



“Let's see how many of you mother fuckers unfollow me for this”: The pragmatic function of the hashtag #sorrynotsorry in non-apologetic Instagram posts



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ABSTRACT

Social media play a key role in presentation of the self and management of social relationships. Although self-presentation online has been seen to exhibit a positivity bias, making positive forms of self-presentation more likely than negative ones, there is evidence that linguistic “behaviour” in digitally-mediated communication (DMC) often transgresses norms of appropriateness. This study adds to research on impoliteness in social media by examining the ways in which users of Instagram strategically employ hashtags and engage in face work with potentially inappropriate posts. It presents the results of a quantitative study (512 posts from a random sample) of the content of Instagram posts labelled #sorrynotsorry, as well as a qualitative analysis of politeness strategies accompanying images using the hashtag. It demonstrates how the hashtag is used as a non-apology marker in a balancing act of (im-)politeness and self-presentation strategies that allows for a level of sanctioned face attack. Overall, it suggests that posters on Instagram use #sorrynotsorry in a trans-ideological manner, allowing them to take both oppositional and complicitous stances on evolving norms of appropriateness online. The results add to an understanding of the pragmatics of hashtags in DMC and highlight the strategic nature of self-presentation on social networking sites.

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1. Introduction

Social media can be seen as “stance-rich” environments (Barton and Lee, 2013, p. 31) whose affordances enable users to construct online identities. While psychological research suggests that presentation of the self on social networking sites (SNSs) tends to be positive (Bryant and Marmo, 2012; Burke and Develin, 2016; Chou and Edge, 2012; Reinecke and Trepte, 2014), there is broad pragmatic evidence that linguistic “behaviour” in digitally-mediated communication (DMC) often transgresses norms of appropriateness (Dynel, 2015; Graham and Hardaker, 2017; Locher et al., 2015). Thus, intriguingly, users of SNSs are involved in a delicate balancing act of promotion of the self while posting potentially offensive content.

From a pragmatic perspective, norms of appropriate self-presentation are closely connected with notions of (im-) politeness and face work. Research has shown that impoliteness and face threat are not marginal phenomena (cf. Leech, 1983, p. 105) but key elements of online communication in digital communities (Arendholz, 2013; Bedijs et al., 2014; Dayter, 2014, 2018; Graham and Hardaker, 2017). Thus far, attention has mainly been focused on archetypally face-threatening behaviour in

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DMC such as trolling, flaming, threats, insults and disagreements (Angouri and Tseliga, 2010; Hardaker, 2013; Hardaker and McGlashan, 2016; Kleinke and Bös, 2015; Shum and Lee, 2013). These and other studies suggest that impoliteness, rather than simply being a manifestation of online disinhibition (Suler, 2004), may also have community- and identity-forming functions (Bolander and Locher, 2015; Dayter, 2014; Graham, 2015), and that online ‘rudeness’ can form part of both in-group and out-group identities (Kleinke and Bös, 2015).

Yet, as Dynel (2015), Graham (2015), Graham and Hardaker (2017) and Locher et al. (2015) make clear, impoliteness as a central element of online relational work is still an under-researched area. In particular, there have been very few studies of how key affordances of social media such as hashtagging form part of (im-)politeness online (cf. Matley, 2018). Equally, the function of other speech acts such as apologies in online environments has received relatively little research attention (cf. Lutzky and Kehoe, 2017; Page, 2014). Furthermore, while Instagram as an SNS has been discussed extensively in the psychological literature (e.g. Halpern et al., 2017; Hendrickse et al., 2017; Moon et al., 2016; Slater et al., 2017), it remains neglected vis-à-vis Facebook and Twitter in terms of linguistic research (cf. Lee and Chau, 2018; Matley, 2018).

The current study contributes to filling this research gap by examining how the hashtag #sorrynotsorry functions as a non-apology marker (Bentley, 2015; Kampf, 2009) on Instagram. It presents a content analysis of posts accompanied by #sorrynotsorry, followed by a qualitative analysis of the pragmatic function of the hashtag and the (im-)politeness strategies that are apparent in such posts. It demonstrates that the hashtag is used as part of a self-presentation and audience management strategy that facilitates a level of sanctioned face attack (Bousfield, 2010; Culpeper, 2005; see also Archer and Jagodziński, 2015). Overall, it suggests that posters on Instagram use the hashtag in a “trans-ideological” manner (Hutcheon, 1995, pp. 29–30) to take both oppositional and complicitous stances on norms of appropriateness online. The results add to an understanding of the pragmatic function of hashtags in DMC and shed further light on the strategic nature of self-presentation on SNSs.

2. Instagram and presentation of the self on social media

Social media play a key role in presentation of the self and management of social relationships (Fullwood and Attrill-Smith, 2018; Lee-Won et al., 2014; Rui and Stefanone, 2013a,b). Users of SNSs have been shown to engage in both *acquisitive* self-presentation, intended to generate social approval and positive impressions, such as posting images of one’s achievements online, and *protective* self-presentation, designed to avoid social disapproval and negative impressions, such as removing unwanted comments on images (Arkin, 1981; Casale et al., 2015; Lee-Won et al., 2014, p. 414; Rui and Stefanone, 2013b, p. 111). Self-presentation online is thus a highly strategic activity in which self-image is constantly at stake (Lee-Won et al., 2014; Rui and Stefanone, 2013a,b).

Research also suggests that self-presentation on social media exhibits a “positivity bias”, making positive forms of self-presentation more likely than negative ones. Positivity bias arises due to both technical affordances and norms of appropriateness in online communities (Reinecke and Trepte, 2014, pp. 97–98; see also Bryant and Marmo, 2012). The affordances of SNSs offer microposters greater resources to edit messages, present an ideal self, and align themselves with individuals, brands and events (Chou and Edge, 2012; Halpern et al., 2017; Michikyan et al., 2015), all of which contribute to overall positive impression formation (Walther, 2007). Norms in online communities also ‘reward’ positivity: a study by Reinecke and Trepte (2014) showed that positive forms of self-disclosure (revealing positive information about oneself) were more likely to receive reinforcement (in the form of likes or comments) than disclosure of “negative aspects of the true self” (p. 96). Thus, there are indications that positivity – both in terms of presentation of the self and audiences’ reactions – has become a normative element of behaviour online.

Instagram is an interesting case in point of the affordances and constraints of self-presentation in SNSs. Instagram is a photo-sharing app that allows users to take photos and post them online, where they can be tagged, liked and commented on. It is one of the major SNSs numbering 800 million users in September 2017 (Statista, 2018), with a strong millennial demographic, including 48.2 million millennial users in the United States in 2016 (E-Marketer, 2016). Instagram provides key affordances for the strategic promotion and marketing of the self, such as filters that allow users to modify photos, giving them greater control over the final image. Hashtags also enable images to be seen by large audiences who are not necessarily followers of the Instagram accounts in question (Dumas et al., 2017, p. 2). Research suggests that Instagram users focus more on forms of individual self-promotion such as selfie posting than on community-oriented behaviour, with one study showing that 24.2% of images posted to Instagram – the largest category – were selfies (Hu et al., 2014; see also Dumas et al., 2017). A further study among US university students documented how Instagram was mainly used for self-promotion, showcasing creativity and increasing popularity among peers (Sheldon and Bryant, 2016).

Nevertheless, despite its affordances for successful self-presentation, there is some evidence that community norms on Instagram encourage excessive self-display and the posting of potentially transgressive content. A growing body of psychological research suggests that activities such as frequent selfie posting on Instagram are correlated with narcissism (Moon et al., 2016; Sung et al., 2016; Weiser, 2015). Sung et al., for example, found that attention seeking accounted for the largest percentage of variance in reasons for posting images (2016, p. 262). Several studies have also examined what might be seen as “inappropriate” content such as funeral selfies (Gibbs et al., 2015; Meese et al., 2015), disaster selfies (Ibrahim, 2015) and holocaust selfies (Hodalska, 2017), suggesting that communities on SNSs such as Instagram develop a “platform vernacular”, i.e. “shared conventions and grammars of communication” (Meese et al., 2015, p. 1820) that are dynamically negotiated over time and which may differ from offline conventions of behaviour. Such research also reflects broader social discourse that the taking and posting of such photographs “constitute self-promoting gambits by the self-absorbed” (Weiser, 2015, p. 477).

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