

What's the role of hashtags in the language of advertising?

When Twitter was freshly new in 2007, the first hashtag was created by a man called Chris Messina. At the time, hashtags were meant to compartmentalize content and to make the search for information easier for users (Tsur & Rappoport, 2012). A quick search of #cars on Twitter or Instagram will load content related to automobiles and of posts who applied the hashtag on their caption. However, deviating from this particular and original usage, people started to use hashtags in creative ways to express themselves to the public. For example, Kylie Jenner, a famous influencer, recently posted a picture on Instagram with a friend reading “#happybirthdayvic”(2020). Her purpose wasn't to categorize and make her post searchable, instead, Jenner conveyed a congratulation message in a short string of words after the “#” symbol. Kylie created her personalized hashtag for her content, a trend others have followed since it's creation too. The trend was soon normalized that even companies adopted hashtags. According to CNN (2015), 58% of SuperBowl ads contained hashtags in 2014. But my question is, why? In the history of advertising, language is always polished and important for marketing. Don't hashtags deviate from professionalism or proper grammar usage? Yes, but from analyzing multiple observations and opinions, hashtags have resulted in a powerful marketing tool that companies have personalized in order to generate conversation with customers, turning advertising into an engaging activity rather than a stagnant one.

As mentioned above, hashtags serve to group content and ease the search of information. If brands create hashtags of their own, they allow others to discover media involved with the company. Additionally, loyal customers may share posts with products and implement the hashtags, allowing brands to reach a broader audience through their clients. The more posts are shared with their hashtags, the more they will promote the public's awareness of the brand,

driving traffic to the company's social account or website. Apart from analyzing this from personal experiences and observation, Sprout Social, a trusted social media management platform for businesses, confirmed that applying at least one Instagram hashtag to a post generated 12.6% more engagement compared to content without hashtags (Brent, 2020).

Therefore, how much more could a second or third hashtag generate? Potentially more, leading to an increase in revenues. This is evidence that hashtags influence a brand's profitability positively, suggesting businesses look after their usage despite its grammatical informality. However, how do they keep advertising language professional?

By returning to Kylie Jenner's hashtag caption, we may study what hashtags look like in the common social media accounts and how brands have shaped them according to advertising language. By looking at "#happybdayvic" we may note three grammatical irregularities: lack of spaces, improper use of capitalization, and undefined vocabulary. Despite these abnormalities in language, people still accept and spread hashtags across social media. I guess that their popularity relies on the freedom that the absence of standard rules of English grammar gives, which is also true for all content on social media. For example, no one corrects people who don't follow grammar rules on social platforms. New words are always generated without the "permission" of dictionaries all the time. That's how popular initialism like "lol" or "bday" came to be part of our daily texting or conversations (McCulloch, 2019, p.29). This independence of language opens new doors for communication like hashtags do right now. However, despite the particular language in digital media that mostly defies grammar, popular brands don't follow along with those trends of writing; they stick to English rules, yet they adopted hashtags. How?

A student from the University of Latvia identified 9 different communicative functions of hashtags, and brands smartly identified which types are mostly misinterpreted or ineffective for

marketing (Laucuka, 2018). The communicative functions the student presented involve metadata hashtags, which are commonly shared by a group of people to describe content like an activity, event, or thing; topic-marking hashtags, those that set a theme for content; aggregation hashtags, those spreading information on a topic; socializing hashtag, which share an experience; excuse-hashtags, those implemented when users don't have a reason to post; irony-hashtags, the ones that contradict publications; attitudes-hashtags; which express feelings or emotions; movement-hashtags, those created to promote a cause; and lastly, propaganda and marketing hashtags, the ones I've focused on that are mostly seen in political campaigns and the business industry. (Laucuka, 2018). If we go back to Kylie's original caption, her hashtag serves as an example of a metadata hashtag. In the picture, she suggests it's her friend's birthday by expressing congratulations and her followers may use the hashtag to quickly get an idea of whose birthday it is. Other examples of the communicative utilities of hashtags are included in the list below.

Types of hashtags:

The next list consists of the hashtags mostly used during the COVID-19 pandemic.

For this paper, hashtags examples will possess capitalization between words to enhance readability. However, social media users customize how hashtags are written at their discretion, independent of how they appear on this paper.

Metadata - #QuarantineKitchen #CenterForDiseaseControl or #CDC

Topic-marking - #quarantine #coronavirus

Aggregation - #CovidNews #Toyko2020

Socializing - #MyPandemicSurvivalPlan #QuarantineAndChill

Excuse - #QuarantineLife #Coronacation (Corona + vacation)

Irony - writing #fun and #GoodTimes by posting a picture inside during the pandemic

Attitude expression - #upset #bored

Exhorting movements- #StayHome #FlattenTheCurve

Propaganda - #WhiteHousePressBriefing #FakeNews

(Retrieved from Twitter and Instagram in 2020)

As a side note, hashtags can fall in more than one of these categories. For example, posting a picture at a fancy hotel and writing #WorkLife depicts both irony and excuse hashtags at once. The person isn't working, and the caption serves as an excuse to upload an image without any other context.

From these 9 communicative functions, brands avoid using those depicting irony, attitudes, or excuses due to the open misinterpretation there is. In 2011, Entenmann's, a company that offers sweet baked goods at retailers, tweeted: "Who's #notguilty about eating all the tasty treats they want?"(2011) along with a donut box. This hashtag falls into the communicative function of irony (Laucuka, 2018), which is open to personal use and random interpretation. For example, a dog owner who pictures a broken a pillow next to his pet might write "#notguilty", dismissing the company's marketing campaign and mixing all types of contents into the hashtag. The "#notguilty" wasn't going to bring engagement due to its wide range of applications across social media. Additionally, at the time of the Entenmann's post, the famous murder of Casey Anthony was trending. As the trial was on-going, Casey's mother was found "not guilty" of the crime the same day Entenmann's tweet was published. The hashtag was already viral, spectators rapidly misinterpreted the company's intentions. Even if "#notguilty" was genuinely used to connect with customers, its use was correlated to something negative and impactful, which

resulted in a completely different perception from the business's original purpose (Usigan, 2011). From this marketing failure, professionals learned about how random hashtags related to irony and attitudes may negatively impact advertising language due to the random and open misinterpretation of their usage.

Identifying the complications of the different communicative functions of hashtags showcases how they are small outlets of self-expression for users and how they should be carefully treated in advertising language. A short string of words followed by a “#” sign allows people to share anything from emotions to promotions like seen above, which makes hashtags seem as an efficient tool for social media. However, Danielle Kucera (2015), a Senior Product Marketing Manager, shared a blogpost that disagrees with their effectiveness. She says hashtags are “a way to avoid our articulation of thoughts” by claiming they hide or diminish context from our content. As an example, this author might object to Kylie Jenner's post reading “#happybirthdayvic”(2020) by suggesting that she missed the chance to say “Happy birthday Vic!”, which would've resulted in a more exciting and party-like attitude comment. Another illustration of Danielle's argument is the use of #upset in social media. When followers read this, they become responsible for answering: What is the user upset about? Why is he upset? and What's the story? Just as in Entenmann's post, the reader will make his conclusion or create an assumption from additional information like an image or second tweet. However, there are cases where someone might post the hashtag alone without any other content, leaving the reader even more misinformed. This is a common practice across social media, and I agree with Kucera (2015), hashtags seem like a vague and incomplete way to communicate ideas. However, even if it's not the case every time, users usually provide sufficient context for others to comprehend hashtags. The emotions Kylie didn't write down on Instagram were portrayed in the images.

Likewise, from a vivid example, today's pandemic makes #quarantine understandable across all digital platforms. This suggests it's the responsibility of users, in this case, brands, to provide content that connects with their hashtag to enhance expression across digital media.

Aside from avoiding wording that's open to second interpretations, marketers must also look after grammar in advertising language. However, as emphasized earlier in this paper, hashtags are free of grammar rules and formal language restrictions. And looking back at the history of bad marketing, simple misspellings, or punctuational errors are known for injuring a brand's reputation forever. How are hashtags still implemented then? Through studying a compilation of different ads across social media, I discovered popular brands follow independent guidelines of their own to create hashtags strategically for marketing campaigns without being concerned about misinterpretations or misuse. The first characteristic observed of business hashtags was the use of capitalization in every other word. As we know, hashtags don't require proper capitalization, a user may play around between upper and lower case letters as desired. However, this hurts a hashtag's readability. In 2012, Susana Boyle, a Scottish singer, released an album and tweeted "#SusanAlbumParty" for promotion (Worstell, 2012). However, the hashtag was written without any capitalization, reading "#susanalbumparty" instead. As expected, the hashtags started trending across Twitter, but for the wrong reasons. The misinterpreted hashtags became a nightmare for the singer, fans were offended, unfortunately. Susana's post wasn't meant to sound inappropriate, but the free grammatical form of hashtags allowed it to be. After witnessing the ineffectiveness of all-lowercase hashtags, top brands opted for capitalizing hashtags to enhance readability and prevent these types of situations from taking place. Even if there's no chance for misinterpretation for some hashtags, reading #HappyBDayVic is much better than seeing "#happybdayvic" too. Examples of famous businesses using this guideline

include #JustDoIt from Nike's slogan, #TheLionKing from the movie, and #IceBucketChallenge by the ALS Association. For the good of advertising language, the closer hashtags are to standard English, the more influential and positive impact they can have.

Another interesting observation from branded hashtags was their particular length; they were no longer than 4 words. By limiting the number of words, hashtags are kept concise and simple for customers to use for their content. For example, buyers may describe a pair of shoes with #Nike and promote the brand's name easily or participate in a contest for creating a new type of chips for Lays by using #DoUsAFlavor. What's special about this is having a third party market a company freely, what's known as "Word-Of-Mouth" advertising. The followers of formal customers who may be unfamiliar with the brand might click on the hashtag and find more related content that could potentially lead them to the product's store or main account. Hashtags became so popular this way, that in 2018, Instagram created a feature where users can follow hashtags too. This allows customers to stay updated on sales and new products, furthering a user's involvement with the company.

Through these adjustments, brands are able to reach broader audiences and boost their general public awareness by driving traffic to the company's online stores and websites. Seeing readable and concise hashtags motivates customers to use and spread advertising through their platforms like said before; this gives people the opportunity to share feedback and ideas, promote products willingly, or show experiences related to the brand (Page, 2012). When this happens, brands inspire conversation in social media, making marketing a social interaction instead of a stagnant activity where customers are only spectators of advertisement. Hashtags invite others to join a conversation, and to make that happen, businesses have to formalize hashtags by making their own language rules.

After dwelling on the potentials of hashtags, there's an underlying question left to ask: Will hashtags be regulated by new rules of implementation in the future, or will they stay forever at the user's disposition? In some way, this may benefit everyone, as brand guidelines to advertising language have enhanced the readability and adaptation of hashtags. Regulated hashtags could improve social media engagement and prevent scandals like Susan's album party or "#notguilty" Entenmann's campaign. However, the cost would result in the loss of grammatical freedom that hashtags offer everyone around the world. The future of digital language may decide that.

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