FISHING FOR FOLLOWERS: USING HASHTAGS AS LIKE BAIT IN SOCIAL MEDIA

Beata Jungselius
University of Gothenburg, Sweden

Thomas Hillman
University of Gothenburg, Sweden

Alexandra Weilenmann
University of Gothenburg, Sweden

Abstract

In this paper we present findings from an on-going study of mobile social photography with a focus on how Instagram users describe the practice of hashtagging as a way to gain likes and followers. There is a recognised connection between using hashtags and gaining likes and followers both among those who use hashtags and those who do not. Based on interviews with 16 Instagram users, we show how underlying norms regulate this practice. For example, it is technically possible to attract more views through the use of hashtags within Instagram. However, due to social norms some users dismiss that possibility.

Introduction

A central part of social media use is hashtagging. Hashtags are used on Flickr, del.icio.us, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and similar social websites to annotate different kinds of content such as micro blog posts, status updates, videos, images and photographs. When adding a hashtag to a photograph on social media like Instagram, the audience for a photographer is extended beyond their immediate followers. By searching for photographs with a specific hashtag, people who usually don't follow a photostream from a certain user are able to see those photographs without needing to follow the rest of their photostream.
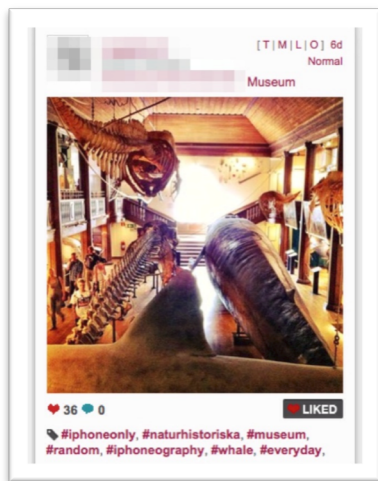
Figure 1. Hashtagged instagram with 36 likes

By using many different hashtags, the possibility for reaching an audience larger than one's own followers is increased. Previous research has shown that hashtags are used to provide information about a photograph and to help others find one's photographs (Ames & Naaman, 2007, Miller & Edwards, 2007). Apart from serving as a bookmark for content and a symbol of community membership (Yang, 2012), hashtags also allow users to track ongoing conversations and to communicate non-verbal cues like irony (Lin, Margolin, & Keegan, 2013). In our study, participants described using hashtags to give others information about where a photo had been taken, the camera used, the filters added, and so forth. However, in addition to using hashtags to provide information for the benefit of other users, participants also described how hashtags can sometimes be used as a tool to attract more views in order to gain likes and followers. Receiving likes has been shown to be a major concern for many social media users (blinded for review). Similar to the way Ames and Naaman (2007) described users' ways of 'gaming the system' in order to attract more views, we found examples in our data where participants described using hashtags as bait for receiving more likes, in essence as '*like bait*'. The data that this paper draws upon is part of a larger study on mobile social photography and was collected through interviews of approximately one hour in length with sixteen Instagram users conducted in connection to their visits to a museum (cf. blinded for review). User names have been changed to preserve the anonymity of participants. The interviews where video recorded and fully transcribed. The focus of the analysis of those interviews for this particular paper is on hashtagging as a practice.

Using hashtags as like bait

Gershon (2010) proposes the notion of 'idioms of practice' for understanding agreed upon appropriate social uses of technology. This concept relates to how people have implicit and explicit intuitions about how to use different technologies that they learn through interaction with other users. In this case, the social rules that apply for hashtagging are learned through the practice of hashtagging and by interacting with other users. Our data suggests that there is a recognised connection between using hashtags and gaining likes and followers, both among those who use hashtags and those who do not. Several of the participants had strong opinions on hashtagging. For

example, one participant claimed to only use hashtags 'sarcastically' while another described how he 'avoids hashtag spamming' as a means to get likes and followers, and a third admitted to using hashtags but with a 'humoristic touch to play with the concept' of hashtagging.

Some participants in our study explicitly stated that they strive to receive many likes and followers and that they use hashtags to accomplish that. A young man described how he values likes from followers he doesn't know differently than from followers who he has a relationship with:

One reason to why you should get some more is, you, that you put up these tags so, because most of them friends that have Instagram do follow you uhm but it's well always fun with others who follow you because you take good pictures (@bobby).

Although some participants stated that they are not interested in receiving likes or followers, they talked about how others use hashtags to gain likes. Based on the descriptions of the participants, there seems to be a recognised connection between using hashtags and actively seeking likes and followers. Even those users who did not use hashtags themselves stated that instagrams with many hashtags receive more likes than those without. A young woman who avoids hashtags because she thinks the picture should 'speak for itself' described her reasons:

One should get as many likes as possible and as many hashtags as possible so that people will find ones pictures and I have become the kind of person that I have friends who hashtag their pictures with like thirty different hashtags under instapic, instagram, pic of the day uhm food, yummy, nomnomnom I unfollow right away (@kim).

This participant not only avoids using hashtags herself, but also goes as far as to unfollow users who she considers use them excessively.

Concluding discussion

Both technical features and social norms regulate the use of social media. Drawing upon a study of the use of Instagram we have articulated a few short examples of the ways in which the practice of hashtagging relies upon an underlying set of social rules that regulate the practice. Although hashtagging can be a technique for reaching an audience beyond one's own immediate followers and for attracting views, likes and followers, there is also a risk of being unfollowed if used in a way not appreciated by the community. For these reasons some users dismiss the possibility of using hashtags. In this paper, we focus on these negotiations as part of the practice of hashtagging in social media. As with the use of all technologies, users negotiate an appropriate way to use hashtags for each particular purpose and in each particular setting they can be used.

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