

Rallying Hashtags as a Tool for Societal Change in Fashion



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Abstract The influencing power of hashtags cannot be overestimated since they can be used as facilitators of some societal change calling for collective action. Following the influential social identity model of collective action (SIMCA) presented by Van Zomeren, Postmes, and Spears (*Psychological Bulletin* 134(4): 504–35, 2008), social identity together with collective efficacy beliefs and perceived injustice leads to collective action. Perceived injustice in the fashion domain is usually associated with sustainable fashion which in this paper has a broad concept of being both environmentally and socially friendly. It presumes a call for fighting against environmental pollution including overconsumption and raising awareness of ethical issues such as racism, sexism, ageism, poor working conditions, and low wages in the fashion industry. This paper discusses hashtags' linguistic and digital characteristics, which could enhance influence on Internet users. The focus is on the rallying affordances of hashtags in the fashion domain, which help raise awareness of environmental and ethical issues. Top-down hashtags promoted by the Fashion Revolution group such as #FashionRevolution, #WhoMadeMyClothes, #sustainablefashion, #slowfashion, #ethicalfashion, #haulternative, and #LovedClothesLast are under investigation. The analysis proves hashtags' influencing power and discusses achieved changes due to social hashtagged campaigns.

Keywords Fashion · Hashtags · Collective action · Online activism · Sustainability · Ethical issues

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1 Introduction

ICT allows for multimedia content publication and high interactivity, offering endless opportunities to explore, vote, buy, customize, connect, share, exchange, copy, ask for, and provide advice [1]. ICT also allows for online collective action or protest. Nowadays digital or online activism is becoming more widespread and is used to raise awareness, rally, set activist agendas, debate, and criticize. Greijdanus et al. [2] argue that in most cases online activism is related to offline protests because posts on the Internet trigger the mobilization of the group offline.

Doerr [3] states that fashion itself can be used as a vehicle to protest. Fashion activists widely use digital social media (DSM) to involve Internet users in a social grouping to influence and further spread values and beliefs concerning sustainable and/or ethical fashion. DSM are computer-based tools (such as websites and apps) that people use to create and share content with other people and organize collectively [4].

DSM is easily organized and navigated nowadays by hashtags which help users find and retrieve information and become part of the community. Hashtags possess great influencing power due to their digital affordances and verbal attractiveness. They can be used as facilitators of societal change calling for collective action. According to Zappavigna [5], a hashtag is metadata embedded in social media contexts or social metadata. Metadata is data about data, which “says” what the post is about [6]. This metadata creates “conversational tagging” [7] and makes a post “searchable” [5] and retrievable. The social aspect of it is in the ability to create communities [8].

Xiong et al. [9] sum up that an emerging line of research centers around “hashtag activism” [10–15], which has been defined as the “act of fighting for or supporting a cause with the use of hashtags as the primary channel to raise awareness of an issue and encourage debate via social media” [16]. Hashtags help people act collectively: distribute the information about social injustice, make the problem visible, involve more people, make similar posts, group them together, and, thus, raise awareness of the issue online or even create offline campaigns. While there is a lot of literature on hashtag activism, in general there is a lack of information on hashtag activism in the fashion domain. This paper sheds light on this particular problem.

Social fashion campaigns can mostly be divided into two metacommunicative frameworks of hashtags advanced by Daer, Hoffman, and Goodman [17]: critiquing and rallying. Expressing negative judgment on a particular case by common users or influencers can be a trigger for a social movement against some injustice, while rallying hashtags are originated by professionals to bring awareness to fashion injustice or gather support for a campaign.

This research discusses the sociopsychological conditions for collective action in the fashion industry together with hashtags’ linguistic and digital conditions, which enhance the influence on the online users and analyze some most frequently encountered top-down rallying hashtags in the fashion domain.

2 Methodology

First, the following three main conditions for hashtags' influencing effect and collective action emergence are discussed: sociopsychological [18], digital, and linguistic.

Second, based on Instagram, Twitter, and the Fashion Revolution website, seven popular rallying hashtags are analyzed. Taking into account two taxonomies, top-down and bottom-up [19], the focus is on top-down hashtags initiated by the Fashion Revolution group who are considered to be opinion leaders and include the following hashtags: #FashionRevolution, #WhoMadeMyClothes, #sustainablefashion, #slowfashion, #ethicalfashion, #haulalternative, and #LovedClothesLast.

3 Conditions for Digital Collective Action in the Fashion Domain

According to SIMCA, any collective action requires three main prerequisites: (1) social identity, (2) beliefs in collective efficacy, and (3) perceived injustice [18]. Later the authors specified that collective efficacy can be replaced by "participatory efficacy." While collective efficacy refers to the belief that "we as a group can reach our goals," participative efficacy refers to the belief that one's own actions will contribute to achieving group goals [20]. Undoubtedly, both collective and participatory types of efficacy refer to the achievement of group goals; however, participatory efficacy addresses the incremental contribution of one's own action to the group goal. According to Wright, Taylor, and Moghaddam, "a group member engages in collective action any time that she or he is acting as a representative of the group and the action is directed at improving conditions of the entire group" [21]. Nowadays digital or online activism is becoming more widespread and is used for emancipatory actions to raise awareness, rally, set activist agendas, debate, or criticize something.

Social identity is the part of an individual's self-concept that derives from his/her knowledge of his/her membership of a social group or groups and from the value and emotional significance attached to that membership [22]. Social identity can be explained as the awareness of self via belonging to some social group [23]. Users of different social platforms organize communities where they are able to share common interests, values, and beliefs. A hashtag presents a clickable hyperlink or metadata that can help to express one's identity and provides the opportunity of establishing and increasing the circulation in the community.

In order to induce collective action, the sender of a fashion-related hashtagged message makes the promoted values popular and appealing to the reader, for example, social and environmental sustainability, so that the perceivers of the message consider themselves to be associated and identified with this idea and

Table 1 Social marketing effectiveness framework^a

Levels of effectiveness	Changes	Result	Method of measurement
Awareness	Increase in awareness of issue	Individual changes in awareness	Audience surveys
Engagement	Change of attitude, contemplation of behavior change	Behavior responses to the intervention, individual changes	Audience surveys, behavior at data
Behavior	Individual behavior change	Individual changes in behavior	Audience surveys, behavioral data
Social norm	Diffusion of the desired behavior change, sustainability, political environment (legislation)	Normative changes in attitude and behavior	Media, political tracking, observation
Well-being	Improvement in quality of life for both individuals and society	Change in social and environmental outcomes	Social report, environmental and epidemiological data

From Luca and Suggs [25]

^aAdapted from Varcoe [26]

campaign, and then a belief in “participatory efficacy” is embedded either implicitly or explicitly, for example: “There are many ways you can be a Fashion Revolutionary. Use your voice and your power to make positive change” [24]. Consequently, they promote the idea that everyone can make a considerable change by participating in this stream. What is the most important for any collective action to appear is a revealed injustice.

While it is very difficult to measure and evaluate such digital campaigns, it is important to understand that they might have very different—even if related—goals. According to Luca and Suggs [25], who moved from a proposal by Varcoe [26], there are five different levels of effectiveness of a social marketing campaign, as depicted in Table 1.

Hashtags can help in reaching all goals but are particularly relevant to raise awareness of an issue, eventually promoting engagement (e.g., liking, reposting, adopting) and individual behavioral changes (e.g., different and more sustainable consumption practices). Society at large might be touched, on the medium to long run, through changes in social norms and impact on well-being.

Hashtags agitating for collective action in the field of fashion are directed to the issue of sustainable fashion. The concept of “sustainability” has been circulating among academics, fashion practitioners, ordinary people, and activists for years and is still hotly debated. A recent manifest on research in fashion communication has indicated it as a topic deserving further research [27].

According to Chabowski, Mena, and Gonzales-Padron [28], sustainability refers to a business goal that seeks to make a positive environmental, social, and economic impact. Sustainable fashion is an umbrella term that includes two main aspects: environmental and social. As Jestratijevic and Rudd [29] claim, some fashion brands promote sustainable commitments only through pro-environmental improvements forgetting about pro-social issues which undermine the true meaning of the term

“sustainable.” Consequently, sustainable fashion should include both eco fashion and ethical fashion which encourages a respectful attitude to people. Sustainability is an issue that expands on a product’s whole life cycle, starting from its design and production, moving on to its maintenance and disposal. Mora, Rocamora, and Volonté argue that sustainability “should be at the heart of the production of immaterial contents; questions must be addressed regarding the pervasive endurance of the many homogenizing and stereotyping visions of beauty, health and success that are typical of mainstream models of western fashion” [30].

A sustainable imagery should combine principles of equality, fairness, and humanity. According to Candeloro [31], sustainability is becoming one of the main trends within our society, and online communication is crucial to influence customers and to deliver sustainable purchase behavior. The word “sustainable” presumes environmentally friendly, adequately consumed, socially fair, and transparent fashion industry aimed at quality rather than quantity.

Fashion activists raise concerns over environmental pollution, overconsumption mainly due to fast fashion, and social injustice toward those who make clothes (poor working conditions, long working hours, low wages, child labor, etc.). Other types of injustice can be associated with the result of intangible contents promoted by fashion, cultural or racial discriminations, sexism, imposed beauty standards, ageism, etc.

While in several cases such issues might be due to fast fashion, which could encourage a consumeristic approach to clothing and might push competition on price too far, so to impact workers’ salaries and product quality, also high-end fashion and even haute couture are not exempt from such criticisms, as it has been documented, for instance, in “Inside Italy’s Shadow Economy” by the *New York Times* [32]. Moreover, it is important to avoid an elitist and naïve approach to the issue, which in the end blames people who cannot afford costly items, as if they are the main cause of lack of sustainability in the sector [33].

4 Digital Affordances of Hashtags to Establish Collective Action

To foster online social revolutions, hashtags are used intensively due to their digital affordances or opportunities. Information spreads faster online than offline. Different social platforms have their own affordances and constraints. While Instagram is more marketing oriented with a visual turn, Twitter is more for reading news and sharing information. While a tweet is limited to 280 characters, an Instagram caption can contain up to 2200 characters and 30 hashtags. On Instagram, users usually post hashtags after the post (text or a picture), while on Twitter hashtags are usually intertwined in the context of the post. Furthermore, both platforms appeal to different user needs. Twitter is mainly used for sharing and following information and news and participating in conversations [34, 35], Twitter hashtags can mark the ebb and

flow of public discussions and events [36]. Instagram, on the other hand, is oriented toward self-expression, entertainment [34, 37], and marketing. Posts on Twitter and Instagram are generally contextually similar but not identical with the consistent use of hashtags.

Two types of tagging are used (# and @). Posts usually contain hashtags which either follow them or are intertwined within the post and serve as highlighters. Hashtags can be used as a tool to start, accelerate, expand, and maintain online social movements due to their basic affordances such as (1) becoming visible and searchable/retrievable for orientation and navigation, marking a topic for categorization [5, 6, 38, 39], (2) referencing to itself or other posts (metadata) [5, 40], (3) linking people and communities together [5, 41, 42], and (4) maintaining social conformity being compliant with social practices. These affordances make hashtags one of the best facilitators of social movements.

Specific affordances marked by Daer, Hoffman, and Goodman [17] such as critiquing and rallying contribute to establishing, expanding, and maintaining online social activism. Supplying a post with some critiquing hashtags makes it easier to make a judgement about the content or rally about some cases of injustice. Judging and critiquing hashtags are used by online users or customers as a feedback on some injustice and are not used by fashion brand officials since, undoubtedly, their main goal is to promote fashion items rather than to reveal any injustice associated with the product.

5 Linguistic Characteristics of Fashion-Related Hashtags to Encourage Collective Action

To become popular and be successfully spread further, hashtags need to be concise but informative, memorable, recognizable, and consistent (a campaign should use one and the same hashtag continuously throughout many posts). Below are some linguistic solutions used in the hashtags to trigger collective action.

Fashion Revolution started its campaign for sustainable fashion with #whomademyclothes, which has the syntactic structure of a question. It appears to be interactive and personal since it implies interaction between a customer and a producer where a customer is not someone out there, an unknown stranger but every one of us: my clothes—the indication to self-reference with the help of the personal pronoun. It activates participatory efficacy so crucial for collective action: if I ask a brand who made my clothes, I become part of a global sustainable fashion community and fight for safe and fair social and environmental conditions. Additionally, “who” in the hashtag helps to shift focus from an industrial/mechanical perspective—clothes are done by machines—toward a better understanding that extensive human labor is involved, hence social equity/sustainability is required. In fact, those faceless and voiceless “who” might be empowered (also) through the campaign, so that they can answer themselves and take action.

Most other hashtags, linguistically speaking, consist of a phrase: a premodifier in the form of an adjective and a noun such as #sustainablefashion, #slowfashion, #ethicalfashion, and #FashionRevolution (adjectival noun + noun). The adjectives collocate with “fashion” emphasize the main ideas of the social campaigns.

The hashtag #haulalternative is a blending of haul and alternative aimed at promoting less consumerism and giving a second life to a garment by refreshing it or buying second hand, swapping with a friend, etc. It refers to a haul, which is a video posted on the Internet in which a person discusses items that they recently purchased, sometimes going into detail about their experiences during the purchase and the cost of the items they bought. Hauls have been a growing trend during 2007–2016. The second part of the blended hashtag directs to an alternative: changing it and using it as something else one or more available possibilities. This linguistic form seems to make the hashtag more attractive and remarkable for online users, inviting them to generate associations and interpretations connected with this blending.

The same meaning introduces #LovedClothesLast with the attributive or adjective phrase, a noun, and a verb. This extended phrase has a repetition of the consonant “l” framing the word “clothes” making it more recognizable and easy to remember. Besides, it informs about the main sense of reusing the clothes and, thus, highlights sustainability.

6 Top-Down Rallying Hashtags

Top-down rallying hashtags calling for collective action are initiated and posted by opinion leaders in the fashion field, in particular, the Fashion Revolution group. In this paper, seven often used and discussed hashtags are outlined with the description of the perceived injustice and possible collective action to be triggered.

#fashionrevolution corresponds to the name of the website and the main global community for sustainable fashion that can be considered as a leader and the main influencer in this sphere. It is Fashion Revolution that has launched different campaigns aimed at sustainable fashion including #WhoMadeMyClothes. Their goal is to change the fashion industry making it environmentally and socially friendly. Fashion revolution creates social identity by describing who they are and attracting people to the community by highlighting the sense of togetherness. The participatory efficacy is revealed in calling for actions and emphasizing that everybody’s action can bring about a positive change. The Fashion Revolution team embraces different kinds of people involved in fashion from designers, retailers, business leaders, to writers and scholars. They want to reveal fashion-related injustices, starting from the disaster of Rana Plaza Dhaka, in Bangladesh, where, on April 24, 2013, a building collapsed, which housed five garment factories, and killed at least 1110 people and injured more than 2500 [43]. Fashion Revolution founders believe that no one should die for fashion, and they promote sustainable fashion demanding a fair and safe fashion industry. They bring awareness to poor working conditions, discrimination, overconsumption, etc. They implement

different campaigns for sustainable fashion and use hashtags as the brand name for their social campaigns to make them recognizable. Fashion revolution's goal is to trigger the following actions [24]: (1) ask brands #whomademyclothes? You can download and print these posters to use with your selfie, when asking brands/retailers #whomademyclothes? Download a [spreadsheet](#) with the Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram names of all the major brands; (2) send email to a brand; (3) use your voice on Twitter; (4) post on Instagram; (5) take the #haulalternative challenge; (6) write a postcard to a policymaker; (6) share your fashion love story; (7) write an email to a brand and ask #WhatsInMyClothes?; (8) fill in their name, sign yours, and share on social media, tagging the brand and @fash_rev; (9) spread educational resources; (10) host a digital event—Fashion Revolution Week; etc.

#WhoMadeMyClothes deserves attention because this campaign is famous not only among fashion experts but also among fashion followers and fashion lovers. The perceived injustice as mentioned above is the poor working conditions of people involved in fashion that caused the dramatic accident in Rana Plaza. The dramatic events in Rana Plaza served as a starting point for the campaign hashtagged with #whomademyclothes to reveal the origins of clothes. Orsola de Castro, an opinion leader, and fashion designer Carry Somers launched this global campaign with participation in over 100 countries in 2013 [44]. To fight for sustainable fashion in terms of fairer and better working conditions and the more transparent production of clothes, Fashion Revolution proposes the following ICT actions: to make a selfie with the premade poster free to download asking a brand or retailer #whomademyclothes and to post it on Instagram, Twitter, or Facebook and to email a brand, to express gratitude on Twitter to those who make clothes, and to ask a brand the same question. Many brands have been responding, and the campaign has been growing.

This movement has been widely present in online social media in the form of blogs, journal columns, and videos. The impact is substantial and can be witnessed in the following offline events: (1) the reinforcement of the UK Modern Slavery Act of 2015 [45]; (2) the enormous scope of Fashion Revolution Week of 2017 (Two million people were engaged with Fashion Revolution in April 2017 through events, posting on social media, viewing videos, or downloading resources from their website [46]; (3) the release of the campaign video for #whomademyclothes in 2018 and its worldwide popularity [47]; (4) the establishment of the Transparency Index in 2018. It caused about 172 brands across 68 countries to reveal more information on the clothes production (in response to the hashtag, #whomademyclothes, more than 3838 global brands also took to social media to respond with information about their suppliers and workers) [47]; and (5) the release of *Fixing Fashion* in February 2019, a report highlighting evidence from global fashion retailers, supply chain experts, and environmental leaders on what the sustainability climate of the UK fashion industry looked like [48].

#haulalternative [49] and *#LovedClothesLast* [50] are two hashtag campaigns advanced by Fashion Revolution. They encourage people to take part in the challenge of promoting fashion sustainability during fashion revolution week which has taken place annually in April since 2013 by demonstrating a video with the refreshed

clothes from your wardrobe instead of buying new ones. There are nine examples and topics of the second life of clothes according to which people should create their own videos: Love story, Broken but beautiful, Fashion fix, 2hand, Swap, DIY, Vintage, Hire, and Slow [49].

The general trend of sustainability in the fashion domain can be highlighted with the corresponding general hashtags *#sustainablefashion*, *#slowfashion*, and *#ethicalfashion* embracing the ideas of environmental protection, designing, and creating clothes which are qualitative, long-lasting, and socially friendly and promote equality. These general hashtags do not belong to any particular event where injustice can be strongly perceived like in *#fashionrevolution* and *#whomadeyourclothes*. They are directed at the main ideas which should be implemented to change the situation for the better in the fashion domain.

7 Discussion

The overview of top-down rallying hashtags posted by Fashion Revolution showed that they are all posted as a response to perceived injustice in the fashion domain. The Fashion Revolution group is focused on social injustice of people involved in fashion, mainly poor and even deadly working conditions, low salaries, and the environmental problems connected with overconsumerism. Some analyzed hashtags are general—they point to and promote what the campaign is fighting for *#fashionrevolution*, *#sustainablefashion*, *#slowfashion*, and *#ethicalfashion*, and others are more focused and aimed, for example, at asking the brand *#whomademyclothes* and raising awareness of the unbearable working conditions of those who make clothes. It makes people understand what might hide behind a garment.

The influencing power of most of the discussed hashtags can be witnessed by real collective action both online and offline which brought about different positive changes in the fashion domain and gained wide public outreach.

8 Conclusion

Behind a rallying hashtag, there should be a story which reveals a perceived injustice. A hashtag never goes alone; it is a part and parcel of the whole message which can be verbal and/or visual. A hashtag aimed at some societal change should be attractive, involving, recognizable, concise, easily remembered, and easily shared and referred to. A hashtag used in the context of social campaigns can be compared with a fashion brand name since its goal is to attract attention, become memorable and spread the idea, involve more people in it, and, finally, encourage some actions, for example, to spread the information further by sharing the post or commenting on it, to create one's own post with the same hashtag, to put likes showing approval and

personal involvement in the issue, to email a brand, to tell the story, or even to go protesting offline.

The overview of rallying hashtags in the fashion domain from sociopsychological, digital, and linguistic perspective can be helpful for those who study digital fashion communication and crisis communication, as well as for fashion activists, who are launching or maintaining some collective action. It generally contributes to the research on hashtags, digital collective action, and digital communication in fashion.

Further research can be directed to bottom-up hashtags which are triggered by Internet users as a response to injustice, for example, #boycottmoncler, #boycottHandM (#boycotthm), #boycottedolce, #boycottegucci, (#gucciblackface), #boycottprada, #boycottkatyperry, and #boycottburberry. Obviously all these hashtags are responses to some particular acts of injustice, which can be in the garment itself or in the immaterial content associated with a fashion house. Behind each boycott hashtag, there is a story of a cultural mistake that evoked injustice and launched a critiquing campaign against a brand calling for actions such as joining the campaign, raising awareness of an act of injustice, blaming the fashion house for such a communication mistake, and demanding punishment such as withdrawal of the garment from sales and apologies.

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