#community: Hashtags generate a sense of belonging

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Abstract

This paper explores how hashtags are used on social media as a kind of textual signpost signifying aspects of our identity. Through these signposts users alert others to their emotions, thoughts and affiliations, all of which help generate a sense of belonging to something online. From its beginnings as a searchable piece of metadata, hashtags help others find others beyond their own circle of friends to discover a collective of similar ideas from an audience which now existed beyond their friends list. Following a political debate with the addition of a hashtag can signify to others your personal views on current events and signify to others your desire to be involved in the conversation. A hashtag can be used to express an individual experience and generate feelings of solidarity between users. A hashtag can perform the role of impression management through self-presentation. Hashtags, when taken collectively, add cultural value to a conversation. For contemporary social media users, hashtags are multidimensional and have evolved into ways of building both strong and weak ties with others, signifying a desire to be part of and belong to the community.

It is hard to visit a social media network today without noticing appended hashtags. From what were originally intended as a means for categorising Twitter content, hashtags

today have defined political movements, become markers signifying support for a cause, use as an opiniated expression and can even be used as trigger to add an item to a shopping cart. Publishing personal thoughts, pictures, comments on public events, cultural taste etc., on social media sites is a new form of identity building in individualist societies (Aguiton & Cardon, 2007). From its very beginnings, in a social media context, Twitter users employed hashtags to organise and categorise their tweets, making reading the Twitter feed a more productive task. Hashtags did this by helping users scan for the tweets that contain particular hashtags on subjects and ignoring the tweets that were not important or as relevant (Pandell, 2017). A few years later Twitter made improvements to the hashtag functionality with the addition of hyperlinks. A hyperlinked hashtag grouped all Tweets with that specific hashtag into a single page of search results (Rao, 2009). An evolution was unfolding. Individuals now had a means for tagging personal thoughts on content and events. The searchable hashtag functionality was essentially a paradigm shift from simple categorisation to something which made it possible for social media users to discover a collective of similar ideas from an audience which now existed beyond their friends list. For contemporary social media users, hashtags are multidimensional and have evolved into ways of building both strong and weak ties with others, signifying a desire to be part of and belong to the community.

The integration of hashtags into conversations on Twitter is a useful communication tool. A diverse spectrum of global Twitter users are discoverable through a connected network of conversational threads grouped together by a hashtag (Zappavigna, 2015). Other leading social network sites followed suit with Instagram incorporating support for hashtags in January 2011 (Introducing Hashtags on Instagram, 2011) and Facebook's hashtag rollout starting in 2013 - which it claimed was implemented to help users participate in public

conversations by discovering "some of the interesting discussions people are having about public events, people, and topics" (Lindley, 2013). Users were assigning their own meaningful hashtags to their content rather than being assigned by the social media platform. This creates a social 'folksonomy'. A folksonomy that evolves through social media describes how people tag posts using their own vocabulary to add explicit meaning (Vander Wal, 2007). As a linguistic device, hashtags serve multiple purposes, from grouping together content on topics to explaining a user's emotional state. For example, on Instagram, a popular social media site for sharing images, a user could post a picture of a home cooked meal and add the hashtags "#GlutenFree", "#nailedIt" and "#epicFail". Each of these tags informs us different particulars about the user. One is a physical trait of the meal, being gluten free, the other two can be tied to modern memes and personal emotions. They identify how the user feels about their cooking skills. While the first hashtag is a searchable categorisation, the addition of the second and third hashtag may serve no other function than to indicate the emotional state of the user. This use of the hashtag in this form is performing the role of impression management through self-presentation. For other users, reading the hashtag may generate an emotional response. This creates an interpersonal bond, linking together the users (Zappavigna, 2015). The use of hashtags as a form of self-presentation online, is a communicative method of creating a connection online with many users, generating a sense of community.

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Erving Goffman (1971) proposed that interpersonal relationships and identity are constructed by the individual as a performance of carefully crafted management of impressions. Online, and particularly through social media, we curate our stream of personal information by choosing which image we are going to post or which situation we want to

have our say about – and hashtags provide a linguistic tool to add meaning to what we share. In the article 'Towards a Sociological Understanding of Social Media: Theorizing Twitter', Dhiraj Murthy (2012) describes the textual conventions employed by users to portray meaning, these include emojis and textual cues. As an identity performance, these textual cues could also be extended to the hashtag (Levine, 2014). Given the limitations of character space in a tweet, or misinterpretation of an image, social media posts may give off an unintended or accidental impression. This can be somewhat managed using a directed and purposeful hashtag attached to a post. Taking the example of the person's Instagram picture of a failed cooking attempt, at first glance, the image itself may give the impression that the user is proud of their cooking attempt as they have posted it and shared it for the world to see. However, the addition of the #nailedit hashtag is a self-deprecating cue with implied meaning that they may not be taking their attempt too seriously (Know Your Meme, 2011). Current online social media platforms allow users to play with and manipulate the way people perceive their identity (Iqani & Schroeder, 2016). In times past, before Web 2.0 and the interactive web, identity issues such as race, sexual orientation, economic standing or religion were constructed by our physical relationships and crafted under a set of constrained circumstances (Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008). Today our identity can be explored online without ever meeting similar people face-to-face (Williams, 2008). Hashtags are a way to convey aspects our identity online as we seek out others who have identified themselves in a similar form online. For example, social media sites like Instagram provide opportunities for us to create a persona that may or may not match our real-life persona or what other might see in a face-to-face meeting. In some instances, these social media sites offer us an opportunity to create multiple accounts with each with different personas and each a performance with the opportunity of reaching different and unique audiences.

A hashtag can be used to signify a sense of belonging. Taken as a form of metadata attached to a post, a hashtag becomes searchable criteria for users across the globe and a single hashtag may serve different or multiple purposes. This multidimensional aspect of the hashtag can signify a person's interest in a topic as well as signifying to others their involvement in the community of users who are also using the same hashtag (Zappavigna, 2015). For example, users following the political debate in Australia may choose to use the hashtag #AUSPOL to signify they are interested in a particular candidate or political movement, at the same time signifying to others that they wish to be involved in the political discussion. In a recent study, Vaccari, Chadwick, & Loughlin (2015) found that users who use this practice are often highly educated and signifying to others that they have a distinct interest in politics. This is a very public display of their preferences and can be used as a method of identity profiling (Vaccari et al., 2015). In a similar fashion, the use of hashtags can not only signify a person's preferences, but also reflect their motives and reasons to feel part of a community (Porter, 2015). This is evident through activism or protest hashtags. Similarly, the Occupy movement during the 2000s, which began as a physical protest on Wall Street to demonstrate the growing differences between the wealthiest citizens of the United States and the rest of the country (Gibson, 2013). Online, through social media networks, the movement spread to more cities across the United States and globally as a larger social movement and people identified themselves as participants in this movement using the #occupy hashtag. This hashtag was then used to signify a user's geographic identity through the addition of their city, often appended to the hashtag, for example #occupySydney. It has been demonstrated that the use of these hashtags had created a personal connection with participants at physical locations and through the network of online users in other parts of the

world (Croeser & Highfield, 2014). Similarly, and most recently on social media, the popularity of the hashtag #MeToo has been used to express an individual experience and at the same time generate feelings of solidarity between users who have experienced sexual harassment or violence (Davis and Zarkov, 2018). Friedman and McAdam (1992) state that expressing a desire to partake in a collective social movement is akin to attaching a desire to assume the traits of that movement in one's personal identity. Therefore, it could be seen that by attaching a hashtag to a social media post, signifying a connection with a cause or political movement, is publicly signifying the desire to be recognised as part of the collective identity traits of that group or community.

The introduction of mobile technology to the home environment has enabled their use while participating in other activities, for example watching television while simultaneously tweeting. Television has traditionally provided the starting point for conversations with peers, friends and family. Mobile technology and online social media applications shift the communication boundaries from these traditional close personal ties to an audience that exist beyond conventional face-to-face ties. Katz, Rice, Acord, Dasgupta and David (2004) found that the informal nature of online conversation, as often realised through social media, promotes the opportunity for people who want to share their opinions with others who they may not have close personal relations. Technology is being used in this way to support the formation of online communities who are bound together by a shared interest (Wellman & Gulia, 1999). Ties within the group are strengthened as everyone participating by tagging their post with a common hashtag benefit through extended and varied conversations (Katz et al., 2004). Today many discussions online via social media involve the practice of participating in live televised events through comments or posts on social media (Vaccari et

al., 2015). Event-specific hashtags, for example a named live event or television show title, have provided viewers new methods of following conversations about televised content in real time. Engaging with content by following a hashtag is providing a shared viewing experience between users who would have previously not had the means to communicate with each other. For example, during the recent broadcast of the Olympic Games in London, communities of users on social media posted their frustration and disappointment in the televised coverage with the use of the hashtag #NBCFail. O'Hallarn and Shapiro's (2014) analysis of the use of this hashtag showed that the use of this hashtag created an instant and live shared experience for the participants. The use of event specific hashtags during televised events ties these people together under a singular commonality. Many reasons exist for individuals to feel the need to participate in online discussions, including enjoyment, self-expression and self-identity (Porter, 2015). There is supporting evidence to show that users who are participating, by sharing their opinions and reactions on broadcasts, desire to be part of a larger community, however, these connections may not be as meaningful as physical real-world connections (Wohn & Na, 2011). Their insincerity and looseness may fool the user into believing that they belong to something greater (Kats et al, 2006). Aguiton and Cardon (2007) describe users who contribute and engage in online communities in this way are creating 'weak' connections. None the less, these weak connections represent opportunities for people to share their thoughts and emotions on topics and ways to express their identity amongst others who are also freely sharing their opinions. All users benefit in this community, as taken collectively, individual contributions add cultural value to a conversation when the conversation is viewed as a whole (Bennet, 2012). To this extent, collectively these hashtaged posts are a social commodity, given freely, which strengthen social ties and increase feelings of connectedness - which are foundation feelings to

belonging (Kats et al., 2004). By tagging a post with a hashtag these weak connections bind users together socially to support feelings of belonging.

Social media continue to play a large part in the formation of communities online. A single hashtag can evoke similar feelings and emotional ties between users. A hashtag can generate a sense of empowerment through social activism, or a hashtag can simply make you feel as if you are part of a larger conversation by sharing your opinion with other users. Whether targeted or casually added to a social media post, hashtag use signifies to other users an intention or motive. Grouped together, under a single hashtag, individual social media posts provide combined cultural value. The evolution of the hashtag, from a way to categorise posts to one that binds similar users together from across the globe, the hashtag continues to create communities online by binding users together.

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