playful engagement’ (Tully & Ekdale, 2014) as it reflects the topic of the user’s comment; marks the newsworthy angle and even facilitates advertising:

- (3) *‘jokes’* She closed her eyes, spent and sated. She finally got a seat on the MRT at 6.30PM. #SG50ShadesOfGrey
- (4) *‘comment’* #SG50ShadesOfGrey is quite funny!
- (5) *‘news’* Singaporeans have fun with suggestive hashtag  
#SG50ShadesOfGrey <http://ift.tt/1EA5tzV>
- (6) *‘advertisement’* Store your kinky stuff with us, no questions asked  
#sg50shadesofgrey. Call 18003703737 for more info. We are referring to books of course.

The creation of (3) is at the core of this studied phenomenon. The ‘lexical blending’ (Maity, Saraf, & Mukherjee, 2015), using the number “50” as the connector, fuses the sexually charged

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<sup>5</sup> According to Twitter, “A Tweet may contain photos, videos, links and up to 140 characters of text.”  
Source: <https://support.twitter.com/articles/15367>

50 Shades of Grey content into a Singapore context. The intriguing combination and cognitive contrast between the two domains ('SG50' and '50 Shades of Grey') offers a basis for its virality and creates a humorous aftereffect. Following Bai's study (2011) on English humour, I applied the incongruity-resolution theory with the perspective of Relevance theory to examine how these #SG50ShadesOfGrey jokes were constructed to align with the meaning embedded in the hashtag.

Since external factors undeniably affect how the user designs his discourse (Carter, 2016), I will examine the tweet's origin and relevant 'communicative functions' (Wikström, 2014) to provide more context for interpretation. My study will include the discussion of non-Twitter material (e.g SG50Shades Facebook page and #SG50ShadesOfGrey parody video on Youtube) to portray a well-rounded perspective of the social life of the hashtag. Finally, I will compare the extent of influence of the *50 Shades of Grey* storyline and the general perspective of sexual innuendos towards the #SG50ShadesOfGrey material before concluding my study.

## 2 Literature Review

### 2.1 Twitter as a communicative medium

Twitter has transformed into an iconic microblogging<sup>6</sup> service since its inception in 2006. Twitter was ranked among the top 10 social networks worldwide (Stastica, 2016), reaching 320 million monthly active users last year (Twitter, 2015) thus categorising Twitter as an everyday form of computer-mediated communication (CMC).

Twitter co-founder, Biz Stone, remarked “you can change the world in 140 characters” and “creativity comes from constraint” (B. Patrut, M. Patrut, & Cmeciu, 2013). #SG50ShadesOfGrey is a prime example of a creative form of CMC because users must convey their #SG50ShadesOfGrey story with fewer words (140 characters as the maximum length of a tweet).

Progressing from its original purpose (to provide status updates), the tweets disseminated information and facilitated discussion, thus becoming multi-functional. The status update prompt (“What are you doing?”) became obsolete as the tweets produced answered beyond what the user was doing. In 2009, the status update prompt changed to “What’s happening?” to fit the circulating tweets and encourage further discourse. Additionally, ‘retweets’ allowed users to remain indirectly active in conversations, inciting discourse (Boyd, Golder & Lotan, 2010).

My study will revolve around three general conventions found on Twitter, namely ‘reply’, ‘retweet’ and ‘quote tweet’. A ‘reply’ tweet is a direct response to the user by connecting the reply through automated tagging of the first user. Twitter distinguishes between a “retweet” and “quote tweet” separately despite outward similarities. The user forwards the tweet of interest to followers in both cases, but the latter, introduced in 2015 (Griffin, 2015), allows additional input to be made on the original content (Twitter, 2015).

Twitter presents the tweet of interest in its original form on the timeline when the user uses the built-in retweet feature (Twitter Help Centre, 2015). The engagement count (‘retweet number’)

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<sup>6</sup> Microblogging is defined as “the practice of posting small pieces of digital content—which could be text, pictures, links, short videos, or other media—on the Internet”  
Source: <https://net.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/ELI7051.pdf>

increases accordingly under the original tweet. Separately, Twitter quotes the content with parentheses and adds the user's comment in a 'quote tweet'. The modified tweet thus appears under the thread of the original tweet.

However, the classification becomes blurred when users use them interchangeably (Boyd, Golder & Lotan, 2010). For example, users may add RT ('retweet') to retweet and credit the original source of their content (Page, 2012). This affects the engagement count for the tweet of interest, as Twitter is unable to quantify the other retweets done through the built-in feature. Users may also insert their own parentheses for the quoted content, leaving out the username of the person being quoted. Likewise, Twitter is unable to quantify such 'quote tweets'.

Notably, these exceptions to Twitter classification systems appear as separate tweets whilst searching for #SG50ShadesOfGrey tweets through Twitter's search function. These tweets were evaluated individually to distinguish if they ought to be grouped collectively under the Twitter's statistics. Tweets that suggested otherwise were analysed as 'original tweets'.

## 2.2 Hashtags

A hashtag consists of the pound sign (#) and a string of characters as a label for the intended reference (Caleffi, 2015). Chris Messina first proposed the use of hashtags in August 2007, following inspiration on the similar grouping method done on IRC (Internet Relay Chat). He tweeted the following post and proposed to imprint this convention onto Twitter – "how do you feel about using # (pound) for groups. As in #barcamp [msg]?"

Its original stated purpose served as a marker for 'meta-data', where a hashtag captured related group posts on the Twittersphere. As users grew familiar with this tagging practice, expanded functional roles were attached to the use of hashtags (Wikström, 2014, Tully and Ekdale, 2014). In Wikström's (2014) study, he analysed 72 representative examples from the collected sample of approximately 1,200 hashtagged tweets in November 2010. Using the Speech Act theory, he identified various communicative functions for the hashtags: to organise information, engage in meta-commentary and evoke amusement. Tully and Ekdale (2014) supported the functions by regarding hashtags as 'sites of playful engagement' (2014: 68) where these online spaces

exchanged discussions regardless the field of topics raised (be it social, political or economic). In my study, I will identify the different communicative functions that occur in the #SG50ShadesOfGrey hashtag to aid my depiction of the social life of the hashtag.

In Zappavigna's (2011) study, the Systemic Functional Linguistics approach evaluated 45,000 tweets on the 2008 US presidential elections. Her findings showed that hashtags have become more than typographic conventions. The inclusion of hashtags in the tweet helps Twitter conversations to become "searchable" and thus, creating an 'ambient affiliation' (2011: 789) among the users involved. Zappavigna discusses this concept in her analysis:

"Being searchable opens up a new kind of sociality where microbloggers engage in ambient affiliation. The affiliation is ambient in the sense that the users may not have interacted directly and likely do not know each other, and may not interact again." (Zappavigna, 2011: 801)

She continued the discussion on ambient affiliation in her later papers, and how online conventions, like hashtagging, induce affiliation among the users (Zappavigna, 2013). She used two corpora — a South African blogger's Twitter stream and a 100 million-word randomized Twitter corpus (2013: 210). Zappavigna identifies three common features (or 'bonds' as she named it) that show how identity is established on the Twittersphere.

Notably, the 'self-deprecation' bond can be found when the hashtag becomes a tool to incite humour despite its initial impression to invoke a negative judgement. This scenario is similar to how the #SG50ShadesOfGrey hashtag encouraged a humorous reading of the apparent ambiguity.

Zappavigna continues her research by focusing on contextualised tweets about Schapelle Corby (2015). She highlights three communicative functions that emerged from her specialised corpus: to mark topics, establish interpersonal relationship and to organise text. Her study in 2015 aligns with earlier studies to further support the claim that hashtagging can be seen as a societal process that enacts ambient affiliation.

Similarly, this present study focuses on a Singaporean context and the perpetuation of the #SG50ShadesOfGrey hashtag. My findings will support the existing depiction of hashtags –

they are linguistically multifunctional and serve beyond its conventional role of meta-data tagging. Furthermore, examining #SG50ShadesOfGrey tweets will shed some insights to hashtagging as a form of linguistic innovation (Cunha et.al, 2011) – or specifically, as a social practice in Singapore.

### 2.3 #SG50ShadesOfGrey – a *glocalised* product

Singaporeans' use of the #SG50ShadesOfGrey hashtag presents an exemplary case to study hashtagging as a social practice because it is a clear product of *glocalisation* – where “global media flows from a local perspective” (Androutsopoulos, 2010: 215). Retrospectively, the Western (American) cultural good has spread globally (*50 Shades of Grey*) and has been successfully localised (*Singapore*), creating the localised #SG50ShadesOfGrey hashtag.

As a form of ‘linguistic locality’, this hashtag is Singaporeans’ creative take on globalised popular cultures (*50 Shades of Grey*). Considering how hashtags have undeniably gone through an intriguing evolution since its inception on Twitter (Cunha et.al, 2011), the hashtag is a platform for people to engage with global flows – to reframe them, localise them and appropriate them in novel ways (Androutsopoulos, 2010: 205).

Wikstrom, however stresses on the dearth relating to the linguistic perspectives done on Twitter compared against other forms of CMC (2014: 127). My study aims to deepen this field by exploring how Singaporeans engaged with the #SG50ShadesOfGrey hashtag, how it crossed over to different CMC platforms (including the offline channels), and how the hashtag was ‘recontextualised<sup>7</sup>’ (Coupland, 2010: 215) to other local contexts (Philippines and Hong Kong). Specifically, I examine how the hashtag #SG50ShadesOfGrey was created, its categorisation in terms of form and function, how it became a viral phenomenon, and finally what it tells us about hashtagging as a social practice in Singapore.

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<sup>7</sup> Recontextualization involves the appropriation and reworking of globally circulating media material into a local code for a local audience.

## **2.4 Classification of Twitter users**

There has been substantial work done, particularly in the field of Computational Linguistics, to propose appropriate frameworks. Moseley (2013), for one, argues that user age can be determined by analysing the word and phrase abbreviation patterns in the text. Other aspects such as the users' areas of interests (Pennacchiotti & Popescu, 2011) and origin of the text (De Choudhury et. al, 2012; De Silva & Riloff: 2014) were also used to perform this classification task. For the aspect of origin of the text, the studies separated the users into two main groups: organisations and individual persons. In my study, I adapted De Choudhury et. al (2012)'s user categorizations to suit the focus of my study. These considerations were in relation to the communicative functions that will extrapolate the difference in intention between organisations and individuals specifically.

### 3 Method

Although Pang first introduced the hashtag on Facebook, Twitter provided a fertile and suitable platform for it to propagate. It caught more attention through Twitter and media coverage, which propelled its virality. That being said, I focused primarily on the Twitter data since most of the active content took the form of tweets. This study combined both quantitative and qualitative methods and analysed its linguistic structure.

The period extracted for my study was from February 2015 to August 2015 and includes the introduction period of the hashtag and the peak of SG50 celebrations in August. The popularity of the hashtag enabled it to cross platforms, and these non-Twitter data were examined to better understand the social life of the #SG50ShadesOfGrey hashtag. In what follows, I will discuss the reasons behind my choice of method, the challenges faced and the data collection procedure.

#### 3.1 Reasons behind choice of method

I present a combined corpus-based qualitative approach to ensure the reliability and validity of my study, through examination of the considerations proposed by Baker and Levon (2015).

I utilised a corpus-based approach to analyse the frequency patterns of the tweets. This reduces researcher bias (Baker and Levon, 2015) and reveals trends that help to better understand why some #SG50ShadesOfGrey tweets were more popular than others. However, certain pragmatic aspects of language use might not be reflected in my corpus-based findings. The complementing qualitative approach was thus undertaken to mitigate that limitation.

A total of 56 Twitter examples will be showcased in the later chapters to facilitate the relevant discussions. Although the explicit selection of tweets (to be used as examples) clearly raises the issue of researcher selectivity of data exposure to the readers (Baker and Levon 2015: 222), it is necessary as it facilitates a more in-depth qualitative investigation into individual tweets. Having said that, it is important to note that claims made about the tweets are ultimately descriptions of emerging linguistic patterns instead of definite structural rules in the social practice of hashtagging.

### 3.2 Challenges faced

The privacy settings on Twitter affect the completeness of my data collection. Users who privatise their accounts (Zappavigna, 2011) inhibit the streaming APIs<sup>8</sup> on Twitter, preventing their tweets from being tracked by the public. Thus, this prevented me from collecting hashtagged tweets posted by users who have privatised their accounts. Correspondingly, based on the tweet structure (the username is inserted at the start), some tweets appeared to function as replies to privatised tweets. With a lack of information of what exactly transpired in the conversations, these tweets will not be used as specific examples in my study. Nonetheless, the overall tweets found were adequate to perform my analysis for a representative study.

As with all social sciences research, participant protection is essential whenever natural data is compiled (Tagg, 2012: 43). Hence, I either blacked out or replaced all user details in my examples with pseudonyms (i.e. male generic names like Tom or female generic names like Jane) to ensure confidentiality of the users quoted. This however, excludes the official corporate Twitter accounts. Nevertheless, given that these tweets are publicly accessible, it is impossible to ensure that nobody will recognise the tweets content while illustrating for the purpose of my study.

Additionally, the dynamic nature of Twitter data affects the accuracy of my data. Statistical results – impression counts in particular – might change over time. The user might delete his reply, account, or undo the “retweet” action. These limitations should be borne in mind in view of the significance of the findings. In my study, I performed checks on random entries to validate its accuracy to ensure that my data is sufficient and accurate as at the completion date of collection.

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<sup>8</sup> For more information: <https://dev.twitter.com/streaming/overview>

### 3.3 Procedure

The hashtagged tweets, or ‘searchable content’ (Zappavigna 2011: 6), can be found using the search function on Twitter’s main site. Initially, the Python extraction method (with the Twitter streaming API) was used to collect the data. The HTML file was extracted and parsed using Python (specifically, the BeautifulSoup package). However, upon further examination, it was discovered that Twitter filters the results when one searches for a specific keyword. This means that only top tweets – tweets that, as defined by Twitter (2015), involving a higher level of interaction and sharing impressions – were extracted thus far.

Hence, I performed a second round of data collection. The tweets were extracted manually to ensure the completeness of the data. Both the top tweets and live tweets were loaded similarly on Twitter. I performed manual extraction in a systematic chronological order from the earliest tweet posted and recorded all relevant information (username, date and time of post, presence of other media within the tweet and the tweet post URL) on Microsoft Excel 2011.

In order to optimize the representativeness, balance and comparability of the corpus (Zappavigna 2012: 16), the two data sets were combined into a single corpus ‘GREY’. All tweets that were finalized in GREY were considered as single original tweets based on Twitter’s classification. Notably, as mentioned in my introduction, tweets that had the content in parentheses or included terms like “RT” were evaluated individually. Duplicates were manually removed and if applicable, relevant instances were cumulated under the respective function counts. Error-checking functions, including auto-correct and Spellcheck, were disabled to ensure that there was no change of data without my knowledge.

GREY was checked meticulously by manually clicking on the extracted URL links to ensure that all information were extracted correctly. Additionally, all tweets that belonged to individual Twitter conversations were marked separately. Finally, the sums of the quote tweets, replies, retweets and favourites were collated. This was collectively termed as ‘total impression count’ to determine the ranking of the tweets in terms of engagement. The following is an example of how the total impression count was tabulated:

- (7) “Deeper, go in deeper.” As she moaned to the passengers standing in the bus.  
#SG50ShadesOfGrey

$$\begin{aligned}\text{Total impression count} &= \text{replies} + \text{quote tweets} + \text{retweets} + \text{favourites} \\ &= 1 + 1 + 215 + 52 \\ &= \mathbf{269}\end{aligned}$$

In summary, GREY was completed and finalized as of 3<sup>rd</sup> January 2016. The tweets extracted spanned from 10<sup>th</sup> February 2015 to 31<sup>st</sup> August 2015 and were presented chronologically in the dataset (refer to Appendix) to facilitate the analysis.

## 4 Analysis of #SG50ShadesOfGrey tweets

In the month of February 2015, the #SG50ShadesOfGrey hashtag was used more than 100,000 times. It included all instances of interactions recorded on Twitter (quote tweet, reply, retweet or favourite). In particular, the most engaged tweet had more than 5000 instances of interactions:

- (8) Her legs shook as waves of pleasure rocked her body. Then the salesman asked,"Auntie, you buying this Osim chair or not?" #SG50ShadesOfGrey

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Total impression count} &= \text{replies} + \text{quote tweets} + \text{retweets} + \text{favourites} \\ &= 9 + 0 + 4089 + 1084 \\ &= \mathbf{5182} \end{aligned}$$

To investigate this viral phenomenon, my study looked into relationships between variables of a #SG50ShadesOfGrey tweet: Twitter user types, tweet text, hashtag functions and communicative functions. In this chapter, I will first describe the hashtag's Twitter activity and tweet composition, follow up with a close reading of the prototypical example of #SG50ShadesOfGrey, and conclude with how the phenomenon increased with tweets of other communicative functions.

### 4.1 #SG50ShadesOfGrey Twitter activity

#### 4.1.1 General corpus (GREY) results

**TABLE 1: GENERAL GREY RESULTS**

Category	Frequency
Total original tweets	3,996
Tweets tagged in conversations	568
Total word count	60,182

As shown in Table 1, a total of 3,996 #SG50ShadesOfGrey tweets were produced during this period. Within this set, 568 tweets belonged to various Twitter conversations. Examples (9) and

(10) below shows a conversation between two users, where Tom attempts to continue the story initiated by Jane:

- (9) Jane: She saw the white, sticky liquid was about to drip down and she quickly licked it up. Her McDonalds’s ice cream is melting 🍦 #SG50ShadesOfGrey
- (10) Tom: @Jane She swallowed it whole. The ice cream cone. #SG50ShadesOfGrey

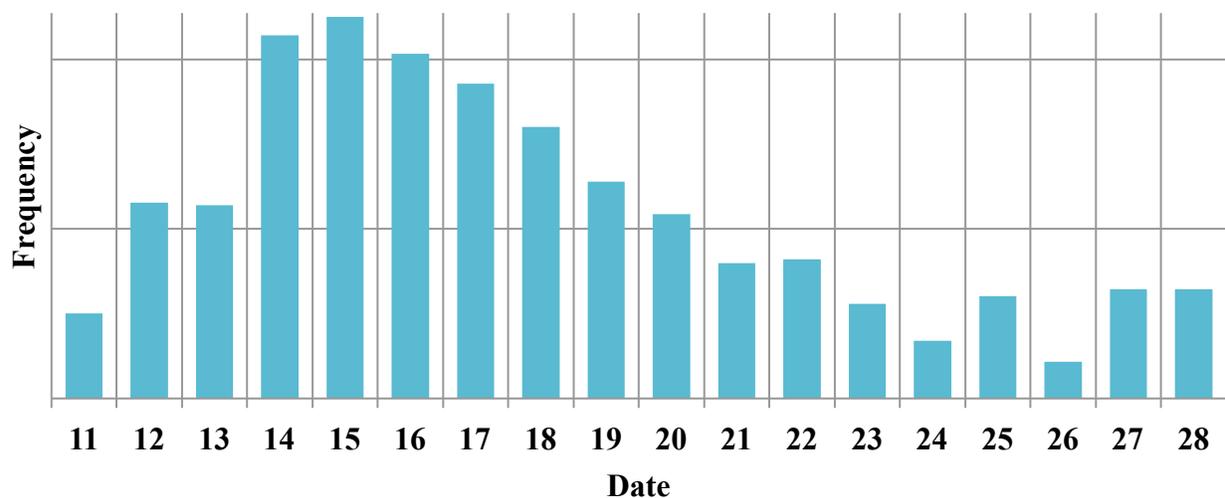
This reflects an interesting occurrence. The presence of the hashtag allows Jane’s tweet to be perceived as both a reply and stand-alone tweet. Depending on how one assesses the tweet:

- it is a reply when one sees Jane’s tweet tagged directly under Tom’s tweet  
*(technical classification by Twitter)*
- it is a stand-alone tweet when one sees Jane’s tweet in the search results  
*(#SG50ShadesOfGrey search results)*

This “double portrayal” reflects the versatility and interactivity of hashtags and suggests that the interpretation might vary indefinitely due to the different assessments. I will examine more of such conversations later in the chapter to understand hashtagging as a social practice on Twitter.

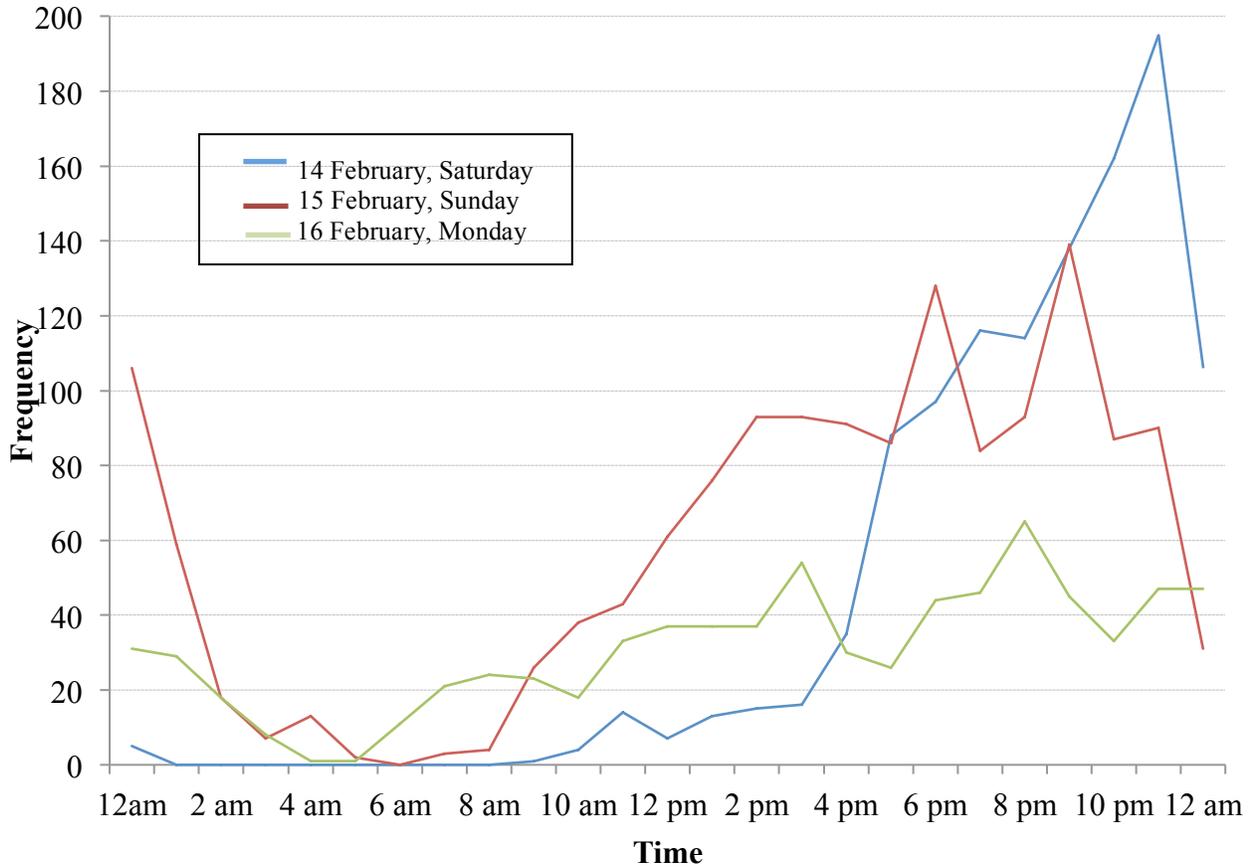
#### 4.1.2 #SG50ShadesOfGrey tweets produced in February 2015

**FIGURE 1: #SG50SHADESOFGREY TWEETS IN FEBRUARY 2015**



3,899 of 3,996 original tweets were produced In February alone. Based on Figure 1, approximately 77% of the original tweets during the studied period came from 14 to 16 February 2015.

**FIGURE 2: #SG50SHADESOFGREY TWEETS (14 – 16 FEBRUARY 2015)**



Three main observations were revealed when the tweet rate was compared within these three days (refer to Figure 2): users generally produced more #SG50ShadesOfGrey content after 5 p.m., on average, 16 February had the least tweets and the highest peak was found to be in 14 February. Users might have associated the Valentine’s Day weekend (14 to 16 February) to the 50 Shades of Grey storyline, thereby recording the highest tweet rate. Despite so, more in-depth analysis on external factors is required to validate the above inference. Nonetheless, my study

will cover on the linguistics factors that influence the tweet construction rather than the social factors.

#### 4.1.3 #SG50ShadesOfGrey tweets produced from February to August 2015

**TABLE 1.1: #SG50SHADESOFGREY TWEETS (FEBRUARY TO AUGUST 2015)**

<b>Month</b>	<b>#Sg50ShadesOfGrey tweet produced</b>
February	3, 899
March	42
April	16
May	7
June	10
July	12
August	10
<b>Total</b>	<b>3, 996</b>

Results thus far revealed that February was the month that saw the most activity.

As shown in Table 1.1, the drastic decrease of unique content produced after February 2015 might bring one to conclude that people stopped taking interest in the hashtag. However, subsequent occurrences of the hashtag on other platforms suggest otherwise. This will be further discussed in Chapter 5.

## **4.2 Composition of a #SG50ShadesOfGrey tweet**

### 4.2.1 Twitter user types

Social media users can be classified in numerous ways. To note, Moseley (2013), argues that user age can be determined by analyzing the word and phrase abbreviation patterns in the text. Possible aspects were identified in the works of Computational Linguistics, including users' areas of interests (Pennacchiotti & Popescu, 2011) and origin of the text (De Choudhury et. al, 2012; De Silva & Riloff: 2014). Notably, they separated the users into two main groups:

organisations and individual persons. For my classification, I adapted De Choudhury et. al (2012)'s user categorizations to suit the focus of my study, forming the following four Twitter user types:

*Group (1): Individuals*

They communicate with family and friends, post updates on one's day-to-day life, discover and share their views on topics of interest, crowdsource<sup>9</sup>, 'follow' like-minded individuals or groups.

*Group (2): Media organisations*

They are media entities that communicate and disseminate information about issues of interest to their audience.

*Group (3): Non-media organisations*

They are non-media entities (commercial or non-profit) associated with some business, political or social goal and usually tweet for marketing, public relations or customer service purposes.

*Group (4): Others*

These users do not fall in any of the above types.

Some Twitter accounts stood out as they could satisfy more than one group. For example, @GeraldKoh987 and @ShaunT913 are accounts that belong to popular Singapore radio personalities. With their radio station numbers indicated – 987 FM and ONE FM 91.3 respectively – they can represent both “Individuals” and “Media Organizations” groups. The evident affiliation with the radio stations allow them to be perceived as representatives of their companies, while simultaneously posting updates independent of the company's interest. For my study, only official Twitter accounts of the media entities will be considered under “Media organizations”.

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<sup>9</sup> Definition of ‘Crowdsource’: obtain (information or input into a particular task or project) by enlisting the services of a number of people, either paid or unpaid, typically via the Internet.

Source: <https://zcrowd.com/what-is-crowdsourcing/>

4.2.2 Tweet elements

As shown in Table 2, there are four elements present within the tweet in terms of its form –text, hashtag, URL link and media (image/video). The tweets were classified into four groups according to the elements present. Surprisingly, more than 91% were pure text tweets despite the availability of media embedment on Twitter.

**TABLE 2: BREAKDOWN OF TWEET (TAGGED MEDIA & URL)**

<b>Group</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>Example</b>
(I) Text + hashtag	3,656 (91.5%)	oh my god #SG50ShadesOfGrey
(II) Text + URL + hashtag	257 (6.4%)	What do the film Fifty Shade of Grey and life in Singapore have in common? <a href="http://bbc.in/1AKfUSB">http://bbc.in/1AKfUSB</a> #SG50shadesofgrey
(III) Text + media + hashtag	58 (1.4%)	"#SG50ShadesOfGrey Baby, go slow. Pull in here for at least two mins cuz ERP ends in two mins..." 
(IV) Text + URL+ media + hashtag	25 (0.6%)	These Singaporeans are sharing '50 Shades of Singapore' <a href="http://bbc.in/1FWzco0">http://bbc.in/1FWzco0</a> #SG50shadesofgrey 

### 4.2.3 Syntactic function of hashtag

On top of its dominant meta-tag function (Zappavigna, 2015), the hashtag could develop a syntactic function, depending on how it was integrated in the tweet (Scott, 2015: 12). Some tweets had the hashtag intergrated within the main content whilst some had the hashtag added at the end. Table 2.1 shows a list of examples to illustrate the above:

**TABLE 2.1: HASHTAGS (SYNTACTIC FUNCTION)**

Syntactic function	Total	Example
<b>YES</b>	1,441 (36.1%)	#SG50ShadesOfGrey is quite funny!
		STOP AUDRIE FILLING MY FEED WITH #SG50shadesofgrey 2K15
		The giggling got louder, peeking thru the door window, Ed saw the Secretary & GM...reading #SG50ShadesOfGrey article - <a href="http://bit.ly/17catQ6">http://bit.ly/17catQ6</a>
		#SG50Shadesofgrey is the biggest celebration since the country's independence in 1965...oops
<b>NO</b>	2,365 (59.2%)	“Put it in now!” She gasped. Too late, they shot past the ERP gantry as he fumbled for a cashcard.
		#SG50shadesofgrey#SG50ShadesOfGrey She grimaced as his strong hands pried folds apart to reveal the moist succulence within. She had not had durian before.
		He pumped and pumped, and when he finally pulled out, it was too late. More than 3/4 tank again. #SG50ShadesofGrey

		Lillian's work clothes and underwear lay on the floor, leading to her bedroom. It was Sunday, the maid's day off. #SG50ShadesofGrey
--	--	---

*Note: 2K15 refers to the year 2015, with 2K meaning 2 thousand (Urban Dictionary, 2015)*

As shown in Table 2.1, 59.2% of the tweets did not carry a syntactic function whilst only 36.1% showed a clear presence of syntactic function in the hashtag. Also, it was difficult to discern if the hashtag was intended to hold a syntactic function within some tweets while some others consisted purely of the hashtag. Hence, 190 tweets (4.8%) were marked separately. Surprisingly, they were all commentary-tweets (refer to Section 4.2.6). The following are some examples of such cases:

(23) #SG50shadesofgrey HAHAHAHAHA

(24) HAHAHAH WHAT #SG50ShadesOfGrey

In (23) and (24), they consisted mainly of the hashtag and common written expressions of laughter and exclamation. As they do not follow the general sentence structure of English, it was unclear whether the hashtag was meant as part of the grammatical construction.

(25) #SG50ShadesOfGrey

Some users chose to include only the hashtag in their tweet as shown in (25). Interestingly, readers are still able to infer and understand the user's implicit communicative meaning (Scott, 2014: 17) by drawing on *50 Shades of Grey* associated knowledge, thus indicating a presence of pragmatic functions in the hashtag.

(26) @Tom #SG50shadesofgrey

As shown in (26), the hashtag was often used purely as a reply, possibly an attempt to relate the conversation to the hashtag. Examples (27) below shows a conversation where Jane suggests that Tom's tweet was '#SG50ShadesOfGrey-worthy':

(27) Tom: She had never seen anything like it before. Her hands wrapped around it with ease. It was long. Very long. Amy finally found her ruler.

Jane: @Tom #SG50ShadesOfGrey

As seen in (27), Jane's reply suggests that she realises the commonality between Tom's tweet and the concept of #SG50ShadesOfGrey. Both incited humour with the 'erotizing' and 'de-erotizing' of the story. Her reply represents an explicit encouragement for Tom to connect his tweet to the #SG50ShadesOfGrey context.

#### 4.2.4 Communicative functions

Communicative functions are crucial for analysis because they undoubtedly influence the user's tweet composition and reveals commonalities in tweet structure across the tweets collected. This was highlighted in researches that discussed communicative functions for their respective aims (e.g. Page, 2012 and Wikström, 2014).

Particularly, Wikström identifies eight communicative functions or categories in his study: 'topic tags', 'hashtag games', 'meta-comments', 'parenthetical explanations/additions', 'emotive usage', 'emphatic usage', 'humorous and playful usage', and 'memes and popular culture references' (2014: 130). This form of classification appears to be highly subjective as the researcher's contextual knowledge would affect interpretations to varying degrees. These categories were developed to emphasize the range of values hashtags could hold. The categories were exact but non-exclusive, and allowed overlaps to reflect the multi-functionality of tweets (Wikström, 2014).

In my study, I have manually gone through all the tweets collected and identified the communicative functions respectively. I adapted Wikström's classification and formed the following four main communicative functions:

**TABLE 2.2: COMMUNICATIVE FUNCTIONS IDENTIFIED IN GREY**

No	Total	Communicative Function	Example
1	2,127 (53.2%)	<b>TELLING A JOKE:</b>	She let the salty, milky white goo slide down her throat. “Best chwee kueh ever,” she sighed. #SG50ShadesOfGrey
2	1,695 (42.4%)	<b>MAKING A COMMENT:</b>	Damn funny one #SG50ShadesOfGrey
3	151 (3.8%)	<b>SHARING OF NEWS:</b>	#SG50shadesofgrey – (It’s not what you think!) <a href="http://bbc.in/1zjUvLK">http://bbc.in/1zjUvLK</a> via @BBCTrending
4	23 (0.6%)	<b>ADVERTISING:</b>	Open wide, don’t worry I will be gentle with you.... #sg50shadesofgrey Get your tees here at... <a href="https://instagram.com/p/znBniUvjaC/">https://instagram.com/p/znBniUvjaC/</a>

When a user tells a joke, he seeks to evoke amusement with the short story set up. The tweet noticeably consists of at least two sentences. When a user gives a comment, he expresses his sentiment (Balahur & Jacquet, 2015), typically with emotive language, and views on issues of interest. For example, “funny” is a form of positive emotive word used by the user to express his positive take on the trending #SG50ShadesOfGrey hashtag. When a user shares news, he typically aims to provide information to an audience, often including a URL link or embedded media. Similarly, when a user advertises, he promotes a service, message or product, often includes a URL link or embedded media as well.

As shown in Table 2.2, jokes formed the majority (53.2%) of the tweets. Hence, this forms the prototypical #SG50ShadesOfGrey example and the focus of my study. I will investigate its

linguistics construction and overall popularity in the next section. It was aforementioned that these categories are not mutually exclusive. For example:

(32) "I want more... I want more!!!" We are unveiling soon....#SG50shadesofgrey

(33) Who said that Singaporeans aren't creative? Our Twitter timeline in the past weekend proves it all. <https://www.facebook.com/media/set...> #SG50ShadesofGrey

Examples (32) and (33) resemble a ‘meta-comment’ (Wikström, 2014) at first reading. In (32), the user expresses his desire for something while in (33), the user provides a link to disseminate certain information. This form leads one to infer that the tweets functioned as a commentary-tweet. However, a closer assessment using factors (e.g. user type) revealed the primary function as an advertisement-tweet and news-tweet respectively. Specifically, (32) was posted by a non-media organisation to to ramp up anticipation for their merchandise using the following line “We are unveiling soon...?”. (33) was posted by a media organisation to provide #SG50ShadesOfGrey-related information to their followers. Both tweets are clear examples of how the categories given earlier are not mutually exclusive.

**FIGURE 3: COMMENTARY-TWEET (VISUAL RETWEET)**



Figure 3 shows a screen capture of a tweet identified to be ‘making a comment’. Based on the use of the exclamatory phrase “oh my” and the positive evaluative word “best”, this tweet was classified under commentary-tweets. However, the four images attached were screen captures of #SG50ShadesOfGrey jokes, thus suggesting that the user has indirectly performed a visual retweet. Notably, this tweet has achieved a high total impression count:

$$\begin{aligned}
 \text{Total impression count} &= \text{replies} + \text{quote tweets} + \text{retweets} + \text{favourites} \\
 &= 14 + 49 + 4312 + 1375 \\
 &= \mathbf{5750}
 \end{aligned}$$

One explanation for this occurrence is that readers were likely intrigued by the images attached and wanted to share the joke-tweets. This further supports the above assertion that #SG50ShadesOfGrey jokes are the prototypical representatives.

#### 4.2.5 Twitter user type and Communicative functions

**TABLE 2.3: TWITTER USER TYPE AND COMMUNICATIVE FUNCTIONS**

	Joke	Commentary	News	Advertisement	TOTAL
Individuals	2024	1659	93	6	<b>3782</b>
Media organisations	17	16	41	6	<b>80</b>
Non-media organisations	11	7	6	10	<b>34</b>
Others	75	13	11	1	<b>100</b>
TOTAL	<b>2127</b> <b>(53.2%)</b>	<b>1695</b> <b>(42.6%)</b>	<b>151</b> <b>(37.8%)</b>	<b>23</b> <b>(0.6%)</b>	<b>3996</b>

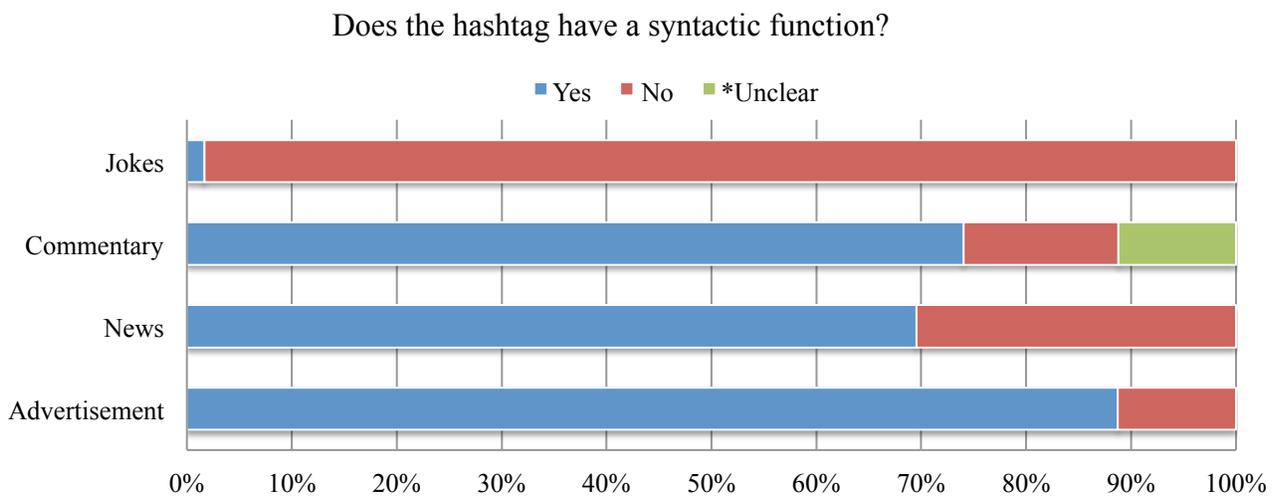
There appears to be a correlation between the Twitter user type and the communicative function. Tweets posted by ‘individuals’ tended to introduce a point of view (commentary) or share a funny story (joke). Tweets posted by ‘organisations’ disseminated information (news) or

promoted a certain product (advertisements). Tweets posted by ‘others’ were more for amusement purposes as compared to other communicative functions.

This also sheds insight on users’ perception over the #SG50ShadesOfGrey hashtag. The tweets produced are also generally more anecdotal than factual. More than 95% of the tweets were found to be of a personal nature (joke-tweets and commentary-tweets). This suggests that users generally associate the hashtag with informal topics that fellow Singaporeans find relatable.

#### 4.2.6 Syntax of hashtag and Communicative functions

**FIGURE 4: HASHTAG AND COMMUNICATIVE FUNCTION**



*Note: see also Section 4.2.3: Syntactic functions of hashtag*

Results from Figure 4 propose a relationship between the presence of a syntactically functional hashtag and the communicative function. Informative tweets (commentary, news, advertisement) tend to assign a syntactic function (i.e. ‘subject/object’ of the grammatical construction) to the hashtag. However, that is not the case in the #SG50ShadesOfGrey jokes where 95% of the hashtags were placed at the end with no syntactic function. This is understandable considering that users are unlikely to give away the joke so quickly by priming the reader with the hashtag right from the start. The construction of these jokes will be elaborated in the next section (Section 4.3) as these prototypical #SG50ShadesOfGrey tweets are the main contributors to the phenomenon. A separate analysis on SG50ShadesOfGrey jokes will elucidate how Singaporeans engage with this globalised popular culture in the local context.

### 4.3 #SG50ShadesOfGrey tweets: a prototypical example

The #SG50ShadesOfGrey jokes are representative of this viral trend; constituting 53.2% of the tweets collected (refer to Table 2.3). The following are two examples of these narrative-based jokes:

- (35) It was agony. Her hands trembled, body covered in sweat as Mr Tan gave her the D. Amy regretted not studying for Chem. #SG50ShadesOfGrey
- (36) I groaned. He kept going faster and faster. I couldn't take the speed "Slow down!" as I tried to copy notes during lecture #SG50shadesofgrey

There were several commonalities across Examples (35) and (36). Each tweet consisted at least two sentences. Both follow the basic structure of a narrative joke - a set-up and a punchline (Bai, 2011). The initial line that builds up the sexual innuendo is the *set-up* while the end of the tweet marks the *punchline*, a Singapore-reference punchline in this case. The hashtags were placed at the end of the tweet and did not serve a syntactic function within the tweet construction.

In this section, I will be following Bai's analytical framework on English humour (2011), and apply Relevance Theory, Incongruity and Incongruity-Resolution Theory for analysis.

Relevance Theory (RT) is a linguistics pragmatic theory that focuses on the 'inferential phase of comprehension'. This loosely refers to the process whereby the reader decodes the message and attempts to draw the most relevant interpretation to derive the writer's informative intention. By 'relevance', it refers to the most instinctive and immediate interpretation, derived with the least processing effort, that the mind draws from the contextual effects (Wilson & Sperber, 2012).

The concepts behind the Incongruity and Incongruity-resolution theories are applicable for many types of jokes. As a good illustration of the "laughter-eliciting mechanism of humour" (Bai, 2011: 83), the presence of an incongruent element is necessary in a joke in order to achieve the humorous effect. However, the humour is only elicited when the incongruity is resolved (Ritchie, 1999).

Bai (2011) highlights that Relevance theory does not stem from Humour studies but it can be used with the Incongruity and Incongruity-resolution theories to illustrate the workings of humour. The incongruity point can be associated as the divergence from the initial expectations (Bai, 2011) in the cognitive search for relevance. As such, she identifies three types of humor in her study. #SG50ShadesOfGrey jokes resonate with the ‘Cognitive Contrast’ humor type: the setup raises the expectation of a setting deemed relevant while the punchline departs from the initial expectation. With the addition of the trigger (hashtag), a strong cognitive contrast is formed as the incongruent resolution, creating humorous effects.

The hashtag can be also said to be the ‘semantic switch-script trigger’ (Raskin, 1984) of the joke. The trigger-script alters one’s reading of the first part of the text – usually deemed as the most ‘relevant’ interpretation until proven otherwise by the trigger (1984: 114). It is commonly found in short jokes (i.e. #SG50ShadesOfGrey jokes) that plays with the ambiguity of the word choice and apparent contradiction of the settings portrayed.

Along with the context provided, the structure of the tweet (sequence of information and the positioning of cohesive devices) guides the reader’s intuitions (Love, 2006) on the joke. I will examine how readers were able to interpret the #SG50ShadesOfGrey jokes in the following section.

#### 4.3.1 Interpretation of #SG50ShadesOfGrey joke-tweets

Take (8) for example:

Line A: Her legs shook as waves of pleasure rocked her body.

Line B: Then the salesman asked, " Auntie, you buying this Osim chair or not?"  
#SG50ShadesOfGrey

In Line A, a female character (based on the use of the feminine third-person pronoun ‘her’) experiences something pleasurable. Line B depicts another character ‘SALESMAN’ asking ‘AUNTIE’ a question. Assuming that the reader recognizes the term ‘OSIM CHAIR’ as a commercial merchandise product sold in Singapore and ‘AUNTIE’ as a common way to address

an older female in Singapore, the terms hint that the Line B is set in a familiar Singaporean context.

An incongruity is caused by the ostensible insertion of the #SG50ShadesOfGrey hashtag. It allows a different reading to be made, especially for Line A. By accessing the contextual knowledge of the erotic 50 Shades of Grey content, the reader is directed to derive the next most relevant interpretation (Wilson and Sperber, 2012: 35) for Line A.

The ‘semantic switch-script trigger’ causes the reader to re-evaluate the earlier interpretation. Line A is skewed towards a sexual nature because its delocalized depiction leaves multiple inferences to be drawn as to why ‘her legs shook’. Thus, mirroring the erotica storytelling manner as the novel (see for example Jacobs, 2000), a sexual innuendo forms when the reader reads Line A as the female character getting pleasure from engaging in a sexual activity. It is understood that one always strives to make sense of an occurrence by constantly looking for relevance (Auer and Roberts, 2011). With Line A now perceived to portray a sexualised scenario, the two inferences made thus far clash and oppose each other (Galiñanes, 2005), increasing the incongruity effect.

The incongruity is resolved and humour is incited when the reader formulates the following interpretation to fit all the information provided in the tweet: the ‘AUNTIE’ was trying out the ‘OSIM CHAIR’ and was getting too comfortable when the ‘SALESMAN’ interrupted her to prompt a purchase. Additionally, the term ‘AUNTIE’ has a social stigma in Singapore for being an older female who is not well educated or possibly Chinese-educated with poor proficiency in the English language (Leimgruber, 2009). The reader then relates this added information to the scenario, and thus increasing the humorous effects.

A similar inferential process occurs in Example (37):

Line A: It was agony.

Line B: Her hands trembled, body covered in sweat as Mr Tan gave her the D.

Line C: Amy regretted not studying for Chem. #SG50ShadesOfGrey

*(Note: ‘CHEM’ is the short form for Chemistry)*

The additive structure (Dynel, 2013: 17), where points are placed one after the other with no explicit connection, is found in Example (35). Lines A and B set the following scene: There was certain degrees of agony. The female character appeared to be experiencing something intense based on her bodily reactions while a male character ‘MR TAN’ gave something ‘THE D’. The given context is insufficient to draw inferences on the situation. There is referential ambiguity to what exactly the ‘D’ represented. Line C follows up with a declarative sentence that the subject ‘AMY’ regretted an action of hers ‘NOT STUDYING FOR CHEM’.

Similar to (8), the user used the trigger (hashtag) to guide the reader to his intended interpretation. Hence, the situation depicted in Lines A and B becomes erotized – with the noun phrase ‘THE D’ possibly referring to the male character’s sexual organ (colloquially known as *dick*), the two characters were engaging in a sexual activity. The sexual innuendo is thus formed as this inference elucidated the first part of the tweet. The hashtag could serve as a direction for the reader to perceive Line C as a scenario that could happen in Singapore where the topic of education is contentious.

Nonetheless, the contrast between the inferences creates the joke – ‘characters engaging in sexual activity’ and ‘the character regretted not studying for her school subject’. The reader finally reaches an interpretation that would fit all the information given – ‘AMY’ was feeling uncomfortable because her teacher, ‘MR TAN’, failed her Chemistry test with a ‘D’ grade.

To further examine how sexual innuendos are detected in the construction, I will analyse related collocations of the verb ‘MOANED’. The senses given in the Merriam-Webster online dictionary (2011) are as follows:

1. To make a long, low sound because of pain, unhappiness, or physical pleasure
2. To express unhappiness about something (complain)

Readers were still able to detect the sexual innuendos despite the word having no explicit reference to anything of sexual nature. This suggests that the sexual connotations exist when the term is associated with certain words or phrases.

**TABLE 3: ‘MOANED’ COLLOCATES IN TWEETS (RANKED FREQUENCIES)**

All words			Lexical words only		
Rank	Word	Frequency	Rank	Word	Frequency
1	SHE	85	1	LOUDLY	4
2	AS	30	2=	WHILE	3
3	IN	17	2=	SWEAT	3
4	HE	13	4	AUNTIE	2
5	AND	9	5=	THRUSTED	1
6	THE	6	5=	STUPID	1
7	WITH	5	5=	STOP	1
8=	I	3	5=	SLOW	1
8=	HER	3	5=	SENSUALLY	1
8=	AT	3	5=	SAMANTHA	1

As shown in Table 3, the third-person feminine pronoun ‘SHE’ was ranked as the top most frequent collocate tagged to the verb ‘MOANED’. There are two ways to explain this observation. It could be an indirect reference to the 50 Shades of Grey story since the female protagonist was mostly the ‘EXPERIENCER<sup>10</sup>’ (Saeed, 2009) of the sexual acts. Hence, the tweets could feature the female character to be in a similar position. The alternative explanation would be the users’ pre-existing knowledge of sexual innuendoes typically portrayed the female character as the common depiction of cross-sex activities in erotic discourse (Jacobs, 2000).

<sup>10</sup> The thematic role of EXPERIENCER is defined as the entity which is aware of the action or state described by the predicate but which is not in control of the action or state.

Based on the earlier definitions, the character has to undergo a certain process before *producing the long, low sound* ('moaning'). Notably, the examples discussed thus far identified the female character as EXPERIENCER.

Take (38) for example:

Line A: "take it." John commanded, shoving it in her mouth.

Line B: Jane moaned in pleasure, juices exploding inside.

Line C: "小龙包 NICE RIGHT?" #sg50shadesofgrey

(Note: 小龙包 *xiao3long2baol* "Chinese soup-filled dumplings" in Mandarin Chinese)

In an addictive structure, Lines A and B set the following scene: presumably a male character, 'JOHN' shoving something forcibly into the female character's ('JANE') mouth. 'JANE' appeared to experience something pleasurable as she moaned in response; with 'JUICES EXPLODING INSIDE' her mouth. There was no clear indication to what exactly was shoved into her mouth that caused her to moan in pleasure or where these 'JUICES' came from. With the association to the hashtag, a sexual connotation was added to the verb 'MOANED'. This erotized the whole setting which portrayed 'JOHN' and 'JANE' engaging in sexual activity. As alike in the previous examples, Line C de-erotized the whole perceived scenario by elucidating the actual context where the characters were dining.

Comparatively, the manner which the tweet story introduces the character and concentrates on the body parts is similar to how erotic discourse is typically structured (see for example Bell, 1997 and Jacobs, 2000). In Example (37), the 'MOUTH' in the story also referred to the female character when she had something shoved into her mouth. The following illustrates prominent tweet occurrences of the feminine pronouns:

- (i) "She put both balls in her **mouth** and immediately gagged. She decide...
- (ii) ...thought, she takes it in her **mouth**, swallows all of it at one...
- (iii) ...it in and out of your **mouth**... Chuppa Chups #SG50ShadesOfGrey
- (iv) As she put it in her **mouth** and gently suck the tip, her...
- (v)...residue from the corner of her **mouth**. It was a lot more today...
- (vi) ...and gingerly slid it into her **mouth**. It'd been a long time...

(vii)...and delicately slid it into her **mouth**. It'd been a long time...

(viii) round and smooth thing with her **mouth**. She wanted more milo peng, as...

(ix) pressed on it and put her **mouth** close. but the liquid came out...

#### 4.3.2 Frequently used words in #SG50ShadesOfGrey tweets

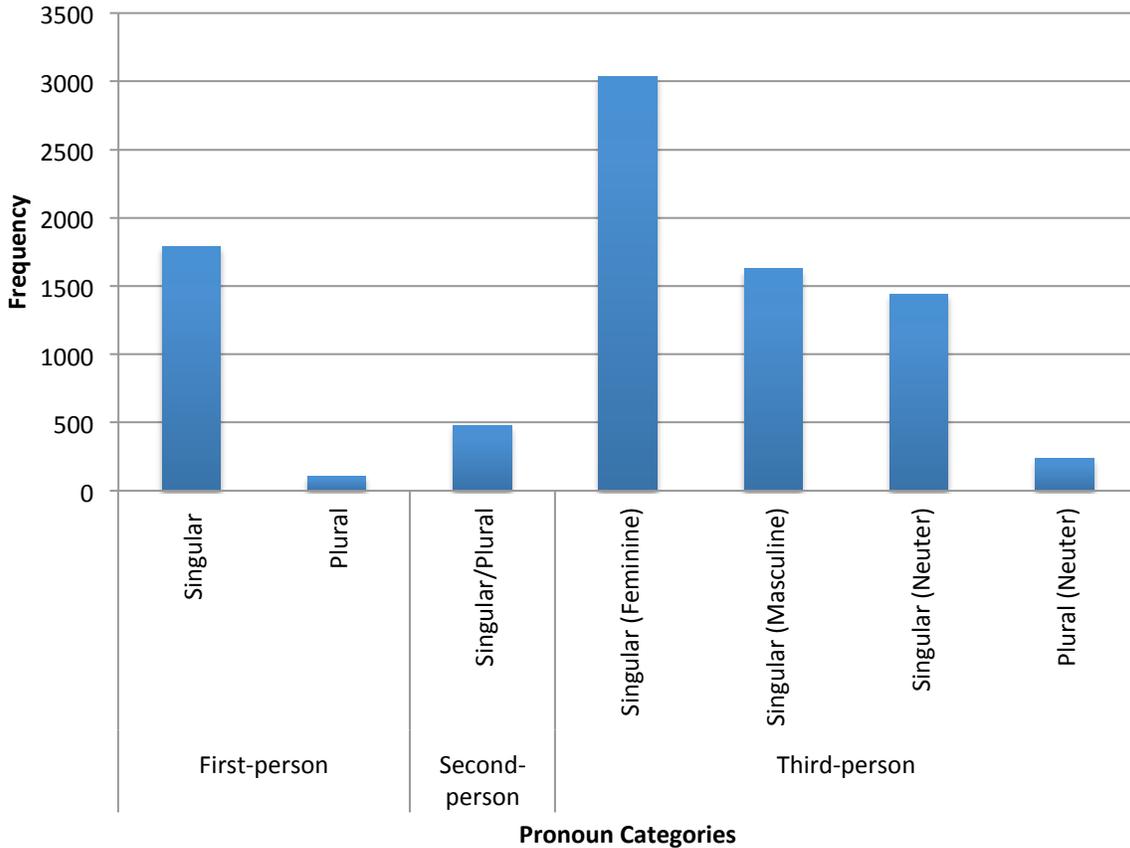
The frequency of each word was summated and analysed using both Microsoft Excel 2011 and AntConc 3.4.4 (corpus) for this aspect of the study.

**TABLE 3.1: THE MOST FREQUENT TEN LEXICAL WORDS IN GREY**

<b>Rank</b>	<b>Word</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
<b>1</b>	SG	4143
<b>2</b>	SHADESOFGREY	4099
<b>3</b>	THE	2328
<b>4</b>	SHE	1777
<b>5</b>	IT	1346
<b>6</b>	HER	1210
<b>7</b>	HE	1017
<b>8</b>	I	1013
<b>9</b>	AND	995
<b>10</b>	TO	975

It is not surprising to note that the hashtag phrase and function words (e.g. pronouns, determiners and conjunctions) were used most frequently. As shown in Table 3.1, five of the top ten words were pronouns, indicating that the tweets were mostly people-focused.

**FIGURE 5: PRONOUNS USED**



*Note: Results are inclusive of the different respellings or misspellings of the same pronoun (e.g. my and myyyyyyy) and contracted forms (e.g. she'd; she'll and she's).*

Results on the types of pronouns used further supports the above assertion. As shown in Figure 5, the third-person pronouns were used most frequently (73%), followed by the first-person and the second-person pronouns. Specifically, the feminine third-person pronouns (e.g. she and her) were the most frequently used; followed by the first-person singular pronoun categories (e.g. I and my) and the masculine third-person pronouns (e.g. he and him).

The book was mainly narrated from the female first-person perspective with liberal usage of the first-person pronoun (e.g I; my), hence the finding on pronouns (Refer to Figure 5) was particularly intriguing as it suggests the extent of the novel's influence on the #SG50ShadesOfGrey hashtag. It is posited that users who have actually read the book would be

more likely to use the first-person perspective while those who did not would more likely use the third-person, whether masculine or feminine. As compared to the non-readers, the readers would also likely make sexual innuendos that were directly related to the content of the book but with a Singapore twist at the end.

These observations, and the lack of actual direct reference to the book (as seen in the examples above), possibly indicate that a large majority of the users have had no direct contact with the book. They appeared to be generating content based on the popularised culture references. It further reflects how #SG50ShadesOfGrey has become a massive cultural phenomenon in Singapore. The following conversation shows two users who have neither read nor watched 50 Shades of Grey but still found themselves exploring the trending hashtag:

(39) Tom: Reading #SG50ShadesOfGrey which is hilarious. Have not read book or watched movie. But I like these tweets!

Jane: @Tom I haven't read #SG50ShadesOfGrey or watched the movie but #SG50ShadesOfGrey is hilarious!

This may also reflect the female gender bias within sexual innuendo. Linguistic studies as such have attempted to account for this form of situation as they described in various forms of discourse (see for example Sapolsky, 1982; Ortiz & Brook, 2014). This may even possibly be connected to a broader theme of the feminine body's objectification in the media and the resulting dominance of female-focused sexual innuendo as opposed to male-focused ones (Ortiz & Brook, 2014: 41).

Having said that, more evidence would be needed to determine if this was the case. One is not limited to a single source in acquiring related knowledge. It is uncertain where and how each user has gotten the relevant knowledge before producing these sexually charged tweets. Furthermore, many might have watched the movie but not read the book, which could in turn influence their construction of their tweets as they imitate how the story was told from the female protagonist's point of view. An in-depth exploration of this issue however lies beyond the scope of this paper.

On the whole, sexual innuendoes are largely successful because it coincides with what one would see as an erotic writing (Callister, et al., 2012) The #SG50ShadesOfGrey hashtag clearly plays a critical role to direct the reader to draw appropriate inferences. With the hashtag, the optimal relevant interpretation would be skewed towards the erotized nature instead of a literal description of a happening. Also, evident from the influx of commentary-tweets produced (discussed in Section 4.4), these joke-tweets appeared non-offensive since only implicit references were used to hint the ‘sexual activity’. In the next section, I will discuss the popularity of these #SG50ShadesOfGrey tweets.

#### 4.3.3 Popularity of #SG50ShadesOfGrey joke-tweets

The critical difference between sexual innuendos from sex jokes (statements aimed to evoke amusement by explicitly referring to the concept of sex) lies in the lack of direct mention or reference to anything sexual in the former. Considering that the writer only has 123 characters in the post to compose the joke (the #SG50ShadesOfGrey hashtag takes up 17 characters), the reader’s inferential abilities is key to making the connection between what was written and what contextual knowledge was triggered by the hashtag.

Nine out of the ten most engaged tweets collected were identified as joke-tweets. This shows that joke-tweets evidently achieved significantly higher levels of engagement as compared to the tweets of other communicative functions. Nevertheless, a comparison between the communicative functions, using the most engaged tweet per function posted across the aforementioned peak (refer to Section 4.1.2), might show otherwise:

**TABLE 3.2: MOST ENGAGED TWEETS PER TYPE (14 TO 16 FEBRUARY 2015)**

<b>Communicative Functions</b>	<b>User Type</b>	<b>Tweet Text</b>	<b>Image /Video</b>	<b>Impression count</b>
“TELLING A JOKE”	Individuals	Her legs shook as waves of pleasure rocked her body. Then the salesman asked,"Auntie, you buying this Osim chair or not?" #SG50ShadesOfGrey	-	<b>5182</b>
“MAKING A COMMENT”	Individuals	oh my best tweets #sg50shadesofgrey	Image	<b>5750</b>
“SHARING OF NEWS”	Media Organisation	Singaporeans have fun with suggestive hashtag #SG50ShadesOfGrey <a href="http://str.sg/ow6">http://str.sg/ow6</a>	Image	<b>542</b>
“ADVERTISING”	Non-media organisation	If you're in need of some comic relief this Munday- #SG50shadesofgrey! Share your fave ones with us!	Image	<b>19</b>

As shown in Table 3.2, the commentary-tweet was found to have a higher impression count than the joke-tweet. This might contradict earlier analyses that joke-tweets were the most engaged communicative function. However, a closer examination into this particular commentary-tweet (refer to Table 4.1) demonstrated otherwise. The critical difference lies in the addition of images in the commentary-tweet. The user had included screen captures of popular #SG50ShadesOfGrey jokes in her tweet, thus becoming a form of ‘visual retweet’. Hence, the high level of interactions for this otherwise ordinary commentary-tweet is attributable to the re-exposure of the original joke-tweets. It could then be said that the overall assertion ‘#SG50ShadesOfGrey joke-tweets are the main contributors to the whole viral

#SG50ShadesOfGrey phenomenon” still holds true. In addition, similar to Section 4.2.2 (Tweet elements), this observation reiterates the significance of media embedment on the tweet’s level of engagement.

**TABLE 3.3 THE MOST FREQUENT TEN LEXICAL NOUNS IN GREY**

<b>Rank</b>	<b>Word</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Rank</b>	<b>Word</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
<b>1</b>	TWEETS	294	<b>6</b>	HASHTAG	100
<b>2</b>	MOUTH	188	<b>7</b>	TWITTER	99
<b>3</b>	SINGAPORE	120	<b>8</b>	SINGAPOREANS	84
<b>4</b>	TIME	106	<b>9=</b>	BODY	77
<b>5</b>	ONE	102	<b>9=</b>	LIQUID	77

The result of the most frequent ten lexical nouns gives an idea about the common topics raised in the tweets. Based on Table 3.3, these nouns can be grouped collectively as they make similar references to certain topics. For example, TWEETS, HASHTAG and TWITTER depict the Twitter platform while MOUTH and BODY refer to specific body parts. Analyses of these words correlating to the factor of communicative purposes found that joke-tweets often featured the ‘body parts’ in their stories, similar to the Jacobs’ findings on erotic discourse (2000: 284). Contrastingly, commentary/news/advertisement-tweets substantially highlighted Twitter as their topic of interest.

In terms of content, there was little reference made to the actual 50 Shades of Grey story. This is further supported by the results in Table 3.4 where most of the verbs did not match the most frequently used verbs in the book. Notably, none of the verbs identified are directly related to the concept of ‘sex’. Almost half of them are either auxiliaries or modal verbs while the rest are action verbs with no direct reference to anything sexual.

**TABLE 3.4: THE MOST FREQUENT LEXICAL VERBS FOUND IN GREY AND BOOK**

#SG50ShadesOfGrey tweets			50 Shades Of Grey novel		
Rank	Word	Frequency	Rank	Word	Frequency
1	WAS	645	1	HAVE	771
2	IS	605	2	CAN	695
3	SAID	231	3	DO	630
4	CAN	204	4	BE	505
5	ARE	196	5	WANT	473
6	STOP	139	6	KNOW	421
7	BE	126	7	AM	352
8	GOT	121	8	WAS	337
9	MOANED	112	9	HEAD	333
10	COMING	102	10	THINK	326

Another evidence that showcases the popularity of the hashtag was the emergence of subsequent hashtags -- #MNL50ShadesOfGrey (Manila + 50 Shades of Grey) and #HK50ShadesOfGrey (Hong Kong + 50 Shades of Grey). These tweets produced with these hashtags were largely similar to the joke-tweets discussed earlier, but in their respective localised contexts (Androutsopoulos, 2010). However, there is a difference between the hashtags in terms of its phrase formation. Lexical blending is performed in the #SG50ShadesOfGrey hashtag where the western media (50 Shades of Grey) is appropriated into the Singapore context (SG50).

On the contrary, lexical compounding (Maity, Saraf, & Mukherjee, 2015). is found in the #HK50ShadesOfGrey and #MNL50ShadesOfGrey hashtags whereby they exist as a juxtaposition of the city's acronyms (MNL and HK) and the term (50 Shades Of Grey). This possibly explain why some users appeared uncomfortable with the subsequent hashtags as they felt that the 'joke was lost':

- (44) What is #HK50ShadesofGrey? The original is funny also because it's SG 50. Not just SG. Other countries just lost the joke. #SG50ShadesOfGrey
- (45) I don't think people grasp the reason why #SG50ShadesofGrey is such a hit. Then there was #HK50ShadesofGrey..Yall are doing it wrong. :/

That being said, these #SG50ShadesOfGrey joke-tweets were largely popular and successful because it is the presence of sexual innuendoes that makes the tweets funny and more than mere descriptions of a Singaporean's daily life.

*“Innuendo, especially sexual innuendo, may also be used to create certain humorous and titillating effects.” (Bell, 1997: 37)*

The ambiguous contrast between the initial perceived erotized settings and the eventual de-erotized Singapore-reference punchline forms the joke. As de Sousa (1990: 277) described, “The gift of mirth<sup>11</sup> is often described as central to human nature.” It is this common notion that supports these joke-tweets as the primary #SG50ShadesOfGrey element that sparked the people's interest in the hashtag and therefore, becoming the core of this viral trend.

#### **4.4 Other #SG50ShadesOfGrey Twitter content**

##### **4.4.1 Commentary-tweets**

The next most frequent communicative function identified was “making a comment” (refer to Table 2.2). Unlike the #SG50ShadesOfGrey jokes, these commentary-tweets have no recognisable structure but are clear expressions of the user's stance (generally positive and active) on the topic initiated. The following are some examples of users commenting about the #SG50ShadesOfGrey trend:

- (46) THIS IS THE FUNNIEST TREND SINGAPOREANS EVER MADE  
#SG50ShadesOfGrey

<sup>11</sup> Mirth is defined as: : gladness or gaiety as shown by or accompanied with laughter  
Source: <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/mirth>

(47) not really getting this 100% but some of these are so funny haha  
#sg50shadesofgrey

(48) Singaporeans are brilliant! LOL!! #sg50shadesofgrey

(49) this trend best la#SG50ShadesOfGrey

Hashtags in commentary-tweets serve interpersonal functions from their ability to facilitate evaluative meta-comment (Zappavigna, 2015). The hashtags thus elucidates the opinion (evaluation, intentionality, epistemology/social relations of the user) towards the topic and presents the opportunity to negotiate affiliations all while enacting relationships with the readers (Martin & White, 2005). This is attributed to the results (refer to Section 4.2.3) where the 190 commentary tweets identified could not be discerned if it held syntactic function or the tweet consisted purely the hashtag.

#### 4.4.2 News-tweets

The influence of media sharing tools (i.e. the ‘share button’ available on websites) is evident in the #SG50ShadesOfGrey news-tweets. Although the sources of information are largely similar, these 151 user-generated posts are treated as original individual tweets on both the Twitter platform and in my study. The critical point that distinguishes these tweets from a quote tweet and a retweet is that the content is not replicated from tweet-to-tweet, but website-to-tweet. Furthermore, they represent sharing of articles with users supplying personalised opinions in their own tweets, as with the intention of Twitter’s revised status prompt “What’s happening?”. This can be seen in Examples (50) to (52), the URL links provided lead to the same article on #SG50ShadesOfGrey:

(50) #SG50ShadesOfGrey is a success on Twitter because Singaporeans and their filthy minds <http://shar.es/1WtC5G>

(51) Better than the book. <http://mothership.sg/2015/02/sg50shadesofgrey-is-a-success-on-twitter-because-sporeans-and-their-filthy-minds/> ... #SG50ShadesOfGrey

- (52) #SG50ShadesOfGrey is a success on Twitter because S'poreans and their filthy minds  
<http://shar.es/1Wn7Nu> BWAHAHAHAHAHAHA!! Love it!

#### 4.4.3 Advertisement-tweets

Advertisement-tweets hold the smallest percentage (0.6%) across all the tweets collected. Despite so, it is interesting to highlight the different ways in which organisations engage with their followers or potential consumers with the #SG50ShadesOfGrey hashtag:

- (53) Let's just face it and be FRANK, banking just got sexy again.  
 #SG50ShadesofGrey [http://youtu.be/d\\_PbOwPWmCk](http://youtu.be/d_PbOwPWmCk) -- [@frankbyocbc](#)
- (54) Open wide, don't worry I will be gentle with you.... #sg50shadesofgrey Get your tees  
 here at... <https://instagram.com/p/znBniUvjaC/> -- [@wetteeshirtsg](#)

(53) was posted by a Singapore bank (OCBC) to promote their publicity video while (54) was posted by a company of Singapore designers in the fashion industry to promote their merchandise. Advertisers are likely to make their primary communicative function ('to promote') implicit in order to generate interest. As such, the first lines in both tweets were purposefully framed in relation to the familiar #SG50ShadesOfGrey story. A deliberate attempt to associate with the hashtag, (53) capitalised the word "FRANK" and attempted to solicit the idea of being sexy while referencing to the organisation. (54) promoted the tee-shirts as the visual designs suggest inspiration from the hashtag jokes itself. Particularly, this production of tee-shirts will be highlighted in the next chapter.

- (55) #sg50shadesofGrey | #leather bondage #harness from #IVORYJAR #UK | new  
 TODAY at #SectsShop... <https://instagram.com/p/0RrFUjKtpq/> -- [@SectsShop](#)

Similarly, the product advertised in (55) promoted their merchandise through direct association of "bondages" in the sado-masochism context.

4.4.4 Twitter account: @SG50Shades

**FIGURE 6: SCREEN CAPTURE OF TWITTER @SG50SHADES**



A Twitter account @50Shades was set up on 14 February 2015, notably during the peak of the entire #SG50ShadesOfGrey hype. As confirmed by the profile description (refer to Figure 6), this primary purpose of this account was to share popular #SG50ShadesOfGrey tweets and also to contribute to the existing pool of #SG50ShadesOfGrey content. Notably, there is no information relating to the actual person or persons behind this account. However, it was later discovered that it was the same person (or group) that started the *SG50 Shades of Grey* Facebook page (to be discussed in the next chapter).

## 5 Branching out: social life beyond Twitter

As shared on MacDonald’s blog article about hashtags (2015): “Hashtags that straddle its multiple uses (tagging and paralinguage, narrative and informality of speech) are most likely to be successful.” This supported the assertion that the hashtag was successful as it served beyond its original meta-tag use - it started both online and offline conversations and sparked the creativity of people to join in the composition trend.

### 5.1 Youtube

Titled ‘50 Shades Of Grey Parody’, this video was produced by a group of Youtube celebrities – *cheokboardstudios*. Bearing in mind the preparation needed for filming, the release of the video (4 March 2015) was considerably timely, despite being almost a month after the aforementioned peak of the trend. The description of the video shared on the page expresses the producers’ thoughts behind the video production:

*“#SG50ShadesOfGrey*

*OUR MINDS ARE AS DIRTY AS WE WANT IT TO BE...*

*The movie, 50 Shades Of Grey movie was recently released and Singaporeans started to get a little too creative with their tweets. Here's the "watchable" version of them crazy creative tweets online. Watch this and it might just change how you look at certain things.”*

*(Cheokboardstudios, 2015)*

This shed insight into the producers’ take on how human perception works (‘OUR MINDS ARE AS DIRTY AS WE WANT IT TO BE...’). Interestingly, this view is very much in line with the arguments expressed in existing discourse studies (see for example Bell, 1997; Jacobs, 2000; Galiñanes, 2005 and Bai, 2011). Innuendos are largely successful in this aspect because humans ‘make sense of what we hear by continually looking for relevance’ (Auer and Roberts, 2011: 388). In addition, the description given by the producers justifies the inference that the video was largely inspired by the #SG50ShadesOfGrey tweets, joke-tweets in particular. As the producers have

stated that the video was ‘THE “WATCHABLE” VERSION’, it featured characters reenacting ten popular joke-tweets:

**TABLE 5: SELECTED SCENES FROM #SG50SHADESOFGREY VIDEO**

<p><b>Script (tweet):</b></p>	<p>Line A: It was agony.                  Line B: Her hands trembled, body covered in sweat as Mr Tan gave her the D.                  Line C: Amy regretted not studying for Chem. #SG50ShadesOfGrey</p>	
<p><b>Scene 1</b></p>	 <p>He gave her the "D".</p>	
<p><b>Scene 2</b></p>		
<p><b>Scene 3</b></p>	 <p>She regretted not studying harder for her Chemistry test.</p>	
<p><b>Note</b></p>	<p><i>Presumably to facilitate a smooth flow for the video, the script was modified slightly from the chosen joke-tweets.</i></p>	

Comparing the two different forms of mediums, the video brings a multi-layered joke as compared to a textual tweet. The video producers can purposefully direct the viewer's gaze to specifics of content using camera techniques (refer to Table 5) while the writer of the tweet can only rely on the reader's inferential abilities to draw relevant inferences (Scott, 2015).

Notably, the narrator had manipulated her voice intentionally to produce the stereotyped 'sexual voice' (Hughes, Mogilski and Harrison, 2014). The low and breathy voice parallels the societal perception of an attractive-sounding voice (Tuomi and Fisher, 1979 and Hughes et al., 2010). Possibly an attempt to increase its entertainment value, the video did not rely purely on language for the viewer to detect the sexual innuendoes. The verbal trigger (visuals and narration) helped to enhance the joke's *setup* and *punchline*, increasing the humorous effects correspondingly.

## 5.2 Facebook page: SG50 Shades of Grey

FIGURE 7: SCREEN CAPTURE OF SG50 SHADES OF GREY FACEBOOK PAGE

The screenshot displays the Facebook page for the community '#SG50ShadesOfGrey'. The page header includes the hashtag and the page name 'SG50 Shades Of Grey Community'. The page has 470 likes and a 'Write something on this Page...' prompt. The 'ABOUT' section shows the Twitter link 'https://twitter.com/sg50shades'. The 'PHOTOS' section shows two images with the hashtag and 'SG 50'. The 'VISITOR POSTS' section shows two posts:

- A post from 16 March 2015: "It's so long, I like!" she cooed. The President just gave an additional public holiday to celebrate the nation's 50th year of independence. #SG50ShadesOfGrey. 18 people like this.
- A post from 12 March 2015: "Put it on, it's for safety!" she insisted. Her boyfriend's refusal to wear a cycling helmet is irritating her. #SG50ShadesOfGrey.

The right sidebar shows sponsored content and a 'Teach' post from 'moe.gov.sg' about welcoming children into primary school.

The *SG50 Shades Of Grey* Facebook page was first set up on 2<sup>nd</sup> February 2015, noticeably before it was introduced on Twitter. On the Facebook page, articles related to the viral #SG50ShadesOfGrey were shared along with the administrator's own contribution to the existing hashtag content on the Internet. Majority of their Facebook posts contained jokes and follow a similar joke structure identified in the tweets earlier. Unsurprisingly, as Facebook does not restrict the length of the post, the jokes posted on Facebook were significantly longer than the joke-tweets. Take (i) for example where the post had 210 characters, including spaces:

- (i) As soon as he placed it in, he started pumping with reckless abandon. What soon followed however, was the grim realisation....Petrol prices have gone up again due to increased petrol duty... #SG50ShadesOfGrey

As of 3<sup>rd</sup> January 2016, the page has a total number of 471 people 'liking' it and the last post was dated 16<sup>th</sup> March 2015:

- (ii) "It's so long, I like!" she cooed. The President just gave an additional public holiday to celebrate the nation's 50th year of independence. #SG50ShadesOfGrey

### 5.3 Official #SG50ShadesofGrey clothing

*Wet Tee Shirt* is a company that manufactures contemporary tee-shirts in Singapore. According to their company profile found on their website<sup>12</sup>, their tee-shirts are largely inspired by the Singapore local culture, and infuses the humour that Singaporeans will find relatable.

During the trending period of #SG50ShadesOfGrey, *Wet Tee Shirt* collaborated with the team behind the *SG50 Shades of Grey* Facebook page to produce a series of tee-shirts with individual #SG50ShadesOfGrey jokes. This was certainly a strategic move by the designers as the production of the tee shirts generated considerable interest.

**FIGURE 8: #SG50SHADESOFGREY TEESHIRT DESIGN 1**



The following is a conversation where a user offered to buy one of these tee shirts:

(56) Jane: @Tom @Mary now what about a book of #SG50ShadesofGrey's greatest hits? (Pun intended) C'mon it's my b'day next week. Just saying.

Tom: @Jane Happy birthday! I could get you a T-shirt w your fav #SG50ShadesofGrey printed! @Mary

(Note: 'C'mon' = Come on; 'FAV' = Favorite)

<sup>12</sup> For more information: <http://www.wetteeshirt.co/about-us/contact-us>

## 6 Conclusion

Following the increased reliance on technology and particularly social media, the user-generated tweets produced these days performed a more interpersonal function than ever before (McCracken, 2009). The #SG50ShadesOfGrey hashtag though created on Facebook, were viral on Twitter. This increased awareness and social media use led the birth and the viral #SG50ShadesOfGrey phenomenon.

All original tweets that were hashtagged #SG50ShadesOfGrey were categorised according to their user types and communicative functions: ‘telling a joke’, ‘making a comment’, ‘sharing of news’ and ‘advertising’. My corpus-based analyses were subsequently ran through AntConc 3.4.4 to identify frequency patterns across the tweets. The analysis of my study focused mainly on the joke-tweets that emerged when the hashtag went viral in February 2015. The joke-tweets were identified as successful because of the humour that was incited when readers were able to resolve the incongruity or apparent contradiction in the localised, de-erotized #SG50ShadesofGrey story. Particularly, the presence of sexual innuendos played a crucial role in creating humourous effects.

There were insightful findings from my study on hashtagging as a social practice. For one, the increased functionality of hashtags is a large reason to the evolution of this original tagging device into a conventionalised social practice. Corporate organisations tap on this practice to reach out to their existing and potential consumers although more innovative ways can be done to utilize the meta-commentary or paralanguage function of hashtags.

One recommendation for further research could be to perform comparative studies, between similar hashtags or between different platforms, to justify these conventions are not specific to this one phenomenon. Another could be to study the common patterns we use to understand jokes; we can study particularly on the construction of sexual innuendos on large corpora available on the Internet (i.e. corpus-based study on specific verbs and their sexual connotations). Ultimately, the findings from my discourse analysis on #SG50ShadesOfGrey contributes to relevant fields including Pragmatics and Computational Linguistics. It is hoped that the data provides valuable insights for further research.

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