The Effects of Instagram Hashtags on Social Capital and Online Civic Engagement

Eun Jeong Lee, Texas State University, San Marcos, USA

ABSTRACT

This article applies social capital frameworks to examine the effects of Instagram hashtag use on heterogeneous and homogeneous networks as well as online civic engagement. Using an online survey of college students (N = 193), the results revealed that using Instagram hashtags for communication, connection, learning about people, and emotional support played an important role in the formation and strength of both heterogeneous and homogeneous networks. The study also found that heterogeneous networks are highly associated with informing current events and public affairs whereas homogeneous networks are highly associated with sharing information, knowledge and discussion online with like-minded people. This demonstrates that Instagram hashtags used in heterogeneous and homogeneous networks has positive effects on online civic engagement. The article concludes with a discussion of the implications for the impact of hashtags on online networks and engagement.

KEYWORDS
Hashtags, Heterogeneous Networks, Homogeneous Networks, Instagram, Online Civic Engagement, Online Networks, Social Capital, Social Media

INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, online social networking has grown faster and has rapidly changed the nature of social relationships. As millions of photos, videos, and texts are posted every day, social media has become central to online visual cultures around social experiences, such as self-portraits, brands, self-presentation, friendships, and civic engagement (Hampton, 2011; Johnston et al., 2013). Particularly, online interactive features have become one of the most essential communication tools for establishing and maintaining interpersonal relationships with various networks of people (Ellison, Vitak, Gray, & Lampe, 2014). Hashtags, for instance, allow social media users access to relevant information and select the most favorite or related content from other users. Instagram is strategically designed to facilitate communication among people’ connections through the respective networks. By tagging an image with a hashtag, social media users can not only connect with their close friends and family, but also communicate with new people (Nov & Ye, 2010). This often provides more opportunities for individuals to participate in the communication process within their network as they increase interactive and bidirectional communication between sources and receivers.

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Bourdieu (1986) defines social capital as the resources inherent in more or less formalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition. The aggregation of the actual or potential resources emerge as the connections of individuals are built through mutual acquaintance and recognition (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Social capital resides within a network of connections among members of specific social relationships and offers many benefits to social networks such as self-esteem, education, life satisfaction, and civic engagement (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2000). Though there has been scholarly attention on the relationship between the effects of interactive features such as tags or hyperlinks on social media use and social capital, the existing review of the literature in this area showed that little scholarly attention has been devoted to Instagram alone, particularly hashtags. Therefore, using an online survey of college students, this is the first study to explore the association of Instagram use with bridging social capital (heterogeneous network) and bonding social capital (homogeneous network) as well as how the use of hashtags on Instagram relate to online civic engagement.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Instagram and Hashtags

Social media as a means of social interaction has become the major communication tool by which people develop their online social network. While Facebook is still the most widely used social media platform, with 79% of Internet users in the United States having an account (Greenwood, Perrin & Duggan, 2016), Instagram has become one of the fast-growing social media channel and a highly visual social networking site whose audience continues to grow, especially among young adults. Originally launched on October 6, 2010 and acquired by Facebook in 2012, Instagram has quickly gained popularity reaching 150 million users in just three years since its launch. Today, many people have incorporated this social medium into their daily life. According to the Pew Research Center, 59% of online adults ages 18-29 in the United States use Instagram which is nearly the twice the share among 30- to 49-year-olds (33%) and more than seven times the share among those 65 and older (8%) (Greenwood, Perrin & Duggan, 2016). Among all the Instagram users, 51% of them say they access the site every day and 35% do so multiple times a day (Greenwood, Perrin & Duggan, 2016).

Instagram creates strong visual-oriented culture. Unlike Facebook and Twitter that can create text-only contents, Instagram users can take, edit, and share the photos and short videos within the application, along with an option of applying various artistic filters that users can run on their photos to enrich or beautify before uploading them (Moreau, 2016). This unique and simplicity of the platform allows users to be easily connected bidirectional by exchanging content created and shared by individuals, sharing quick visual updates with their social network, “following” other Instagram users to see what has been posted and be “followed” by other users. Additionally, Instagram offers users a social means to write comments about the post, tag locations and people in their content, express their positive assessment of the photos or videos by clicking a heart icon ‘favorite’ on the post, and see the stream of images from their photographic feeds with algorithm that tries to guess what the user wants to see (Beese, 2016; Titcomb, 2016).

A hashtag is a word or phrase without spaces between that is preceded by a hash symbol (#). Widely used to define shared context for specific topics or events, the hashtag is a directory in which users can designate for their own content, such as photographs or videos, which will connect them with other content in that category (Loren, 2017). In other words, tagging a post with a hashtag creates
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