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Emoji hashtags // hashtag e Of platforms, visual affect, discursive flexibility

by Tim Highfield

Abstract

This paper examines the communicative functions of emoji in concert with hashtags, comparing two platform-specific approaches to combining hashtags and emoji: emoji hashtags as discursive markers on Instagram, and platform-directed hashtag emoji on Twitter. These approaches offer key insights into the dynamics between the platforms and their users, from user-led practices on Instagram to the commercial partnerships over-riding user intentionality on Twitter. Such different means of combining emoji and hashtags then demonstrate how platforms variously support and restrict their users' platform vernaculars and discursive creativity within their everyday social media practices.

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Introduction

When we talk about emoji and their use in communication, including over social media or in private messages, we are often not just talking about the specific subjects or scenes depicted in these icons. The likes of 👊 , 🕹 , or \aleph , for instance, are images of a bee, a snake, and water droplets respectively — but these are not the only meanings attached to these particular emoji. Meaning-making around emoji has led to extensive variations around the images, which is part of their discursive power and flexibility. In other words, they visually remain the same, but can signify many things. For example, you might be posting content that actually contains bees, snakes, or water, but you could also be using these emoji to demonstrate, perhaps, that you're a member of the Beyhive (see Watercutter, 2016) or that you're texting in the style of Rebecca Bunch from Crazy Ex-Girlfriend (so weird, right?); on which side you have aligned yourself in Taylor Swift's public disputes and relationships (although emoji also get co-opted by different sides here; see Weaver, 2017); or demonstrate indirectly just how safe for work your messages might be (particularly in different app contexts). The meaning-making potential of emoji is extended, too, through combination with other social media functions. In this paper, I explore the structural and communicative relationships between emoji and hashtags, and how these are differently

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enabled and articulated on Instagram and Twitter, as a reflection of both user communication practices and platform policy.

The hashtag has been widely-researched, particularly on Twitter, as a communicative device — but primarily as strings of letters and numbers to form words and phrases, not including emoji (or other symbols). One reason for this is that Twitter does not support these other characters in the creation of hashtags, be they apostrophes or 🦠 . Hashtags are not solely found on Twitter, though, and are supported in different ways on Facebook and Instagram, among others. However, the communicative functions, practices, or interoperability of hashtags themselves are not consistent across social media platforms: what shows up as a hashtag on one platform will not necessarily be recognized as one on another. When Instagram announced support for emoji hashtags in 2015, this move opened up possibilities for extensions and reimagining practices around hashtag use with the incorporation of visual elements. For users of major Western social media platforms, too, this recognition of emoji uses and possibilities set Instagram apart from the approach to hashtags promoted by Twitter [1].

Critical to the practices and examples discussed in this paper, and to uses of emoji more broadly, are the creation of meaning through the visual, and how meaning is read and interpreted by users. Emoji take on symbolic roles: as Marcel Danesi (2017) argues, they may be pictographic, signifying exactly what they depict, or they be logographic, acting as word-replacement [2]. Emoji then may stand-in for another subject, making reference through visual similarity or cues such as homophones and contextual links. However, while emoji use, like any text, has a particular meaning intended by its creator, whether this is realized depends on the reader. Stuart Hall's (1980) encoding and decoding model suggests that a text, encoded with an intended reading, may be interpreted, or decoded, from three positions: dominant, negotiated, and oppositional. Rather than the reader automatically inferring the same meaning as intended, their response to the text might instead resist this, or develop meaning through a combination of both dominant and oppositional readings.

Expanding on this model and on the affordances of digital media, Adrienne Shaw (2017) argues that these positions may be adapted to "potential activities with new media texts, objects, and forms" [3]. Such practices then variously reflect 'correct' or intended uses of these media (dominant), new applications of existing affordances (negotiated), and unexpected practices with user-imagined affordances (resistant). Emoji, as multimodal visual media, offer multiple readings for their users; these may be normative, as-intended by the developers, but they could also be asintended from the sender of emoji in a text message. For example, the peach emoji could be read as-intended as a representation of a peach, but user practices have also adapted the peach as a stand-in for the butt, due to its visual similarity. This oppositional reading, though, could also be seen as dominant in inter-user communication, particularly as this meaning for the emoji becomes popularized; when Apple proposed redesigning its rendering of the peach to look less like a butt, it was met with resistance due to this emergent interpretation of the emoji (Gerstein, 2016; Reinstein, 2016). Such vernacular applications of emoji highlight how they take on new socio-cultural meanings in emerging from user practices, but are also dependent on platforms and operating systems in how they present and support the emoji: changes in design can lead to changed meaning, while different renderings on different platforms can also provoke unforeseen interpretations (Neal, 2015).

This relationship between the technical and the social is central to the construction and shaping of meaning (Langlois, 2014). In this paper, I explore how these elements are realized within platformed approaches to emoji and hashtags on Instagram and Twitter. Individually, hashtags and emoji offer users discursive flexibility and creativity, employing and appropriating the affordances of platforms in their everyday expression. However, the platforms also complicate this in their own application of meaning to hashtags and emoji, and in their individual approach to supporting these combinations. By examining phenomena around hashtags on emoji on both Twitter and Instagram, this paper features examples of top-down, platform-directed practices and examples (Twitter) and bottomup, user-created opportunities (Instagram). While these are not universal practices or experiences, representative of all users or topics on either platform (nor on other social media platforms necessarily), these cases provide insight into how platforms both support and restrict their users' engagement with social media functionalities and affordances. The present analysis covers developments up to mid-2018; platforms' support for hashtags and emoji, both individually and in concert, has changed over time, and may continue to change further beyond this research, in unexpected ways.

The hashtag context

In the research literature around Twitter, hashtags have been studied for

their various communicative functions (Zappavigna, 2015; 2012). For example, a hashtag may be a discursive marker for a particular topical context, but which also acts as a 'hybrid forum' where multiple, related discussions coalesce under one banner (Burgess, et al., 2015). Another hashtag may be an affective performance, a demonstration of emotion, solidarity, or reaction (Papacharissi, 2015). Other hashtags may be used for humorous or creative purposes, playing with the conventions and vernacular of Twitter in response to breaking news or trending topics (Highfield, 2016). And then there are hashtags which simply denote (what the user determines as) the #keywords in a #tweet, incorporated into the #discussion as #deemed #necessary (#nottolaborthepoint #okaymaybealittle #sorrynotsorry). Throughout, though, hashtags are treated consistently by Twitter: any unbroken string of letters and numbers, preceded by a # symbol, is turned into a link to a search for other instances of the same string. Regardless of whether or not the user is meaning to join their tweet to any other public comment using the same hashtags, Twitter's architecture automatically recognizes hashtags as structural communicative devices. Such practices have also appeared on other platforms, including Instagram: the discursive flexibility of hashtaggery means that while the format (#[string]) remains consistent, there is wide scope for practicing affect, humour, and making concise topical connections within a single phrase. Portmanteaux appear in hashtags accompanying visual media on Instagram, for instance, in contexts as varied as the pro-eating disorder content of #thinspo and #thinspiration (Gerrard, 2018) and the #dogmocracy of #dogsatpollingstations (Caple, 2018).

On Twitter, these discursive practices are predicated on the lexical, with hashtags consisting of strings of letters and/or numbers. As of July 2018, Twitter still does not support emoji, or the use of punctuation, in hashtags. Yet the use of emoji in everyday communication suggests that they can still be incorporated into the discursive practices of hashtaggery. This was arguably part of Instagram's rationale for extending their emoji support to include hashtags, whereby "[t]heir usage has rippled across human languages and emoji frequently function as word-substitutes" (Dimson, 2015). For a primarily visual platform like Instagram, supporting visual communication through emoji seems like a logical development.

What complicates matters is that while Twitter does not support the likes of #0 the platform has its own combination of hashtags and emoji: hashflags, or what have become referred to by Twitter as branded, Twitter, or hashtag emoji. These are specific icons which are appended to particular hashtags, as determined by Twitter. The introduction of hashflags predates emoji hashtags, and these two approaches to combining emoji and hashtags offer contrasting perspectives on visual affect and discursive flexibility enabled on social media. Through this paper, I explore how such platformed approaches to emoji and hashtags variously support and restrict the platform vernaculars and users' discursive creativity within their everyday social media practices. For Twitter, I draw upon a dataset of hashflags collected between 2016 and 2018, supplemented by content archived online [4], to provide examples of this type of content. For Instagram, I use selected examples identified through a wider examination of the platform and its practices as part of ongoing research into visual social media more broadly (see Highfield and Leaver, 2016).

The following section focuses on Instagram and emoji hashtags, examining how this approach was supported by the platform, and the practices that have developed in response. The discussion then turns to Twitter's hashflags and the role of the platform in their development and deployment. Finally, the paper reflects on these platformed approaches to emoji and hashtags by comparing their varying demonstrations of visual affect and discursive flexibility.

Part one: Instagram emoji hashtags

Emoji hashtags on Instagram are hashtags constructed using the Unicode Consortium-approved emoji set. Other emoji and similar collections, from Bitmoji to television-show specific iconography, are not supported in the same way: they do not have Unicode codepoints and so are unable to be incorporated into text strings. The standard emoji, though, can be preceded by the # symbol in the same way as text strings from #phdlife to #humbleandblessed (and in combination with text). These create discursive markers that can be employed at the user's discretion (and with their own intentionality and meaning). The expressive potential of emoji hashtags, and the fact that users might use both text and emoji in hashtags, were active considerations in Instagram's development process:

We went back and forth on whether to allow mixing of emoji and script together. While allowing richer

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expression, it also creates edge cases when appending emoji to the end of existing hashtags like #tbt After playing with emoji tags around the office, we sided with expression. How else can you express #dealwithit [9] [5] (Dimson, 2015)

The process of supporting emoji hashtags on Instagram also realized platform-specific instances of wider concerns around emoji. In particular, the introduction of skin-tone modifiers within the Unicode standard emoji, an attempt to improve the diversity of representations (McGill, 2016; Miltner, 2015; Solon, 2016), resulted in technical concerns for Instagram. Testing emoji hashtag support, the platform debated whether or not to collate all variants of an emoji as one single instance (Dimson, 2015). Such considerations would have potentially seen hashtagged emoji of various skin tones all collapsed into a single search result, overriding any user intentionality and deliberation in their choice of imagery, and reigniting questions about social media platforms' approaches to racial representations and diversity.

Questions around emoji hashtags also tie in to more general questions about hashtags overall, on Instagram and on other platforms: while the form of a hashtag is consistent (# + string (text/numbers/emoji)), the actual purpose of the marker could reflect a number of motives (see, for example, Olszanowski, 2015). The presence alone of a hashtag is not evidence of any intent to engage with a wider conversation; even when using a trending marker, a user might simply be referring to the topic at hand rather than seeking to link their comments to a broader public discussion. There can also be a performative element to hashtagging: preceding a word or phrase (or emoji) with # is also a phatic gesture which can put a different intonation on these ideas, depending on the user and their audience (where using a hashtag could have genuine or sarcastic aims: 'blessed' vs. '#blessed', for instance). A hashtag might offer a demonstration of feeling or a summary of ideas without any greater intentions, which becomes linked to other content because of the architecture of the platform, not because of what the user is actually seeking here. However, there are markers which are somewhat publiclyoriented, including emoji hashtags; the likes of #\scripts or #\scripts or #\scripts symbolize, among other things, particular graphic and sexual content (or ideas, at least), and these and other emoji form part of a wider repertoire of sexting practices using digital media (Albury, 2017; Bond, 2016; Brantz, 2017); the development of these Instagram hashtags crosses over from texting conventions and practices. The key difference here is the # symbol, which has a structural implication as well as an affective one: the # makes it discoverable on Instagram, as tags are one of the specific search options. However, as keywords are not searchable on Instagram, just posting 🗲 👌 in a comment or caption would mean that the post would not show up in searches for # 👉 🤌 .

Emoji hashtags have created other issues for searching Instagram content. Possibly the most infamous emoji hashtag is # he eggplant emoji (and because it was initially excluded from search results on Instagram $-% \left(\frac{1}{2}\right) =-\frac{1}{2}\left(\frac{1}{2}\right) +\frac{1}{2}\left(\frac{1}{2}\right) +\frac{1}{2$ only emoji hashtag to receive such treatment (Griffin, 2015). The hashtag could still be used, but searching for it would lead to zero results. The ban happened for a reason: the visual similarity of the eggplant to a penis meant that it was adopted as a phallic symbol, given the absence of any actual emoji for that specific purpose. As a signifier of Instagram content, # ♦ was not just denoting that there might be a penis (or more) depicted, but also that there might be more explicit content. Of course, the hashtag might also be denoting nothing of the sort: it could also be used, again in the phallic context, to describe a feeling or sentiment about the content being posted, or in a comment responding to someone else's content. It could also be used because of its notoriety, as a spam hashtag or hook despite having no connection to any of the emoji's established meanings or uses. Occasionally it is used to denote actual eggplants.

The discursive versatility of emoji, individually and in concert, means that

emoji hashtags are an opportunity for Instagram users to develop new meanings from these icons. Emoji hashtags can denote the subjects of images, from animals to the contents of meals, or provide a connecting marker for a user's content over time in the same way as a special occasion hashtag. Just as a wedding or holiday might be accompanied by a specific hashtag, the same events might also receive emoji hashtags which depict the overall narrative: a round-the-world trip might feature a sequence like # occasion of the countries visited, for example. These hashtags might be used just by one person, or by a small group of the friends and family attending an event; instead of a general public demonstration, the emoji hashtags serve to group related content together for a limited audience, and to provide a visual expression of affect. Seemingly unrelated emoji can thus be combined by users to construct new pictographic stories and expressions, with added public performativity through being hashtagged [7].

Emoji also add nuance and context to hashtags, providing personal perspective or affiliation. This can be in the form of using flag emoji to denote locations, national support during sports events, or to provide a thematic setting for user content. Such uses can also be political. For example, when voters in the United Kingdom participated in the 2016 referendum about whether to remain in or leave the European Union, #brexit-tagged content on Instagram was also accompanied by appropriate flags: #brexit for remain, #brexit for leave, as well as the non-adorned versions of these hashtags. The use of emoji here illustrate a user's views on the vote — or, in the period since, their views about the U. K.'s ongoing relationship with Europe — providing a political statement without needing to go into more detail.

These discursive practices reflect both the recognition of emoji's linguistic functions in general (see Danesi, 2017), and the role of social media platforms in supporting and enabling this. Emoji can be used on Instagram regardless of whether they are hashtagged or not, but enabling the hashtags means that they are searchable. This in turn offers new discursive opportunities, in developing public-facing tags which use emoji or combinations of emoji and text. Conversely, these opportunities are not apparent on other platforms, even though both hashtags and emoji may be both present. Instead, as explored in the following section, other approaches to combining the visual and the structural elements of social media have been developed.

Part two: Twitter and hashflags

Unlike Instagram, Twitter does not support emoji hashtags, despite the association of the hashtag function with the platform; searching for # for instance, is an "invalid query". However, Twitter has developed its own hashtag emoji ('hashflags'), appending a Twitter-approved image to selected hashtags for a particular time period. Even though they are not emoji in the same sense as the pictograms approved by the Unicode Consortium, they are referred to as such by Twitter and its partners. This can cause some ambiguity between what is being described, as Twitter emoji (or 'twemoji') is also the term for the Twitter-specific rendering of the Unicode emoji set. However, in the platform's own materials, 'Twitter emoji' more often than not refers to Twitter's own, unique imagery, which "give brands the chance to inject some additional fun into their marketing, lighten their tone, and perhaps boost brand likeability" (Brady, 2015).

Since 2014, hashflags have taken on commercial applications, offering advertisers and partners the opportunity to develop platform-specific content. Indeed, Twitter describes hashflags as "commercial products" (Twitter Ads, personal communication, 2017): a hashflag is part of an advertising campaign encompassing promoted tweets and trends. The price for the campaign varies, depending on its scope; reports about early hashflag campaigns by Coca Cola and Spotify estimated the total cost to be more than \$US1 million (Johnson, 2016), while Twitter's eventual rejection of a #CrookedHillary hashflag for the Trump presidential campaign allegedly cost the platform millions in associated advertising costs (Coby, 2016). The commercial links underpinning most hashflags, however explicit, highlight how these images are directed by interests beyond the user community. Because these are special features only accessible through Twitter, though, they are used to encourage engagement with brands, events, and promotional campaigns through scarcity and novelty: tweeting to see a cute image, regardless of the context.

Unlike emoji, hashflags are platform-determined visuals. They offer novelty for Twitter users, but, as will be discussed later in this article, they work against a user's intentionality and the discursive flexibility of hashtags and user practices on the platform. Predating Instagram's support for emoji

hashtags, the earliest hashflags appeared in 2010 during the men's soccer World Cup. Their initial implementation fit into established Twitter communicative practices: three-letter country codes for each competing country, preceded by the # symbol, created hashtags that also featured the country's flag at the end. This development, and indeed the following reactivation of hashflags for the 2014 men's soccer World Cup, actually gave Twitter's images an advantage over the Unicode set: for both competitions, not all 32 competing nations had their flags represented in the Unicode set, but they all appeared in Twitter hashflags (until the competitions finished).

Similarly, in February 2016, the Australia and New Zealand (ANZ) bank launched a rainbow flag hashflag (seen in Figure 1) to accompany its #GAYNZ campaign in support of Pride and the Sydney Mardi Gras (which it sponsored). While this was branded content, even though the hashtag used is a slightly confusing mix of pun and brand name, the hashflag also enabled access to a popular, much-demanded visual still absent from the Unicode set. Using #GAYNZ while the hashflag was active allowed users to post a rainbow flag, a move not possible using the standard emoji set until November 2016.



Figure 1: #GAYNZ hashflag (2016).

Hashflags can also depict subjects which, as commercial entities, are not present in the Unicode set but which are popular topics on social media (and elsewhere), and for which there is a clear audience who might want to use these images. For blockbusters like *Star Wars Episode VII: The Force Awakens, Thor: Ragnarok*, or *Justice League*, for example, as well as releases like *Murder on the Orient Express*, hashflags were developed as part of their promotional strategies. These did not just feature film-related imagery, but had multiple icons representing individual characters (some of which had long histories in comics, films, and other spin-off media). The rendering of these characters, too, might encourage further engagement, the cute aesthetic working with the small size of the icons within tweets, as seen in Figure 2. This works in concert with their related hashtags, too: Poirot hashflags from *Murder at the Orient Express* appeared for the appealing (and topically flexible) #cluesareeverywhere as well as the more formulaic #orientexpressmovie and weak pun of #mustachemeaquestion.



Figure 2: Hashflags for characters from *Thor: Ragnarok* (2017) — respectively Ho Thor, and the Valkyrie — and for *Murder on the Orient Express* (2017) depicting I

The different renderings of emoji across platforms and devices have led to some discrepancies in depicted gestures, and in the presentation of specific emoji. This has implications for the reception and interpretation of emoji in cross-device communication, where the 'emoji gap' can lead to misinterpretation through variations in rendering the same symbol (Neal, 2015). A similar effect is observed with certain hashflags, as well, because they offer specific imagery unavailable in the Unicode set, and are able to feature subjects which are in emoji but present different characterization. For instance, the Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce (CIBC) launched the hashflag in Figure 3 as part of a new branding campaign. Hashtagging the bank's slogans in English and French, the hashflag appeared (while active) for #fitsyourlife and #votrevie. While there was already a penguin emoji (40, it was not Percy, CIBC's penguin mascot; developing the hashtag seen in Figure 3 allows for a different depiction of a penguin and gesture, in comparison with the Twitter rendering of the penguin emoji [9]..

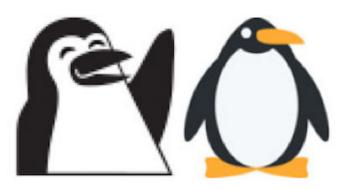


Figure 3: Hashflag developed by CIBC for #fitsyourlife/#votrevie campaign (le Twitter rendering of penguin emoji (right).

Of course, these hashtags were not solely used in tweets about the bank, its campaigns and products. #votrevie, for instance, is 'your life' in French, and is a phrase that has many non-branded applications. The way that hashflags are implemented, though, means that during the period that the icon was active, all tweets containing the relevant hashtags saw Percy appended to the markers. While some hashtags are so specific as to render unlikely the chance that a hashflag will appear out of context (e.g., #turkishairlinesopen2017), there are numerous examples of hashflags being attached to hashtags with multiple meanings and applications. In these cases, Twitter and its partners have essentially decreed that one meaning is more important than the others during a certain period regardless of the user's own views or intent here. During the 2016-17 American football season, for example, the National Football League (NFL) launched hashflags intended for users to incorporate into their livetweeting of games. Some of these were attached to hashtags reflecting football-specific jargon, such as #touchdown or #onsidekick. Others, though, were more generic: the icons in Figure 4 correspond to the hashtags #blitz, #kickoff, and #sack respectively.







Figure 4: Hashflags for #blitz, #kickoff, and #sack (2016).

These hashtags could be used in other sporting contexts, for instance; the kick-off is far from unique to American football, after all, but the hashflag meant that #kickoff received an American football icon regardless. Similarly, #sack and #blitz could be used in very different ways, such as referring to historical events (the #Blitz during the Second World War), or current events and breaking news ('getting the #sack'). This can make for awkward juxtapositioning of thematic context and imagery in hashflagged tweets. In 2017, when the *LSE Review of Books* tweeted about its review of *Law and the economy in colonial India* (by Tirthankar Roy and Anand V. Swamy, published by the University of Chicago Press in 2016), the tweet included the hashtag #empire to denote the colonial focus of the reviewed book (@LSEReviewBooks, 2017). For Twitter, though, its commercial partnership with television network Fox meant that regardless of context, the hashtagged empire in question was that of Cookie Lyon (Figure 5):



Figure 5: #empire hashflag in tweet unrelated to the television show Empire (left for #empire (right); the hashflag was later deactivated.

Finally, the way that both hashtags and hashflags are supported on Twitter means that there are additional vagaries that can appear, further superseding user creativity and intentionality. Hashtags are not casesensitive, so that tweets containing #yesallwomen or #YesAllWomen, for example, are linked to the same hashtag search. This does mean, though, that any hashtags which could create multiple phrases, depending on intonation, are treated the same — and a hashflag doubles down on this. For instance, while unlikely variants, Figure 6 shows how the hashtags for the Chicago Bears NFL football club (#DaBears) and Adam Levine on The Voice (#TeamAdam) could also be other phrases, but the associated hashflag would still show up. With these examples, there is less concern over a hashflag showing up for unintended or oppositional meanings; however, given how hashtags are supported by Twitter, this is still a risk and, presumably, part of the planning process in which hashtags to use for brands and campaigns.



Figure 6: Non-case sensitive variants on hashtags with hashflag

However, the example of #DaBears also demonstrates that while unintended meanings might be factored in to development, other concerns like trademarks may be overlooked. The hashflag originally accompanied

the slogan #GoBears, chosen by the Chicago Bears as its 2017 call to action — a logical choice, except 'Go Bears' is the trademark of the University of California, Berkeley's Golden Bears. When the hashflag was activated, and the Chicago logo appeared on the official UC Berkeley accounts, complaints meant a change in hashflag to #DaBears; the platform and its partners forced to respond to the appearance of corporate branding in unexpected places (Bleeker, 2017; Wong, 2017).

Part three: Emoji hashtags and hashtag emoji, visual affect and discursive flexibility

Emoji hashtags on Instagram and hashflags on Twitter showcase two different approaches to combining hashtags and emoji (or related visuals); more specifically, though, they offer key insights into the dynamics between the platforms and their users. Both approaches recognize the ongoing importance of visual elements to everyday social media communication (Highfield and Leaver, 2016), and respond to platform vernaculars (Gibbs, et al., 2015) and established practices on Twitter and Instagram respectively. However, while emoji hashtags enable discursive creativity and flexibility on the part of Instagram users, Twitter's hashflags work directly against this; instead, creativity is offered to commercial partners and forced upon Twitter's users.

Zizi Papacharissi (2015) describes hashtags as "textual gestures' [10]: they enable social media users to demonstrate and transmit affect, using markers not just to note topics of interest but to highlight emotional responses, humour, and sentiments like solidarity, outrage, and hope. Visual social media also offer similar opportunities. For example, the use of animated GIFs to perform affect (Ash, 2015; Kanai, 2015; Miltner and Highfield, 2017) uses clips from other media sources employed to stand in for (and heighten) the user's own emotions. Emoji (and, prior to this, emoticons) are further visual mediators which can allow additional affective information to be provided, to depict the user's mood and intentions; this applies both when used by themselves, and when they appear in hashtags (whether or not they accompany text as well). Many of these elements are also polysemic, with multiple meanings available to the same GIF or emoji depending on the specific context of their use: they are ambivalent, where there is no single interpretation which can automatically or definitely be applied to them (Phillips and Milner, 2017).

This ambivalence is realized in different ways for emoji hashtags and hashflags, though. On Instagram, emoji hashtags are up to the individual user, because any combination of emoji might be used for their own purposes. While the likes of the eggplant and frog emoji have taken on different meanings, because of their similarities to other objects or their politicization through the meme cultures of white supremacists, they are not the only interpretations available to emoji users. Even though the eggplant emoji gained notoriety because of its phallic resemblance and connotations, a cursory search of Instagram shows that the hashtag has no single, universal meaning. Furthermore, while the hashtag's ban received press attention, the associated graphic content is not necessarily representative of the hashtag [11]. Instead, there are myriad applications of the eggplant emoji hashtag, potentially taking on different cultural significance. Indeed, emoji hashtags offer a complication of global Instagram cultures and practices. Whereas hashtags in different languages and scripts would not necessarily coincide, emoji remain the same in form regardless of context: an Australian Instagram user hashtagging the penguin emoji does so in the same way as one in Sweden or Singapore. Any variety in the meanings that are ascribed to an emoji in different cultural contexts may then be reflected in the types of content appearing around the hashtags featuring that emoii.

This diversity of practices means that a specific emoji hashtag in itself does not point to a single community or meaning, and this sets Instagram hashtags apart from much research into Twitter hashtags. Whereas many hashtag-oriented Twitter studies have examined topical markers which have a particular temporal or subject focus, emoji hashtags are not topical (or, if they are, this is not their only use). Assuming homogeneity here is ill-advised; although in this discussion I have included examples of emoji hashtags, the meanings I describe here are not representative of all the interpretations (actual or potential) of these markers.

While emoji hashtags may be policed by Instagram, which places restrictions on their visibility whenever necessary, the platform's users are still free to use emoji as they desire (and respond to any policing with new practices; see Albury, 2017). The discursive creativity available to Instagram users is limited only by the emoji available. This is what Luke Stark and Kate Crawford (2015) dub the 'conservatism of emoji'; however, while the Unicode emoji set have notable limitations in terms of scope and diversity, for example, they do at least offer users a degree of agency in

their use of the images and the meanings attached to them.

In contrast, Twitter's hashflags demonstrate a clear lack of discursive flexibility. Which hashtags are or are not accompanied by hashflags is a decision made by the platform and commercial partners, and a user cannot choose if - or when - the hashflag appears. The visuals themselves may offer more potential for fun or cute renderings of specific subjects, particularly entities like fictional characters which are limited by copyright agreements. However, while hashflags may let Twitter users include an image of a favourite character alongside a hashtag, these arrangements demonstrate how these are commercial undertakings, not organic userdriven practices. A hashflag featuring Wonder Woman or Black Widow exists because of corporate partnerships, and as such their use is heavily restricted. By only allowing the images to show up with particular hashtags, for a limited period of time, there is no potential polysemy here; this may avoid brands' images being taken out of context or used in a way that is not beneficial to them (as happens with other social media campaigns, including hashtags; Jackson and Foucault Welles, 2015), but it limits the creative and subversive opportunities for social media users.

Instead, hashflags may subvert the user's own views. Affective expression may be apparent with the particular visuals in a hashflag, or in combination with the associated hashtag, but this might not reflect the user's perspective on a topic, or even the subject being discussed. This is especially evident with politically-relevant hashflags: Twitter's decision to automatically append an icon of solidarity to #BlackLivesMatter or #marriageequality, for example, overwrites any opposition, or neutral reporting, expressed in the surrounding tweet. While Twitter's support for these particular campaigns and causes is a positive development, it also highlights the platform's selective political engagement in offering these visuals without appearing to address its own widespread problems of racist, sexist, and transphobic abuse and harassment (among others) [12]. Similarly, when the #MeToo hashtag — used to share personal accounts of sexual assault and abuse — received a hashflag in October 2017, the specific visual developed was an addition which seemed to trivialise the topic (see Schwedel, 2018) [13]. As discussed previously, such concerns also apply to hashtags which may have multiple meanings: because Twitter has entered into a partnership around a specific interpretation of a hashtag, all uses (past and present) of the marker will receive the relevant hashflag. This also works against the general discursive flexibility around hashtags overall. In promoting a particular hashtag by appending a hashflag. Twitter has decided which markers users should be employing. despite the fact that there are extensive creative, cultural approaches to hashtagging which build upon established practices and forms (see, e.g., Florini, 2014; Highfield, 2016. Here, to return to Stuart Hall, the platform enforces one particular, dominant reading of the hashtag over any others denying any negotiated or oppositional readings.

The presence of a #MeToo hashflag demonstrates Twitter's support for the movement, irrespective of any trivialising effect. #MeToo is far from a Twitter-only movement, though, and associated social media activity takes place across many platforms. In addition to giving visibility and support to attempts to counter sexual harassment and abuse, these offer additional insights into the use of emoji and hashtags (and, indeed, the platforms in question). Meg Jing Zeng's (2018) examination of #MeToo in China found that related hashtags like #MeTooInChina, already subject to surveillance and censorship, were also being blocked; in response, Weibo users employed the hashtag #RiceBunnyinChina, as 'rice bunny' is a homophone of 'me too'. The written hashtag was also accompanied by rice bowl and rabbit head emoji, working in concert (if not necessarily in # high form). Zeng argues that such approaches, mixing emoji and alternative names for prominent groups or topics, demonstrate "a tactical response to circumvent online censorship": user-driven, creative, and applying everyday communication forms and content to political contexts and developments. Such practices also reflect what Kath Albury (2017) describes as 'off-label' uses of digital media, where users — aware of the platform guidelines and norms — "communicate via coded workarounds", applying unanticipated uses to platforms designed for other purposes.

Examples like this also highlight that common digital media forms like hashtags and emoji are featured in widely different practices and applications across cultural contexts as well as platforms. My discussion in this paper has focused primarily on English-language content on popular, U. S.-based social media platforms, reflecting on two platformed approaches to hashtags and emoji. However, these are not demonstrative of all the ways that users on Instagram or Twitter engage with hashtags and emoji (or would like to), let alone how users on other digital media platforms do the same. The multiple meanings that users may ascribe to emoji, individually and in combination, demonstrate that although the visuals may be consistent, what they signify can vary dramatically depending on context.

Regardless of the creativity apparent within the combinations of emoji and

hashtags, applied to myriad topics and contexts, there are distinct limitations on the freedom available to users to create the visuals used in either hashtag form. Albeit a lengthy process, proposals for new emoji in the Unicode standard are open to the public, whereas Twitter's hashflags are developed without public consultation. As part of Twitter's advertising opportunities for commercial partners, the hashflag design process and motives are not visible to Twitter's own users. Of course, this does not limit Twitter users' employment of the Unicode emoji set in other ways: there are numerous Twitter accounts, including bots, which post emoji art, literature, and generative landscapes and scenes using emoji. They do not have the same structural support as emoji hashtags, but hashtags are far from the only way of using emoji. However, Twitter's promotion of its own branded emoji, in the form of hashflags, demonstrates the value it puts on its products rather than the standard imagery available to all users. Unicode emoji cannot be monetized in the same way by Twitter. While users may be engaging in the discursive flexibility and creativity that emoji in general afford, Twitter instead pushes its branded, limited edition visuals, using novelty and scarcity as a motivation to engage with this content.

Conclusion

The combination of emoji and hashtags demonstrate how these features reflect communicative practices, including the vernaculars of platforms as well as meaning-making between users, and structural, categorisation processes, denoting topics of interest and (theoretically) offering links to related content. The examples of emoji hashtags on Instagram and Twitter's hashflags represent different platformed approaches to emoji, though. Both demonstrate the platforms' awareness of, and endorsement of, the visual within everyday communication. However, there are disparate motives behind these approaches. The ability to use emoji in hashtags on Instagram, together with other textual elements, allows users to make use of the discursive flexibility and polysemy of the emoji set, encouraging bottom-up user-led creativity. This extends into the use of emoji in comments, bios, stories, user names, and other parts of Instagram; hashtagging emoji, though, makes such practices searchable, part of the platform's own mechanisms for surfacing — and policing — content

Twitter users can also be creative in their emoji use within tweets, but not when it comes to hashtags. To date, Twitter has restricted hashtags to only including letters and numbers, despite Instagram's support for emoji hashtags and the evolution of the Unicode set in general. Instead, Twitter's approach to combining 'emoji' and hashtags is arguably its own platformed intervention (Gillespie, 2015). As visuals which are automatically appended to specified hashtags through commercial partnerships, Twitter's hashflags remain directed by the platform, not its users. While Instagram retains structural control over emoji and how emoji are used on the platform, Twitter removes the possibility of creativity or subversion by restricting the use and visibility of hashflags. At the same time, Twitter imposes its hashflags without user consent or the ability to opt-out: if a hashtag has a hashflag attached, the user can either not use the hashtag, or has to accept the presence of the icon (at least while it is active). While emoji hashtags are an outlet for user creativity and affective expression, Twitter's hashflags constitute a corporate opportunity that monetizes the visual through exclusive content to benefit Twitter's own interests.

These developments highlight the competing tensions concerning what their users do or want to do on social media platforms, and what will enable the platform to grow and be profitable. Such practices differ between platforms, and the cases of Instagram and Twitter are obviously not representative of all apps or social media; however, they provide insight into different ways platforms encourage and limit their users, how they adapt to emerging communicative behaviours, and which users, stakeholders, and contexts become privileged. Emoji are not the only instance of these tensions but, they show the ways in which the likes of Instagram and Twitter think (publicly or privately) about their users and how they engage with the affordances and capabilities of these platforms: sometimes positively, sometimes #\PM*.

About the author

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Notes

- 1. This paper focuses on (primarily) English-language platforms and practices; although emoji afford visual, pictographic strings rather than letters and words, my own background means my interpretations come filtered through a Western, English-language perspective. While focusing on Instagram and Twitter here, too, it needs to be acknowledged that these are just some of many other approaches to hashtags and emoji (individually and in concert) on social media platforms and apps from around the world; this includes the development of platform-specific emoji and stickers, and their communicative applications, (Lim, 2015), and new meaning-making with emoji in non-English linguistic contexts (Zeng, 2018).
- 2. Danesi, 2017, p. 4.
- 3. Shaw, 2017, p. 597.
- 4. Repositories include https://talk.tf/hashflags/; and https://talk.tf/hashflags/; and https://talk.tf/hashflags/; and https://talk.tf/hashflags/; and https://twitter.com/HashflagArchive.
- 5. Presumably, though, users express this in other ways; in Instagram search results as at 4 July 2018, #dealwithit appears in 612,512 posts, #dealwithit in 5,852 posts.
- For more on hashtag bans, moderation, and circumvention, see Gerrard, 2018.
- <u>8.</u> Coincidentally, Poirot here is portrayed by Kenneth Branagh, who also directed the first *Thor* film in 2011.
- 9. Further renderings of the penguin emoji, for different platforms and devices, can be seen at Emojipedia: https://emojipedia.org/penguin/.
- 10. Papacharissi, 2015, p. 110.
- $\underline{11}$. Of course, Instagram's flagging processes for the identification and removal of inappropriate content may also contribute to this (see also Crawford and Gillespie, 2016).
- 12. See also the creation of a hashflag to commemorate the summit between U.S. President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim-Jong Un in June 2018, which glossed over the political contexts of both countries (Hatmaker, 2018).
- 13. The discussion of political affect with regards to #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo is examined in depth in a separate part of this project; see Highfield, 2018.

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