

*Review*

# **Possible selves of a hashtag: Moving from the theory of speech acts to cultural objects to interpret hashtags**

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In recent years hashtag studies have increased their numbers. The role of hashtags becomes increasingly predominant in social media studies. Many researchers wonder how to study them, ending up treating them in an aggregate way and turning to big data and static-mathematical modeling. This type of studies seem to consider hashtags as tools, favoring a single analysis perspective. In fact, The studies and the research carried out in the field of social media deal with what users do with hashtags. This paper wishes to propose a different perspective. The question raised here is not "what users do with hashtags," but "what they do to hashtags." This theoretical approach presupposes a change in the perspective based on the reading of hashtags as speech acts, which impacts the construction of social reality and identifies hashtags as cultural products. This interpretative path of cultural nature seems to be necessary in order to be able to look at the hashtag as a concept that changes its meaning through human interaction. The consequence of inserting this perspective is that the hashtag becomes a multidimensional concept, which in order to be analyzed must be decomposed and analyzed in all its possible dimensions. If the aim of the research is to reconstruct the sense and meaning of the hashtag.

**Key words:** Affordances, cultural objects, Hashtag, sensemaking, speech act.

## **INTRODUCTION**

In recent years studies on hashtags have increased the number of their appearances in trade journals and books and hashtags are starting to be the subject and the object of continuous analysis by scholars. This depends on their strength to aggregate people and allow them to express feelings and emotions. The hashtags studies have analyzed the phenomena of social television and the relationship between social media and politics, leaving behind several questions, such as: What is a hashtag? What elements is it made of? Is its meaning unchanging over time? These are aporias, doubts, key issues on

which to address the research, probably something about which the answer is still unknown or which has been little heeded. However, these are points that need to be resolved, if the attention of scholars today focuses on these connection-tools and on the effects they produce. These are points that need to be discussed, thematised, interpreted, if the goal of our work is the *Verstehen*.

The starting point of this paper is an attempt to understand and interpret the trend involving the current use of hashtags. In other words: Are they tools that are used only to index conversation topics and daily facts or

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are they something more? When hashtags appeared first, their function was certainly to index conversations.

However, today we cannot ignore the fact that they are multitasking tools. Whether it is an event, a protest, or the life of a star, a hashtag is made up of a significant (symbol) # and a meaning. It is a semantic content that is formed by speech signs and mental images, continuously redefined through human actions and interactions.

Colleoni (2013) states that hashtags can serve as empty signifiers that invite the ideological identification of a polysemic orientation. Papacharissi (2016) defines them as signifiers that are not empty but open to definition, redefinition, and re-appropriation. They also signify the emotional component that users connect to events, the sense of public affection, or connected audiences (Boyd, 2010) that express their participation through the expressions of sentiments (Papacharissi, 2016). And while they connect people, themes, emotions, they broaden and modify their original meaning.

Therefore, there is something that goes beyond the label itself and opens up to new possible worlds of meaning, which need to be specified because only if we understand what hashtags are, we can identify their effects on the construction of social reality. Hence, we need to read them through epistemological, linguistic, cultural, and media lenses. In this paper, we place our attention on the hashtag - what a hashtag is and what its impact is on social reality. It is important to bear in mind that the point of view considered here is not a hashtag as a means, but as a purpose. In other words, we do not ask what users do with hashtags, but what they do to hashtags, and how many "possible selves" they allow to give them a shape.

A hashtag's signifier and meaning are explored by its three-dimensional interpretation: 1) a hashtag as a speech act; 2) the affordances of the hashtags; and 3) a hashtag as a cultural product.

## POSSIBLE SELVES OF A HASHTAG

Markus and Nurius (1986) presented the theory of possible selves, indicating how research on the concept of self reveals the great diversity and complexity in the knowledge of the self and the importance that the self has in regulating behavior. Despite the proliferation in studies in their opinions - a few steps have been taken concerning the criticism of self-knowledge, represented by the control of one's possible selves. The concept of possible selves is ideal, depicting what a person would like to become and the desire of which can be frightening. The term possible selves contains the multiplicity of expressions that a person can come up with. Hence, they contain the person's potential, the person *in fieri*. This repertoire can be regarded as a personal repertoire, seen as the cognitive revelation of long-term objectives, aspirations, stimuli, fears, and threats. We could add that it is a folding fan of emotions. Thus, the term possible

selves provides a specific self-pertinent form, which is the organization and the direction of these dynamics. They are the essential connections between the concept of self and motivation (Markus and Nurius, 1986). The element that we are most interested in the description of the term possible selves is their being linked to the dynamic properties of the concept of oneself, that is motivation, distortion, and change-both temporary and long-lasting. In this sense, when we say "possible selves of a hashtag," we mean to say that a hashtag can have multiple expressions has a multiplicity of expressions it can give a form to. In other words, it can become something more than what it contains, and this self-pertinent form is potentially inserted in it. Possible selves of a hashtag are trusted to the agency of users, who allow them to emerge, contributing to the construction of social reality (Searle, 1995) and producing an impact on the social world (Griswold, 1997). By having both, a signifier and a meaning, a hashtag can change the content while moving from one tweet to another, thanks to the dynamic character of the concept it contains, through interaction, knowledge, and motivation. It is no longer different from what Boyd et al. (2010) state, by analyzing the practice of retweeting and considering the retweet as a conversation within Twitter.

All this cannot be surprising since the Medium Theory (Meyrowitz, 1985) has already made us aware of how technologies produce an impact on culture and social life. The use of different 'media' of communication reverberates its consequences on the experiential world of the human being (La Rocca, 2012). It is not difficult to accept the idea that the use of a means of communication for a prolonged period of time determines the nature itself of the knowledge to communicate, and that its pervasiveness brings to the birth of a new civilization, that is, to a particular form through which the material, social and spiritual life of a population reveals itself (Innis, 1951; Ong, 1982; La Rocca, 2017).

All this further enhanced by the introduction of the word and the concept of mediatization. It is connected to the process of the change in social and cultural institutions as a consequence of the growing influence of media, taking, however, the circumstances into account, that is, how the culture and society are changing (Cardoso, 2008; Couldry, 2012; Hjarvard, 2013). Influenced by the whirlwind of mediatization (Deacon and Stanyer, 2014; Lunt and Livingstone, 2015; Couldry and Hepp, 2017) and the mediatization of emotions, which transform social media into emotional media (Tettegah, 2016), and are populated by hashtags for political campaigns, terrorist attacks, environmental disasters, and the life and death of famous people (Döveling et al. 2018), a hashtag changes its meaning of a post in a post. Let us understand what it is.

## The hashtag as a speech act

Trying to understand what is a hashtag is not only a

notional operation, it is also an operation that has got repercussions on how we analyze the content of the hashtags. How can we work with hashtags if we don't know what they are?

We can consider a hashtag as a speech act because it allows us to understand how the way we indicate “things” is changing; the words we use determine what we know, what we keep an idea of and give a representation. A similar perspective is that of the theory formulated in the 1950s and known as the theory of speech acts (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969). This theory is based on the main assumption that “saying” is the same as “doing”. It seems that we can – at least – try to consider a hashtag as a speech act and thus try to understand what are the effects and consequences of this. A preliminary summary of what speech acts are, however, is necessary, although not exhaustive. Within this theory there are three levels in speech acts: locutionary acts, represented by the act of saying something; perlocutionary acts, which indicate all the consequences that saying something can have on who receives the communication; illocutionary acts, which represent the actions we perform and make them real by simply pronouncing them. In order to understand the reasons why hashtags have been associated with illocutionary acts, it is necessary to follow the considerations made by Searle in *Speech Acts* (1969) and in *The Construction of Social Reality* (1995).

Searle (1969) conceives language discourse as a behavior; He, therefore, believes that talking about speech corresponds to engaging oneself in a type of behavior. In his opinion, to speak means to make speech acts. He distinguishes four speech acts: uttering acts, propositional acts (divided into reference and predicative moments), illocutionary acts and perlocutionary ones. It is important to remember the lesson of Innis (1951) – about the nature of communication that depends on the support, the medium that vehiculates it – according to him interpretation we can affirm that today hashtags are creating new ways of considering speech acts with consequences traceable in the construction of the social reality, the latter to be considered as a constant relationship between mind and society which contributes to the creation of the social world (Searle, 2010).

In his works, Searle focuses on illocutionary and perlocutionary speech acts, considering, however, illocution as a “complete” speech act, or rather a speech act par excellence. According to Searle, illocutionary acts are a paradigm for reference and predicative acts, that is for the two acts that make up the propositional act. In Searle's opinion, when we make an illocution, we utter something, we transmit content, and we cause some effects as consequences in interlocutors.

When we create a parallelism between illocutionary acts and hashtags, and we start looking at the latter as speech acts, the distinction that Searle makes between sense, the meaning and the reference is of fundamental importance. Searle believes that meaning something and

saying something with a meaning are aspects of illocution since they are simultaneously intentional and conventional acts.

It is for this reason that we here associate the hashtag to the illocutionary act. A hashtag is an assertion followed by a proposition, by another assertion or by a multimodal content. This set of contents should be taken into account when we working with hashtags, otherwise their analysis is only partial, it is just a small part of the meanings that they contain. Only one possible self. But as it also happens with Searle, it is impossible to study only the uses of speech (Smith, 2003); in fact, it is necessary to study not only speech but also the brain, the mind, the laws of physics, and the kinds of social organization. Recognizing this, Searle treads a new path with work on intentionality, the mind, and the conscience. Here we follow the same path. To understand what one means by intentionality, which for Searle is the aboutness of the mind, and how much this is connected to speech acts, the mind or to the state of things, we need to distinguish the phenomena related to the observer from those independent from the observer, considering how the explicitation of two different points of view can contribute to the development of two analysis perspectives.

Thinking back to the hashtags we use on Twitter, what intrinsically contains a hashtag, considered separately from observers, users or other forms of external intentionality? It intrinsically includes digital characters made of bits that pass from one state to another very quickly. The core of the issue is exactly the following: in the passage from one state to another one, we digit, tweet, retweet the hashtags until they perform certain functions, but these functions are always related to the observer. This is the fundamental step, the awareness we need to understand how to look at hashtags. It is only because the observer knows how to interpret a hashtag and what it recalls that we can claim that a hashtag contains information in itself. Therefore, there is a sense of intentionality independent from the observer (intrinsic intentionality), a sense of intentionality extrinsic to the observer (extrinsic intentionality), and then a third form of intentionality, the metamorphic one. It is here, in this acquisition that we have already identified different interpretation possibilities for the hashtags; let's call them: possible selves. This distinction made by Searle is, without doubt, relevant when one needs to extract the meanings of hashtags and their re-modulation in the various uses by social media users. In the hashtag studies, it is necessary to start considering the associate contents linked to the hashtag, such as: images, videos, other hashtags, emojis, quoting and retweets, as crucial for the extraction of complete-meaning.

In fact, according to Bruns et al. 2016 the hashtag studies can be understood as representing the dominant stream of Twitter, but they are a “low-hanging fruit in social media data” (p. 1), and we can add that they can tell us what the theme of the day is, that bringing together

ad hoc publics (Bruns and Burgess, 2015) but – if not well analyzed – they cannot tell us how they are thinking about that theme the ad hoc publics.

So, whether we work with a quantitative approach, or that we work with a qualitative data analysis approach what we must keep in mind is that the hashtag is like a concept, and for this reason it is to be operationalized in all its dimensions. The interpretation of the hashtag like a speech act is useful to us, because it allows us to understand how many and which, visible or latent, are the dimensions of a hashtag.

Hence, we always need to distinguish between the literal use of the hashtag's intentional concepts, the literal use that describes intentional states intrinsic or independent from the observer, the literal use that describes intentional conditions, so only to the observer. These two literal applications of intentional notions should be in turn distinguished from the metaphorical applications of intentional notions. There is already a first indication on where we should look, that there is something that must be extracted and something that must be imagined/supposed, because it was added later. Another possible self.

Fundamental is Searle's clarification that it is impossible to have an intentional state without having also many others. Indeed, they presuppose beliefs, values, wishes and we can consider them as a web in which every intentional state works, in other words, determines one's conditions of satisfaction only for its position and relation to all the others on the web. The entire web of intentionality works only because there is a background, a field that makes it possible for the detailed elements of the web to work adequately. This field/background is able to put all the elements in communication with each other. Something of implicit that we all understand and feed. Such background does not consist of further beliefs added to the web itself, but rather of a *habitus*, shared social practices, ways of being correlated to it in some way. For these reasons the hashtag becomes a semantic umbrella, a polysemic connector, a vehicle of meanings, a collector of emotions always correlated, but which extend and redesign the nuances of sense and of original meaning. It is in this process that possible selves find development possibilities.

Applying to the hashtag the cultural diamond framework proposed by Griswold (1997) in which parallelism is created between the creator of a social phenomenon, its receiver, the social world and the cultural object. This way it is possible to obtain a hashtag that is created by a user (producer) to indicate an event, a phenomenon, a celebrity, a protest, etc. The creation of the hashtag takes place in the social world (here represented by the social media), but until there is no receiver (another user or a community of users) that can accept this hashtag and re-use it, the hashtag cannot become a cultural product; in other words, a shared

meaning inserted in a form. Without interaction, the passage to a metaphoric use of the hashtag's semantic and emotional content could not occur.

We need to understand how technology and society relate with one another; how the former enters in contact with cultural contexts, personal actions and social effects.

In some way, we have to consider the efficaciousness of human actions and the unexpected effects they have on social systems. As institutional facts (Searle, 1969), also hashtags are to be considered as facts whose existence presuppose the existence of certain human institutions. To clarify this statement Searle (1969) only tells us that given marriage, certain behavioural forms make up the union of two people. These institutions are constitutive rules, and institutional facts can only be explained according to the constitutive rules they are based on. Thinking about hashtags, they carry a set of constitutive rules that are both social and structural. Among the social ones, we can insert without doubt the cultural reference frame, the users' usage of a set of rules connected to social media, the knowledge of the effects of media or rather of a hashtag on social life; Among the structural ones we can insert the technical and technological components of social media. The producers and the receivers know the rules and the effects of hashtags on social media. The idea that hashtags can be considered speech acts inserts them in action theory, simply because speaking/digiting is a behavior regulated by rules. It is equally simple to imagine or better, to accept that hashtags produce effects, to be intended as the consequence of the intentional or not act of their being on social media. Indeed, not only they are the object of semantic remodulation inside social media through operations of retweets or quotations, but are also object of remediation (Bolter and Grusin, 1999). Remediation occurs when media gross roots take over a hashtag and turn it into a theme. Through a hashtag's remediation, and therefore through the compenetration of old and new communication technologies, hashtag meanings and social uses are reconfigured with new cultural interpretations open to unprecedented meanings. This happens because hashtags are themed through means of mass communication; in other words, they are placed at the attention of the public, so that they receive adequate coverage, underlining their centrality and meaningfulness in comparison with the normal flow of un themed information.

### **Affordance in hashtags**

Hashtags and their use in social media represent a quite unique thematic index that designs a new perspective of connectivity (Bruns and Moe, 2014), especially if one considers retweet or quoting operations (Rathnayake and Suthers, 2018).

Social media like Twitter since they have appeared, have been the object of numerous studies and of various thematic in-depth analyses, among these there is a line of study that analyzed the dimension of connections between users, thanks to this tool, moving from the idea of a connected presence (Licoppe and Smoreda, 2005), of being together but alone (Turkle, 2011), to the analysis of tweets as a tool to provoke reactions in the audience (Marwick and Boyd, 2012), to reach the idea that on Twitter the users imagine their potential audience (Litt, 2012) and the Twitter networks can be both real and imagined (Gruzd et al., 2011), and as well as aggregate ad hoc publics. Interest in hashtags has become stronger in recent times, as evidenced by the volume edited by Rambukkana (2015), although research focuses on what hashtags are done in political communication. It seems that they are becoming increasingly pervasive communication tools, also entering in the spoken language, as slang. In the same way, as speakers used to say “quotation marks”; helping oneself with the hands and imitating the same quotation marks with the two fingers. More recently Rathnayake and Suthers (2018) have focused on hashtags as temporary connection affordances; after reviewing the literature on affordance. Obviously, they start from the ecologic theory of perception (Gibson, 1979), where the concept is born and subsequently adopted in other fields. It refers to the properties of the environment that activate or offer potential action by an agent. As many studies have shown (Wells, 2002), affordances are not just properties of the environment: They exist only as a relationship between an agent and his/her environment. A study of the uses of the concept of affordances was carried out by Bucher and Helmond (2018), who show how this concept has been examined from different perspectives: high-level and low-level affordances (Boyd, 2010), imagined affordances (Nagy and Neff, 2015) and vernacular affordances (Mcveigh-Schultz and Baym, 2015). Furthermore, Bucher and Helmond (2018) in their analysis of social platforms show how they can allow various types of users (among whom the final users and the developers) to perform different actions or changes to the platforms. According to Rathnayake and Suthers (2018), Twitter hashtags can be seen as affordances for two reasons: (1) the platform allows the creation of hashtags and (2) through hashtags different types of action emerge. To their analysis of hashtag affordances, we add a third reason: (3) the possibility of hashtags to change their original meaning thanks to retweets and quotations.

Rathnayake and Suthers (2018) study is based on the analysis of the independent interaction of media, ‘so [it] is not subject to the constraints that offline metaphors carry over to the analysis of online transactions, and therefore provides a foundation for a natively digital conception of phenomenological elements of online expressions’ (p. 2). They use a concept adopted from Suthers (2006), that of uptake, defined as ‘acts in which one participant takes up another’s contribution and does something further with it’

(Suthers, 2006: 331), to place momentary connectedness in the right context. They define momentary connectedness as ‘a novel conception of online publicness, as an extended computer-mediated sociality that includes transactive as well as non-transactive online activity’ (Rathnayake and Suthers, 2018: 2). They then introduce a further correlated concept, that of ‘projected uptake’. Indeed, if uptake is the ‘most fundamental element of interaction’ (Suthers et al., 2010), projected uptake is based on the affordances of acts for future uptake. The objective with which they introduce these two concepts is to examine transactive as well as non-transactive elements in Twitter hashtags. For them, hashtags are affordances of the platform that organize instances of momentary connectedness into networks.

In line with our idea that hashtags change through human interaction – that is, its usage – its original meaning is their concept of project uptake. However, as already signalled, the objective of this work is to understand what a hashtag is and how affordance allows it to develop its possible selves, which it already contains in itself. This is easy to imagine, especially if we consider a hashtag as a cultural product. For example, the hashtag #MeToo had a literal meaning when it was put on the social networks, and it was launched by a feminist movement against violence on women. However, it became viral in October 2017, as a hashtag used by social media to help show the widespread presence of sexual violence and harassment against women after the public revelation of the accusations of sexual violence against Harvey Weinstein. If we now carry out a research on such hashtag, we can understand how its original meaning has been widened, transfigured, through human interactions, that is through its usage and spreadability (Jenkins, 2006). Following Searle (1969), it is possible to affirm that the original literal meaning has widened – giving space to the possible selves that every hashtag contains – in other words, intentional metaphoric and figured usages generated by intentional and non-intentional acts have developed, independently from who is the initial creator of the hashtag itself.

According to this perspective, it is possible to consider affordances guided by Hutchby (2001a, b) studies, who uses this term to go beyond any naive technological determinism and rigorous social constructivism. Hutchby suggests that affordance provides a middle term able to consider both the ways in which technologies are socially constructed and positioned and how they are both materially binding and enabling. The scholar coins the expression communicative affordances to refer to all the possible acts deriving from technology (2001a). It is possible to state that the individual act of retweeting a hashtag can be reconducted to communicative affordances. For Hutchby and Barnett (2005) the expression communicative affordances stress how affordances are both functional and relational. Furthermore, affordances can shape the possibilities connected to action in a double way: by defining the necessary ways to

perform the action and, by so doing, excluding other ones (Hutchby and Barnett, 2005). The best way to observe affordances is to evaluate the efficaciousness of human actions, that is to address the agency, understanding how technologies show their affordances while actors are engaged in performing an action within the social system using them. The agency derives from the actor's knowledge of the frameworks and from his/her ability to apply them to new contexts (Sewell, 2009), operating little transformative actions (Goffman, 1967) and working in a creative way. This is a process that has obviously been consolidated and amplified by top-down, bottom-up and horizontal media production mechanisms which intersect with the communicative empowerment and the cultural convergence theorized by Jenkins (2006).

### **Whether a hashtag is a cultural product**

If we consider a hashtag as a cultural product - that changes its meaning through human actions- we need to start asking ourselves about what we can know about it. In fact, several scholars (Boyd and Crawford, 2012) are beginning to wonder what phenomena big data can explain and what they cannot (p. 666).. Some questions remain open such as the following: Can data, although they are big data, speak for themselves? Do topic trends really tell the truth? And what kind of truth? What does the datification process tell us?

In the same article Boyd and Crawford (2012) claim that taken out of context, big data lose their meaning, because big size data sets are subject to modelization processes, opening new questions on algorithms and big data. It becomes increasingly necessary to understand what it means to investigate the sense and meaning of a hashtag and what they are, only in this way can they be extrapolated.

In addition, the context inside which big data – here represented by hashtags – are created and spread, remains difficult to investigate and interpret. Boyd and Crawford (2012) believe that for these reasons the context of big data management and analysis will be in constant evolution. Here we necessarily ask what we can understand about hashtags and whether they are a cultural product. If they change meaning via human action and interaction, what can we know about them? Hence, we are in search of a *Weltanschauung* capable of addressing research.

In the search of a framework, we need to bear in mind that it is possible to fully understand the “type” of communication tool only after a further step in technology has been made; This means that we can understand the radio after the advent of T.V., of T.V. after the advent of the computer, of the computer after the advent of the Internet, and of the Internet after the advent of the social media. Of this intertwinement of knowledge, we possess some “cultural objectifications”, a fragment of a wider knowledge; We are referring to formations of sense that

we use in every cognitive act and that should show us thanks to their intertwinement, the phenomenon in its entirety (Mannheim, 1952).

Mannheim faces the methodological problem of the scientific study of cultural objects following a phenomenological framework and considering them as “structured units of sense”. Cultural objects are placed in a sort of middle level between a theoretical understanding and an irrational one. For this reason their study requires an interpretation of the levels of sense: a) the objective sense; b) the intentional sense of expression; c) the documentary sense (1952).

What are we talking about? On the contrary of a natural object, to understand what is a cultural object or product we need not only to penetrate its objective meaning, that is its appearing as it is, but also to consider it as an expression and as a document that informs us about something, if our desire is to fully understand its nature. In the case of the hashtag #MeToo, reference is made to a social problem placed in a certain historical, economic and political moment and of which users have become spokespersons and spreaders. The consequence is that daily life cultural objects are to be considered as formations of meaning. The sense is to be seen also in expression (the expressive meaning), the latter inseparable from the person and his/her experiences; in fact, the expressive sense acquires its meaning and uniqueness only if related to the interior world it is expressed by. The expression of the interior world through a cultural object gives to the person in contact with it a documentary meaning, that is the translation of the meaning of the object or of the action that gives the habitus of who performs it; It is for this reason that the documentary sense is understood only by the observer.

In order to understand this mechanism, it is necessary to divide the sensemaking process into two steps: a) the represented content and its representation; b) the content of the means used, the material used and the form it acquires (the medium). Let's consider the hashtag #MeToo. If we stop at the represented content, we immediately find the objective element and the expressive one: form and content. We find the Feminist movement with its revendications and the educational, informative and divulgative function of the posts. We notice that the distinction between form and content is fluid. Another distinction can be made with reference to the documentary meaning, that is the valence that the observer gives to this hashtag or hashtag cloud. What function is performed by the hashtag #MeToo for who created it and for who has retweeted it? To visualize the distinction, we must think about two audiences: the supporters and the detractors. It is obvious that different expressive moments are attributed to the same events and figures and this depends on the user. However, to grasp the intention of the individual, creator of the hashtag and to interpret correctly the meaning, one needs to study in-depth the intentions of the meaning of that moment and of the specific creator (Mannheim,

1952).

The consequence of this is that the cultural objects of daily life - and we consider hashtags as such - are to be considered as sense formations. The meaning is to be found also in the expression (expressive meaning); the latter cannot be separated from the individual and his/her experience. Indeed, the expressive meaning becomes understandable and unique only if placed in relationship with the interior world of the person who expresses it. Expressing one's interior world through a cultural object gives a documentary meaning to who is interacting with it. In other words, it is a translation of the meaning of the object or of the action, which in turn gives us the *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1979) of who performs it. It is for this reason that the documentary meaning can be understood only by the observer.

In other words, the meaning sends us to our pre-reflexive propensity, to an emotional oscillation of our subjectivity, which cannot, however, be considered as presence to oneself, but as an orientation to the other and to things. Before establishing a relationship with ourselves, we are already in a relationship with the world outside us. Thus, relationships come before awareness. Sense contains an evident ambiguity due to its coming to life in front of the other or in front of an object and to its always being related to events which are simultaneously a tie and a possibility because it is connected to our intrapsychic world.

Tracing the origin of sense means entering the world of meaning. This requires stepping into the reflexive space of intentionality, and into a symbolic dimension made up of collective experiences and of the social sharing of symbols. Sensemaking emerges from the intersection of the pre-reflexive subjective area with the reflexive and transitive area of social sharing (Weick, 1995). Sensemaking is the process of continuous coevolution between the pre-reflexive (sense) and the reflexive (meaning). According to Weick (1995), sensemaking has seven characteristics and these are connected to processes of signification. Indeed, sensemaking is founded on the construction of our identity, being implied that when we are defining somebody or something, we are also defining ourselves; It is retrospective because when we search for the documentary meaning of something that we are making is a retrospective analysis of what has already occurred; It creates sensible environments; It is social because so can be considered the social substratum which constantly models the interpretations as well as the interpreting; It is continuous because it has no beginning and no end; It is centered on specific information;

Finally, it is plausible because its prerogative is not accurateness but plausibility. What we aim to reach with sensemaking is the clarification of past human situations, which are therefore social. In the reconstruction of the social meaning of daily practices what we obtain is the discovery of the nature of the situations in which

individuals are acting (Garfinkel, 1967). In the sensemaking process, crucial are the questions, that is asking ourselves for example, why things are in a certain way and what will happen after. It is in its being a retrospective process when building sense that we can here retrieve the concept, and this is possible because it is socially inserted in time and space and in particular because it is capable of joining action and cognition. When we analyze the data extracted from social media and indexed by the use of hashtags, we should bear this in mind: the importance of the social construction of the hashtag and the meanings that lie beneath it. Whether we use them for audience analysis (Athique, 2018) or catastrophic events (Matheson, 2018), we must keep in mind that they are born with a particular sense attribution, but that it changes through interaction, developing the possible selves that hashtag contains.

## CONCLUSIONS

What is a hashtag? How can its original meaning change giving a way to its possible selves, that is to its implicit contents? What impact do hashtags have on social reality and what can we learn by studying them?

The interpretations given so far have allowed considering the hashtag itself, that is to focus on what it could be. In doing this, the theories of speech acts and of the construction of social reality have been used (Searle, 1969, 1995). They permit us to consider the hashtag as a cultural product (Griswold, 1997) and they open up to a perspective based on cultural objectivization (Mannheim, 1952) and sensemaking (Mannheim, 1952), concluding in a study carried out ex-post that what we know about a hashtag can be defined as retrospective sensemaking (Weick, 1995). If we allow ourselves to be guided by Griswold's cultural diamond theory (1997), we have that a producer creates a #hashtag; he/she inserts it into the social world represented by the social media; it is then reused by the receivers, in this case, the users of social networks, who by quoting or retweeting, transform it into a cultural product thanks to communicative affordances (Figure 1).

Transforming the hashtag into a cultural object, the receivers allow the hashtag's possible selves to emerge. In all this process we can discover portions of meaning. The objective meaning is represented by the source; in other words, by the producer; the expressive meaning is used to trace and delimit the intention of the cultural product and it is included in the receiver's action; the documentary meaning gives information about what the hashtag becomes passing from one tweet to another. It is typical of the cultural object.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

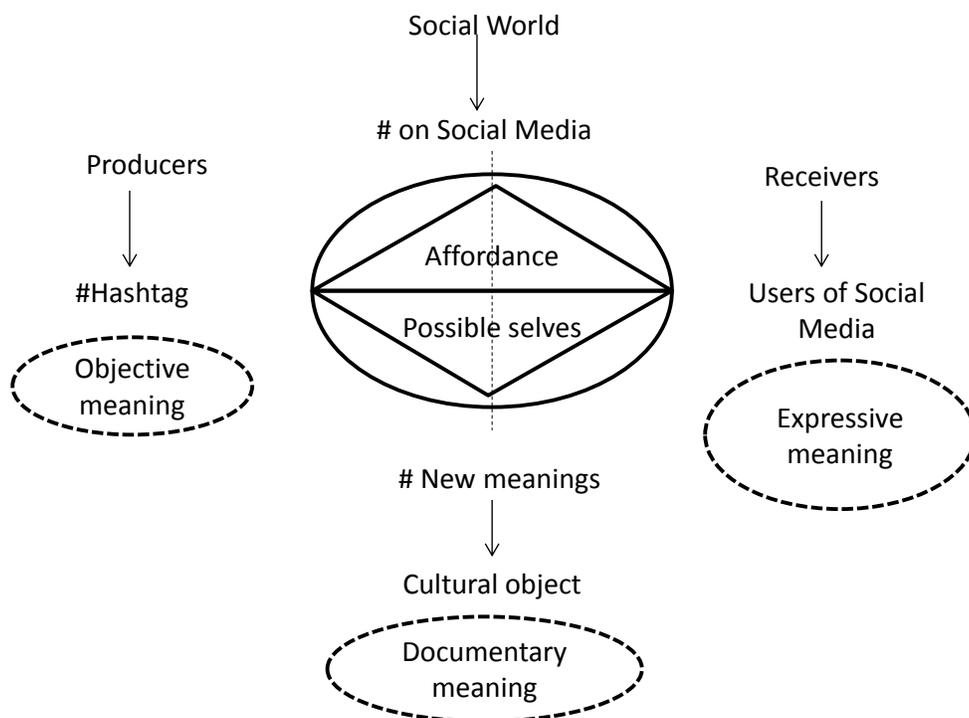


Figure 1. Schematic summary.

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