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Hashtagging on Instagram: Functions of Hashtags as Employed by #Instagirls

Abstract

Hashtagging, similarly to tagging, has become an inseparable part of online communication and users' motivation for employing hashtags—especially on the platform of their origin, i.e. Twitter—has attracted the attention of scholars from various fields, including linguistics. In reference to previous studies, this paper aims to expand existing knowledge regarding the role and functions of hashtags by examining Instagram posts, which are, in contrast to tweets, predominantly visual and remain an insufficiently researched area. The analytical data consisting of posts uploaded by three Instafamous personalities, also known as Instagirls, were scanned for the presence of hashtags to determine their frequency and their characteristic traits. The qualitative analysis of posts shows that on Instagram, hashtags are employed to fulfil one of two opposing goals: 1. to serve as a tool for aggregating posts of similar content; 2. to serve as a resource for creative self-expression. Furthermore, since hashtags are often designated as a means of promoting one's visibility, their role as a self-presentation strategy in the construction of micro-celebrity on Instagram is also discussed.

Keywords: hashtags, Instagram, content analysis, functions, micro-celebrity, multimodality

1. Introduction

A significant part of our daily communication has moved online and is mediated via social media platforms. While originally largely asynchronous, online communication is becoming increasingly instantaneous thanks to new developments in the field of information technology. Because of this, users are accustomed to sharing updates from their life in real time and “have developed a number of conventions in order to keep track of the talk that emerges” (Page 2012: 183). Such conventions are, for example, the use of ‘@’ in combination with a username that developed into the practice known as ‘tagging’ and the use of ‘#’ followed by a word (or a phrase) called ‘hashtagging’. Even though these conventions are adopted by social networking sites to various degrees, communication on social media in general demonstrates that metadata (e.g. tags and hashtags) is now able to “work seamlessly inside social media texts [...], subverting its traditional role in separating meta-information from primary content” (Zappavigna 2015:

287). Incorporating metadata into a text is, however, not regulated by any strict guidelines and thus presents a significant challenge which users confront in their daily communication online.

After the introduction of the hash ‘#’ to the social media environment in 2007 by Twitter user Chris Messina¹, users were not equipped with any instruction manuals on how to use it and the practice of hashtagging thus evolved—and is still evolving—organically through the online behaviour of users. A number of studies have been conducted to delineate what hashtagging is and to determine the functions of hashtags on social media platforms, especially on Twitter. Zappavigna (2011), for example, examined a cultural shift to more ‘searchable’ talk and the potential of hashtags on Twitter for establishing ‘ambient affiliation’ which unites not only those users who are interested in the same topics but also those adhering to the same values. Furthermore, in Zappavigna (2015), three communicative functions of hashtags—experiential, interpersonal and textual—were explored in a corpus-based analysis. Page (2012) studied the frequency, role and grammatical context of hashtags in tweets posted by three distinctive groups of users—corporate, celebrity and ‘ordinary’ users—while considering hashtags as a tool for self-branding and promoting one’s visibility. In addition, from the perspective of relevance theory, Scott (2015: 19) demonstrated that hashtags can be employed “to activate certain contextual assumptions [and thus guide] the reader’s inferential processes”.

While both qualitative and quantitative research of hashtagging on Twitter abound, only a small number of linguists have examined hashtags on other social media platforms even though their position there is likewise very influential. Amongst these scholars, China (2018), for example, explored the hashtag #Beyoncé as used on three platforms, namely Twitter, Tumblr and Pinterest, and adopting a social semiotic approach, identified multiple meaning-based identities for Beyoncé. Her study is instrumental and differs from other analyses of social media as it does not limit itself to textual data but takes into account a possibly multimodal character of posts on all three platforms. Also paying attention to the visual content of posts, Matley (2018) examined the pragmatic function of the hashtag #sorrynotsorry on Instagram. While exploring “a range of both face aggravation and mitigation strategies” which users employ when using this hashtag, Matley (2018: 70) demonstrates that #sorrynotsorry functions as a non-apology marker. Furthermore, a notable example of multimodal discourse analysis is Caple (2019), which focuses on the strategies of expressing voter preference in Instagram posts. In light of these studies, the present research recognizes the significant role of hashtags on social media platforms other than Twitter and aims to contribute to the understanding of hashtagging on Instagram, whose interface is predominantly visual.

On Instagram, which is a mobile-based social networking site, users are encouraged to share photos and short videos with their followers in real time on the go—hence the name Instagram where ‘insta’ stands for ‘instant camera’ (Lang 2014). In contrast to Twitter and other networking sites, a photo/video is always required for a successful upload of the post (or the ‘gram’) on Instagram and the preponderance of the visual content is thus likely to influence the arrangement of the textual element, of which hashtags are a part. As a consequence, it would be wrong to automatically assume that hashtags are employed in the same manner and to fulfil the same functions on Instagram as on Twitter, which is textually richer. Therefore, following the tradition of earlier studies, the present research refers to and further develops previously identified functions of hashtags and outlines new implications for their use on Instagram.

Particularly interesting in the context of Instagram is the discussion of celebrity construction as ‘Instafame’ started to play a significant role in areas such as modelling (Djafarova & Rushworth 2017). In

1 <https://chrismessina.me/>

order to achieve popularity online, the user is required to develop an original public image through the process of self-branding and to actively promote it. By following strategies of personal branding and self-presentation, users known as ‘micro-celebrities’ treat their followers—irrespective of their number—as fans and put to use the celebrity demeanour as they know it from the offline world of traditional celebrities (Senft 2008, Marwick 2016). As previous studies of communication on Twitter have shown that hashtags are frequently employed to promote one’s visibility (e.g. Page 2012), it would be interesting to see if hashtagging on Instagram has similar implications and can strategically be used by micro-celebrities for self-branding purposes. This paper therefore also aims to investigate if hashtags are employed consistently by Instagram users with large following and if hashtagging could be considered a characteristic trait of their social media behaviour.

2. Data and methodology

The present analysis deals exclusively with posts published on the photo-sharing social media platform Instagram. Since one of the aims of this paper is to expand the understanding of the concept of ‘micro-celebrity’ while concentrating on the practice of hashtagging as a strategy for self-promotion, the analytical data were extracted from public profiles of three Instafamous personalities. The choice of the profiles was random but chosen specifically to represent one particular group of Instagram users referred to as ‘Instagirls’. The term *Insta-girls*² was originally coined by *Vogue* magazine (Testino 2014) to designate female users of Instagram whose presentation online is carefully curated to emphasize their physical appearance and their model-like lifestyle. It is also important to note that while the term denotes a certain demographic of users active on a specific social media platform, its first use is reported in traditional media outlets (e.g. *Vogue*) and is now commonly employed in other online and offline contexts as well.

As far as their fandom and visibility is concerned, a large percentage of Instagirls earned their fame outside of social media (e.g. in the fashion or film industry, modelling, through family or a close relationship with a celebrity) but their presence and engagement on social media, in particular on Instagram, has helped them increase their popularity and provided them with new career opportunities. Current research in celebrity studies underscores the importance of ‘Instafame’, showing that it has become “the latest criterion for models” as model agencies nowadays take the user’s online presence into consideration before casting them (Djafarova & Rushworth 2017: 3). The other group of Instagirls has, on the other hand, gained popularity solely through their original social media presence and the successful practice of self-presentation and self-branding. Instagram and other social media networks are thus to be considered here as both the tool for and the driving force behind their recognition and celebrity. In order to be successful, users apply a number of ‘micro-celebrity’ practices that have been inspired by celebrity culture and adapted to the Web 2.0 environment (Marwick 2016). Owing to this, the paper primarily focuses on the first group of Instagirls who already have some experience with celebrity culture outside of social media. We suggest that these are the users who provide an unwritten norm of the social media behaviour and to whom aspiring Instagirls turn and are inspired by. This class of Instagirls is currently

2 The word-formation process of the term *Instagirl* is in line with other denominations of women in the context of their media presence. Note, for example, *cover girl* for magazines (traditional media) and *Camgirls* (Senft, 2008) for webcamming and weblogs (Web 2.0).

represented by Gigi and Bella Hadid, Kendall Jenner, Hailey Baldwin, Emily Ratajkowski among others (Okwodu 2016). It is argued that comprehending and mastering communicative strategies of this group of Instagram users will cast valuable light on the celebrity construction on Instagram, represented by the second group of Instagirls.

For the present analysis, Instagram profiles of three Instagirls with a varying number of followers (from several million to more than one hundred million followers) were closely examined and their posts were scanned for the presence of hashtags. Having assessed the nature of Instagirls' online behaviour—and in order to meet the needs of qualitative research—posts published in three different months (November 2016, February 2017 and May 2017) were collected and stored with the accompanying data, i.e. images and videos, and metadata such as tags. To avoid manipulation with the data by other users of Instagram and the Instagirls themselves (e.g. the deletion of the post or the inclusion of new comments and likes), posts published in November 2016 were originally selected for the analysis as it is deemed unlikely that the poster would delete an older post or followers would engage with other than up-to-date posts. Since the first collection of data did not yield a sufficiently large sample, posts published in two other months were added to the sample (February 2017 and May 2017). The two-month interval between the sampling time frames was chosen strategically to achieve a higher thematic diversity of posts. The collection of the data took place in June 2018 with an update of all figures in February 2019. Altogether, 227 posts were collected and studied in detail.

While focusing on the practice of hashtagging, the examination of the data showed that hashtags had been employed in 87 posts (38% of posts). In this sample of 87 posts, 115 hashtags were identified, giving an average of 1,3 hashtags per post.³ When compared to other studies of hashtagging (e.g. Page 2012, Matley 2018, China 2018), it is essential to note that the present analysis does not limit its data exclusively to posts containing a pre-defined hashtag and identified using the Search option directly on the platform. On the contrary, hashtags are considered to be organically produced in the user's behaviour on social media and are thus studied in the context of the accompanying posts in the user's profile. Even though the present analysis does not study hashtags as employed by the general usership, it provides valuable insights into their appropriation and usage by a specific group of users called Instagirls. Adopting the content analysis approach, the role of hashtags and their functions in the given context are reviewed and the implications of hashtagging are proposed. Moreover, since Instagram posts contain elements of two different modes, i.e. textual and visual, the relationship between the caption and the image is also taken into account. For the purposes of transparency and due to privacy reasons, any specific names (usernames, brand names, product names, etc.) have been omitted and replaced by general labels, e.g. *username*, *hashtag*.

3. Hashtags on Instagram: Their frequency and functions

3.1 Product posts

As discussed above, 115 hashtags distributed among 87 posts have been detected in the collected data. A considerable number of these hashtags (45 hashtags, i.e. 39%) were used in a group of posts that are

³ The overall frequency of hashtags in the present data is 0,5 hashtag per post.

to be termed here ‘product posts’. Such posts—while published on Instagram—resemble traditional forms of advertisements such as magazine advertisements (if static) or TV commercials (if containing a moving image or a short clip) in which a product or service is promoted. The majority of hashtags employed in these posts correspond either with the name of a specific product, the name of a company, their collections or slogans. Specifically, 76% of hashtags employed in product posts assume this form. This confirms the findings by Page (2012: 198) in her study of the role of hashtags within the practices of self-branding and micro-celebrity on Twitter: “hashtags are used most frequently by corporations and celebrity practitioners, who use these hashtags to make visible company names, slogans and products”. Hashtags of this kind, however, are not employed merely as a marketing tool as they also enable the retrieval of similar content through search directly on the social media platform. This use of hashtags traces back to the grassroots initiative to use the symbol ‘#’ followed by a word or a phrase to denote groups of tweets with a similar content (Heyd & Puschmann 2017), making it the primary function of hashtags. As evidenced by the present data, using hashtags as “a hyperlink, allowing users to search for any content that includes the same tag” (Scott 2015: 12) still remains a very common and influential practice.

The remainder of the hashtags employed in product posts is mostly comprised of #spon and #ad hashtags which social media influencers use to signal sponsored content—see (1) below.⁴ These hashtags serve as context clues since they supply information on the nature of the post and enable the audience to identify the type of brand endorsement⁵ (sponsored vs. non-sponsored).

(1) [video clip of the user dipping an ice lolly into chocolate] Now watch me dip 🍦 😊 ... #
hashtag1 #hashtag2 #hashtag3 @username #spon

In (1), the three hashtags—the first one being the name of an ice-cream-producing company, the second one naming their promotional event and the third one being their campaign slogan—are strategically employed towards the end of the post in the rhematic position. The rheme, according to the Functional Syntax Perspective theory (Firbas 1992), provides new information and thus stands in opposition to the theme, which orients the reader towards what is being communicated (cf. Zappavigna 2015 for her discussion of Theme and New information). As a consequence, hashtags in this position gain greater prominence and simultaneously draw the attention of the audience to the product and the company.

3.2 Hashtags as topic markers and context clues

If focusing solely on its form, the post can be divided into three parts - beginning, middle and end—and hashtags can be employed in either one of these locations, termed specifically *infix*, *prefix* and *suffix*

4 According to Instagram policies, the user is required to tag a business partner in the post if there is an exchange of value involved between the two parties (*Instagram.com* 2019). The Committee of Advertising Practice in the UK has furthermore issued the Influencer’s Guide which provides guidelines for influencers on how to indicate sponsored content in their posts. Using #ad and/or #spon is considered essential to make clear that the post is sponsored (Source: <https://www.asa.org.uk/resource/influencers-guide.html>).

5 In the present data—albeit in a marginal number of cases—Instagirls were also observed to endorse a particular awareness-raising cause through employing hashtags such as #equalmeanequal, #withrefugees, #womeninfilmm in their posts. Devoting posts to such topics indicates what particular cause the user endorses and promotes and in what ways constructs her identity online.

positions (Tsur & Rappoport 2015). Previous research has shown that besides being used as the marketing tool as shown above, hashtags in the suffix position are often employed to define the “topic” of the post (Zappavigna 2015: 287). This topic-defining function—elsewhere also termed the “aboutness” of the posts (Kehoe & Gee 2011)—was also recorded in the Instagram data—see (2) and (3).

(2) [**video clip of the user having a pillow fight with her dad**] When you gotta put your dad to 🤪. Lol! #pillowfight #nightnight @username

(3) [**video clip of a pole dancing lesson**] Breaking the workout routine with my fiery chica @username #stripclass Part I 😊

Similarly to hashtags that are used for the purposes of brand promotion, this type of hashtag enables users to aggregate posts of the same topic through search, e.g. #pillowfight assembles posts that denote content related to the pillow fight, even though they have been uploaded by various users from different locations around the world. Interestingly, the data shows that toponyms are also employed as hashtags in the suffix position (e.g. #Paris, #Bahamas, #PuertoRico) where they simultaneously fulfill two functions: a) they aggregate posts of similar content, i.e. #Bahamas for breath-taking seaside photos; b) they geolocate the post and make public the information on where the photo/video was taken. In addition, names of various events and occasions are often used in a similar vein—see (4) where #vsfashionshow is used to denote the post that concerns a famous fashion show and (5) where #NYFW stands for New York Fashion Week. Altogether, 28 hashtags in the dataset function as topic markers.

(4) [**photo of models**] Backstage Madness with these beauties! 📸 @username #vsfashionshow

(5) [**photo of the user having her hair styled**] Back at it #NYFW

As previous research (Zappavigna 2015, Scott 2015) emphasizes, hashtags are often used in the suffix position to provide contextual information that is necessary for the desired interpretation of the post. To illustrate this, by relying solely on the caption ‘Just stating the obvious’ in (6), one would not be able to arrive at a complete interpretation of the post even though the user claims it is ‘obvious’. The hashtag #backtowork and the accompanying photo thus supply additional contextual information necessary for the interpretation of the post.

(6) [**photo of the user in the car**] Just stating the obvious @username #backtowork

Using hashtags to provide necessary contextual information has become a common practice especially on Twitter due to its 280-character tweet limit. “This function of hashtags [thus] offers an efficient and effective way to manage communication in the impoverished mediated context” (Scott 2018: 59). Interestingly, such use of hashtags is also frequently⁶ documented on Instagram—for example, in (6) above—even though the character limit of the caption is more generous (2,200 characters) and the post is always accompanied either by a photo or a video, which provides additional contextual information. It is, therefore, argued that employing hashtags that contain further contextual clues on Instagram should not be understood as a way of confronting the character-limit challenge but as a creative resource for expressing the desired interpretation. While Instagrammers are likely to have appropriated this use of hashtags to ensure clear and effective communication on the basis of the model they are familiar with from

6 Approximately one third of hashtags in the dataset function as context clues.

Twitter and other social networking sites, the role of hashtags in clarifying the meaning of the Instagram post is less integral than in a tweet which is mostly devoid of any visual cues. It is also essential to note that the Instagram caption can be composed of hashtags only, i.e. without any non-hyperlinked text, which would serve as a mediator between the visual element and hashtags—see (7) and (8).

(7) [**photo of the beach**] #nofilter

(8) [**photo of the user with untidy hair**] #Messy

Analysing the relationship between the two modes in (7) and (8), each hashtag performs a different function with regard to the image. According to Barthes's (1977) analysis of the linguistic message and its relation to the image, #nofilter in (7) performs the function of *relay* while #Messy in (8) the function of *anchorage*. In (7), #nofilter and the photo of the beach both provide complementary information equally important for the interpretation of the post. On the other hand, (8) contains a close-up photo of the user whose interpretation is supported by the accompanying hashtag #Messy and thus emphasizes the untidy hair. Owing to their role in clarifying the meaning of the photo, hashtags can be regarded as “very good predictors of the visual topic of the Instagram post” (Cagle 2019: 17-18). Nevertheless, Cagle's analysis (2019) also revealed several instances where the visual element of the post either does not correspond to what the hashtag describes, or offers its alternative (often humorous) reading. This finding, however, was not confirmed in the present analysis as all Instagram posts here use hashtags which comply with the visual element and the rest of the caption. While it cannot—due to the size of the dataset—be categorically dismissed that Instagirls do not use hashtags in ways that do not comply with the post type, we argue that this practice is disfavoured by Instagirls. The possible explanation is that since they use their posts to build their public image, they would not like to be simultaneously seen as disruptors of their online behaviour and their own personal brand.

3.3 Hashtags as identity labels and metacomments

The Instagirl's personal brand—as is the case of every Instagrammer—is constructed alongside her online identity through her front stage behaviour on social media (Goffman 1959). Hashtags fulfil a very important role here as they can be exploited by users to specifically label their self-proclaimed identity. Even though hashtags used as identity labels form the least numerous category in the dataset, they represent a very creative tool for self-branding. See, for example, (9) where the Instagirl explains that her identity of the #IslandBaby—evidenced by the accompanying photo—is reinforced by the fact that she was born under Cancer (replaced by the symbol ).

(9) [**photo of the user on a jet ski**]  =  #IslandBaby

Moreover, the present data shows that in order to become synonymous with the product/brand they promote, users creatively construct and employ hashtags as identity labels in formats similar to the following: #**BRAND**Model⁷, #**BRAND**Ambassador, #**BRAND**Club. It is also possible that the use of these hashtags is required by individual sponsors to track the activity of the Instagram users they collaborate with. Nevertheless, examples of posts such as (10) below demonstrate that hashtags can also be employed “to build a minimal self-praising pattern and to authenticate claims to status” (Dayter 2014: 101).

7 The highlighted section ‘BRAND’ is to be exchanged for any name of a brand, product, collection, etc.

(10) [**photo of the user wearing a stylish dress**] NYC w @username #BRANDModel

Besides the roles described above, hashtags are further demonstrated to function as tools for expressing the user's attitude and opinion on the topic discussed in the post (Scott 2015, Scott 2018, Zappavigna 2015, Page 2012). Despite being less frequent,⁸ this practice of employing hashtags to "provide information about the speaker's attitude towards the main proposition" (Scott 2018: 61) has been attested in the present dataset, e.g. #soproud in (11) and #bloated, which indicates that the user considers the situation unnecessarily exaggerated, in (12). It is also important to note that the user's attitude is emphasized in these posts by the inclusion of flashy emoji such as 🖐️ for middle finger.

(11) [**photo of four users wearing medals**] ❤️ 🗲 Well done ladies ❤️ 🗲 So sad I couldn't take part this year @username1 #soproud @username1 @username2 @username3 @username4

(12) [**photo of a public announcement**] 🖐️ 🌀 🖐️ it's shameless to discuss women's bodies just to sell papers #bloated ❤️ 🗲 @username

Hashtags in situations like (11) and (12) are hence regarded as a form of metacomment (Scott 2015, Scott 2018) or meta-evaluation (Zappavigna 2015). While hashtags #soproud and #bloated name a specific emotion that the user experiences, in other cases the user's feeling "must be inferred from the content of the hashtag" (Scott 2018: 61). See, for example, (13) where the Instagirl's excitement is deduced from #ItsgonnabeEpic.

(13) [**close-up of models**] These faces ❤️ 🗲 #ItsgonnabeEpic

As Zappavigna (2015) notes, hashtags conveying the user's emotion can sometimes become too specific and verbose and thus risk never being replicated by other users. Consequently, the aim of such idiosyncratic uses of hashtags is not to aggregate as many posts of the same content as possible, but the exact opposite—to differentiate one particular post from the other ones and to emphasize its originality. Supported by previous studies and the present analysis, hashtags thus operate in two opposing directions on Instagram: 1. as a tool for aggregating posts of similar content (i.e. primary function); 2. as a tool for creative self-expression, highlighting the individuality of the post (i.e. secondary function).

Conclusion

While the practice of hashtagging is not native to Instagram but was gradually incorporated into the platform according to the model functioning on other social networking sites, in particular Twitter, it is evident from the analysis that the use of hashtags has been fully embraced by Instagrammers and that they themselves have propelled its further development. The fact that hashtagging on Instagram thrives can be additionally illustrated by two interesting examples of hashtags, namely #repost and #regram, that were also identified in the present data. These two hashtags have been modelled after #retweet but since sharing posts of other users is not intrinsic to Instagram, their function here differs. While the function of #retweet (alternatively #RT) on Twitter is to encourage others to tweet the user's post and hence share it with one's audience (Zappavigna 2015), #repost and #regram on Instagram are used to label any

⁸ Hashtags functioning as metacomments represent 7% of the dataset.

content that originates either outside of the user's profile (e.g. when sharing someone else's post, usually in the form of a screenshot) or outside of Instagram as such (e.g. when sharing a screenshot of the user's Facebook update). Another interesting group of hashtags represented by #TBT (Throwback Thursday), #FBF (Flashback Friday) or #WBW (Way back When/Wednesday) is employed in posts to show the user's participation in various trends popularized by social media. While Instagram plays a very influential role in promoting such trends, their detailed analysis is beyond the scope of this paper and these hashtags were therefore preliminary subsumed under the category of context clues.

The present research into the communicative practices of Instagirls confirms that hashtagging forms an inseparable part of their social media behaviour. Users wishing to gain higher following and to achieve a celebrity-like status should, therefore, take into account the power of hashtags and grasp the rules of hashtagging as set by the more successful fellow Instagrammers. The analysis has shown that hashtags perform a number of functions that are never arbitrary and their meaning is always dependant on the context of the whole post. Furthermore, a detailed examination of the data proved that hashtags are employed in Instagram posts on the basis of one of two opposing motivations: 1. the motivation to assign the post to an existing aggregate of posts that are of similar content; 2. the motivation to separate the post from other existing posts and thus highlight its individuality. The first motivation was observed in product posts which aim to promote certain products, services or causes. In addition, using hashtags as topic markers and identity labels is also incited by the underlying purpose to group similar posts together and a quick search on Instagram confirms that, for instance, #stripclass and #IslandBaby—both documented above—aggregate posts of similar content. On the contrary, the second motivation was evidenced in posts with hashtags that function as metacomments. When used in the search query, these hashtags (e.g. #Itsgonnabeepic, #soproud) bring together posts of diverse content and, as a consequence, make each post distinctive and unique. Concerning hashtags that function as context clues in Instagram posts (e.g. #backtowork, #nofilter), the motivation for their use is not consistent throughout the data, especially due to the size of the present dataset, and cannot be objectively determined at this point. In order to confirm what the dominant motivation for their use is, the analysis of a large dataset is required.

Moreover, the analysis of the data showed that context is instrumental in distinguishing between the functions performed by hashtags, especially if a large number of hashtags is employed in one post. In such cases, it is important to consider all hashtags both individually and collectively as each brings new insights into the interpretation of the post. One should also keep in mind that functions which hashtags assume are dynamic and a hashtag that started as a mere form of creative self-expression might with time turn into, for example, a promotional slogan replicated in millions of posts. Research into the evolution and lifespan of hashtags thus presents an intriguing study of the online environment and could provide valuable findings for further discussion of hashtagging.

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