
A Socio-Semantic Analysis of Hashtag Activism on Twitter

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Abstract: *This paper is concerned with investigating how hashtags on Twitter impact society. It examines the ways in which these hashtags unite individuals, establish common identities, and call attention to issues in society. Through the examination of ten widely used hashtags, it shows how they organize online conversations. This paper delves into how social interactions and meanings shape hashtag activism using socio-semantic theory. In addition, it examines community formation, power dynamics, and key influencers in these movements. Moreover, it highlights how hashtag activism derives meaningful social change and pushes for a fairer society.*

Keywords: *Socio, Semantic, Hashtag, Social Media, Twitter.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Recently, social media platforms, particularly Twitter, have emerged as powerful tools for activism, enabling individuals to articulate their opinions, raise consciousness, and garner backing for various social and political causes. Hashtag activism is a form of internet activism that uses hashtags to bring together people who have a common cause or concern. This phenomenon has received acclaim for its capacity to empower individuals who lack a voice. People have praised this phenomenon for its ability to give voice to those who don't have it.

Although hashtag activism is widely used, there is still a lack of understanding of its socio-semantic effects; that is, there is a limited understanding of how hashtag activism works and its influence on public discourse. Conducting research in this area is essential in order to bridge the gap between online activism and the effects that occur in the real world. Thus, this paper tries to answer the following questions

1. What are the communicative functions of hashtags on Twitter?



2. How are hashtags on Twitter utilized to bring people together and create a sense of unity and shared identity?
3. What are the ways in which hashtags affect society?

Depending on the previously mentioned questions, it is hypothesized that hashtag activism may function as topic-marking, aggregation, socializing, excuses, irony, providing metadata, expressing attitudes, initiating movements, propaganda, and brand marketing. Users on Twitter utilize hashtags by adding the "#" symbol before relevant keywords or phrases in their tweets, which enables them to participate in existing conversations, initiate new ones, and spread their messages to a wider audience. Additionally, it impacts society by facilitating discussions on crucial subjects, coordinating protests, disseminating information, educating about social issues, and amplifying voices that often remain unheard.

2. RELATED WORKS

Johnson and Martinez's study on Twitter's hashtag activism explores its socio-semantic dynamics, linguistic content, diffusion patterns, and impact on public discourse. They also examine the role of social networks, influencers, and cultural context in shaping hashtag movements' effectiveness and longevity, providing insights into the evolving digital activism landscape. Following this, Lee and Garcia's study on Twitter hashtag activism explores its mechanisms and implications. They analyze hashtag campaigns, their role in social mobilization, identity construction, and agenda-setting. The study also examines platform affordances, user engagement, and offline mobilization efforts. The findings offer valuable insights for activists, policymakers, and scholars interested in technology, communication, and social change.

1. Hashtag Activism

Hashtag activism, also known as the practice of organizing public support or advocating for a cause through social media, has gained popularity as an effective method of expressing support for social change. It possesses the capability to introduce new viewpoints into public discussions (Bornila, 2015). In contrast to conventional forms of activism, hashtag activism does not require any active engagement from people beyond just sharing or liking a post or retweeting tweets on Twitter.

According to Burgess (2011), Twitter's popularity and convenience for public communication grew primarily due to user-led innovations, with the majority of applications emerging later. One significant innovation was the hashtag (#), initially intended to organize Twitter conversations. Over time, hashtags gained widespread use not only on Twitter but also on other social media platforms.

Originally, Twitter introduced the hashtag as a tool for organizing online conversations, which Occupy Wall Street Movement activists used to orchestrate spontaneous protests (Yaverbaum, 2015). Since its inception, various social media platforms, particularly Twitter, have widely utilized the term or symbol "#" to strategize and organize social awareness campaigns, instigate rallies and marches, exchange personal narratives, and foster solidarity among communities, all with the aim of effecting societal transformation.



2. Socio Semantic

Socio-semantic theory investigates the complex connection between social interactions and semantic meaning, highlighting the impact of social settings on the understanding and formation of meaning. This idea suggests that language is not only a set of symbols with unchanging meanings but is instead influenced by social elements such as culture, power dynamics, and interpersonal interactions.

Socio-semantic theory emphasizes the concept of social constructionism, which asserts that meaning is not inherent in words or symbols but is instead determined and formed by social interactions. According to Berger and Luckmann (1966), humans cooperatively create and maintain common perceptions of reality through continuous communication and engagement within social groupings.

Moreover, Benjamin Lee Whorf (1956) established the concept of linguistic relativity, which argues that the structure of a language influences the way its speakers perceive and think. This concept highlights the impact of social and cultural elements on the interpretation of meaning, as language mirrors and strengthens societal standards, principles, and beliefs.

In addition, symbolic interactionism, as theorized by George Herbert Mead (1934), emphasizes the significance of symbols in influencing social interactions and creating collective understandings. From this viewpoint, people derive meaning from symbols by considering their social environment and previous encounters, resulting in the collaborative construction of significance throughout social exchanges.

Within the realm of hashtag activism on Twitter, the use of socio-semantic theory allows for a comprehensive understanding of how social interactions within online communities impact the perception and spread of hashtag meanings. For instance, the significance of a hashtag might change over time if it is adopted by different user communities or employed in different situations. Moreover, the power dynamics on online platforms can influence which voices are given more attention and whose interpretations become more prominent in hashtag activism campaigns.

To sum up, socio-semantic theory provides valuable perspectives on the dynamic relationship between social interactions and semantic meaning. It emphasizes the significance of taking social context into account when interpreting and constructing language.

2.1 Social Dynamics of Hashtag Activism

This paper investigates the social dynamics involved in hashtag activism. It specifically examines how online communities are formed, the power dynamics within these communities, and the analysis of networks. The study also looks at how online communities are created around specific social issues, influential individuals, and patterns of engagement.

Hashtags are effective tools for creating online communities centered around specific social issues, facilitating connections among individuals who have shared concerns. According to Boyd (2007), hashtags allow for the formation of "imagined communities" on social media platforms. These communities bring together people from different backgrounds and experiences to engage in discussions and take action towards common goals or issues. The establishment of a community fosters a sense of togetherness and shared identity among individuals, hence reinforcing their dedication to the activism endeavors aided by the hashtag.

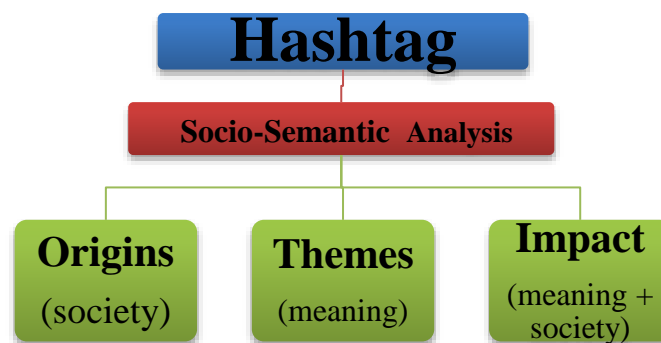
A comprehensive understanding of power dynamics is essential for analyzing the patterns of engagement and influence within hashtag activism campaigns. Castells (2015) argues that power plays a crucial role in building online social movements, as dominant actors in digital networks have influence over the flow of information and agenda setting. Power imbalances can impact whose voices are given more prominence in hashtag conversations, often leading to underrepresented groups encountering obstacles in actively engaging.

Examining power dynamics among hashtag activism movements can reveal tactics for advancing more inclusive and fair forms of online activism. Network analysis techniques play a critical role in identifying important influencers and patterns of interaction within hashtag activism networks. Karpf (2012) proposes that researchers might reveal the fundamental frameworks of online social movements by mapping connections between users and investigating patterns of interaction. This analysis uncovers the contributions made by influential users, community leaders, and organizational players in influencing the direction of hashtag campaigns. Gaining insight into these dynamics provides guidance for improving the efficacy of online activism endeavors and optimizing their influence on societal transformation.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Data Collection and Description

The data for the current study is collected from Twitter's API under study. Thus, ten hashtags are chosen randomly. Basically, the target data represent actual real-world legal cases that can be considered natural, reliable, and authentic sources for the analysis of dialogue evasion. The present study employs qualitative research methods to synthesize the data. Qualitative methods include describing the types of characteristics of the characters and events without comparing them in terms of measurement amounts (Thomas, 2003). After the data is collected, a qualitative analysis is done by considering their origins, key moments of activity, themes, and impacts, as elaborated in the following figure:



3.2 Data Analysis

1. #BlackLivesMatter

Origin: it starts in 2013 after George Zimmerman, the man who killed Trayvon Martin, proves not guilty.

Themes: racial fairness, police brutality, and unfair systems in general.



Impact: it spread around the world and changed the way people talk about racism. It led to policy suggestions and large-scale protests.

This hashtag is part of a movement that advocates for social justice, ending police brutality, and fixing systemic inequality, especially against Black people and communities.

2. Me Too

Origin: Tarana Burke creates the hashtag in 2006, but it goes viral in 2017 when celebrities used it to talk about sexual assault and harassment.

Themes: Sexual harassment, assault, and power dynamics in different industries.

Impact: Start global discussions, led to high-profile resignations and convictions, and led to changes in the law.

This hashtag represents a movement against sexual harassment and assault, encouraging people, especially women, to speak out against it.

3. Climate Strike

Origin: It gained widespread popularity in 2018 due to its association with Greta Thunberg and the Fridays for Future movement.

Themes: government environmental policy, sustainability, and climate change action.

Impact: Inspired millions of individuals to participate in worldwide climate strikes, exercised a significant influence on public opinion and political discussions around climate policies.

This hashtag is used to raise awareness of climate change, call for immediate environmental action, and demand policy reforms to promote sustainability and mitigate climate change.

4. Meals on Wheels

Origin: originates from Meals on Wheels program.

Themes: food security, elder care, community support, and volunteerism.

Impact: fosters solidarity and provides vital support to vulnerable populations.

5. Bring Back our Girls

Origin: Established in 2014 following the kidnapping of 276 schoolgirls by Boko Haram in Nigeria.

Themes: rights for women, education, terrorism.

Impact: Global attention was drawn to the situation of the Chibok girls, but attempts to bring them home had been limited.

This hashtag is initially created as a call to action in reaction to the kidnapping of Nigerian schoolgirls by the extremist organisation Boko Haram. It represents a plea for the secure repatriation of the abducted girls and draws attention to wider concerns regarding women's rights and education.

6. March for our Lives

Origin: Established by students in response to the Parkland school tragedy that occurred in February 2018.

Themes: Gun control, school safety, youth activism.



Impact: It was one of the biggest protests led by young people in U.S. history, and it led to some changes in gun laws at the state level.

The hashtag indicates a student-led campaign that promotes gun control measures and school safety in reaction to mass shootings, namely the Parkland school massacre in 2018. It emphasizes the importance of tackling gun violence and the active involvement of young people.

7. Refugees Welcome

Origin: obtained popularity in 2015 throughout the European refugee crisis.

Themes: Human rights, refugee status, anti-xenophobia.

Impact: Enhanced consciousness and support for refugees, shaped some policies on refugee resettlement.

This hashtag symbolizes unity with refugees and asylum seekers, promoting their entitlements, security, and integration, while confronting xenophobia and anti-immigrant attitudes.

8. I Stand With Ahmed

Origin: it occurred in 2015 when Ahmed Mohamed was arrested for bringing a self-made clock to school, which was mistakenly perceived as an explosive device.

Themes: racism, Islamophobia, and education.

Impact: motivated conversations about stereotyping, which led to an important show of solidarity for Ahmed from internet businesses and institutions.

This hashtag signifies solidarity with Ahmed Mohamed, a Muslim American teenager who encountered discrimination and racial profiling following a false accusation of carrying an explosive device to school. It brings attention to the problems of Islamophobia, racial profiling, and educational fairness.

9. Women's March

Origin: The day following President Trump's inauguration in January 2017, in an immediate response to his election.

Themes: Women's rights, reproductive rights, equality.

Impact: One of the biggest protests in US history, along with sister marches around the world, brought attention to women's issues.

This hashtag represents a worldwide campaign that supports women's rights, gender equality, and reproductive rights. It is commonly used in response to political actions or policies that are seen as endangering women's rights and independence.

10. No Ban No Wall

Origin: in 2017, President Trump issued executive orders to construct a border wall and impose travel restrictions on specific countries.

Themes: Immigration, racism, human rights.

Impact: Demonstrated opposition to the administration's policies, resulting in legal disputes and public demonstrations.



This hashtag is used to express opposition to policies that seek to limit immigration, including the executive orders issued by the Trump administration to prohibit travellers from certain countries and construct a barrier along the US-Mexico border. It symbolizes resistance against racism, xenophobia, and breaches of human rights.

The analysis of the data can be elaborated more in the following table:

Table (1) the Analysis of the Data

Hashtag	Origin	Theme	Impact
#Black Lives Matter	Started after Trayvon Martin's killer was acquitted in 2013.	Racial justice, police brutality, inequality	Became a global movement, changed public conversation.
#Me Too	Went viral in 2017 after celebrities shared stories of assault.	Sexual harassment, power dynamics	Sparked global conversations, led to changes in laws.
#Climate Strike	Popularized by Greta Thunberg in 2018.	Climate action, sustainability	Inspired global strikes, influenced policies.
#Meals on Wheels	Originates from Meals on Wheels program.	Food security, elder care, community support, and volunteerism.	Fosters solidarity and provides vital support to vulnerable populations.
#Bring Back our Girls	Created after Boko Haram kidnapped schoolgirls in Nigeria.	Women's rights, education, terrorism	Raised awareness globally, though success limited.
#March For our Lives	Started by students after Parkland shooting in 2018.	Gun control, youth activism	Led to large protests, impacted gun laws.
#Refugees Welcome	Emerged during European refugee crisis in 2015.	Human rights, anti-xenophobia	Increased support for refugees, influenced policies.
#I Stand with Ahmed	Originated when student Ahmed Mohamed was wrongly accused in 2015.	Islamophobia, education	Sparked support, raised awareness about profiling.
#Women's March	Organized in response to Trump's inauguration in 2017.	Women's rights, equality	One of the largest protests in history, raised awareness.



#No Ban No Wall	Reacted to Trump's executive orders on immigration in 2017.	Immigration, human rights	Challenged policies, led to legal actions and protests.
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4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the analysis, the results can be summarized as follows

1. Communicative Functions of Hashtags on Twitter

The study showed that hashtags on Twitter have many communicative functions, such as topic marking, collection, socializing, making fun of, giving context, expressing opinions, starting movements, spreading propaganda, and marketing brands. With these features, users can join conversations that are already going on, start new ones, and send notes to a wider audience.

2. Employing Hashtags to Build Unity and a Shared Identity

On Twitter, hashtags are used to bring people together and build unity and a shared identity by making it easier for online communities to form around certain social problems. They let people with different experiences and backgrounds meet, talk, and work together for common causes or goals, which builds unity and a sense of belonging among participants.

3. Hashtags have a Sufficient Effect on Society

Because they help people talk about important issues, organize events, share information, learn about social problems, and give a voice to those who don't often get heard. They have done a lot to make people aware of problems, change the way people talk about them, get people behind different political and social groups, and bring about real-world changes like policy proposals, mass mobilizations, and new laws.

5. CONCLUSION

Twitter's hashtag activism has become a powerful way for people to support and share their opinions online, as well as to bring more attention to and support for various political and social causes. Even though it's used a lot, not much is known about how it affects society and meaning. But this study has shed light on how hashtags are used for communication, how they help people come together and share an identity, and how they affect society as a whole. Hashtag activism could make a big difference in the world. It could also help make society more fair and just.

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