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## #Communing affiliation: Social tagging as a resource for aligning around values in social media

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## ABSTRACT

Social metadata is an important dimension of social media communication, and closely associated with practices such as curating, tagging, and searching content. This article explores how hashtags are used to coordinate and accentuate the values construed in a corpus of Twitter posts (tweets) about depression. In other words, it explores how people use hashtags as a resource to 'convoke' communities of feeling around values realised as ideation-attitude couplings. The aim is to extend work on dialogic affiliation (Knight, 2010a, 2010b, 2013) in order to account for 'ambient' affiliation via social media, where participants do not necessarily interact directly. We employ a discursive system, *communing affiliation*, to interpret how particular values about depression are positioned as bondable in this ambient environment. The focus is on understanding how people are forging alignments and negotiating meaning through social tagging practices.

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### 1. Aligning through social media 'conversations' about depression

This article explores the role of social tagging in forging networks of solidarity about depression, an important domain of experience that is widely discussed on various social media platforms. Social media discourse about depression incorporates a range of different communities of language users, from those living with the illness, to organisations attempting to raise awareness about the nature of the condition. The focus of this article is on how hashtags, a type of in-text annotation, are used to enhance social affiliation around values about depression, such as the stance that it is a serious illness. For example, consider the following tweets aimed at destigmatising mental illness, and foregrounding the possibility of treatment and recovery (hashtags shown in bold):

**#depression** is a serious illness...just like diabetes... Stop the **#stigma** [link to a Facebook page]

I hate that everyone keeps acting like this is his fault. You wouldn't blame a cancer patient.  
**#DepressionIsAnIllness**

**#Depression** is a serious issue that has for far too long been embroiled in taboo. People need to speak up and about it. **#mentalhealth**

Posts of this kind, particularly when they relate to an issue of current or widespread public concern, such as mental health, have been seen as a form of 'public conversation' (Bruns, 2012; Boyd et al., 2010). Indeed, social tagging has itself been characterised as 'conversational' (Huang et al., 2010), with hashtagging contributing to "a conversational ecology ... composed of a public interplay of voices that give rise to an emotional sense of shared conversational context" (Boyd et al., 2010: 1). This discursive ecology has also been described as a 'backchannel' to other forms of communication about a wide range of phenomena, including public events (Bruns and Burgess, 2012), crises (Lachlan et al., 2014; Potts et al., 2011), and entertainment (Pittman and Tefertiller, 2015; Highfield et al., 2013).

While linguistic studies of social media discourse have proliferated,<sup>1</sup> language-focused studies of hashtagging remain comparatively sparse (see Lee, this issue). An exception is a concentration of work in the computational domain featuring studies aimed at

<sup>1</sup> For a collection of sociolinguistic studies see Seargeant and Tagg (2014) *The language of social media: Identity and community on the internet*, London: Palgrave Macmillan.; for an overview of research methods see Page et al. (2014) *Researching language and social media: a student guide*, London: Routledge.

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using tags to improve natural language processing tasks such as identifying and categorising sentiment (Davidov et al., 2010; Kunneman et al., 2015; Mohammad and Kiritchenko, 2015). Linguistic studies have, however, spanned a wide range of areas including translation (Carter et al., 2011), inferential process in reading (Scott, 2015), self-branding and microcelebrity (Page, 2012), bullying discourse (Calvin et al., 2014), digital libraries (Schlesselman-Tarango, 2013), and political memes (Zhu, 2016). Nevertheless, beyond initial recognition that hashtags such as #depression might play some heteroglossic (Bakhtin, 1935/1981) role in coordinating online communities around particular topics, there has been little linguistic work on how these tags actually function as a social semiotic resource supporting social bonding.

Hashtags have been of interest to general social media research, not only because of the new communicative affordances they have offered users, but because they provide researchers with an efficient means of collecting discourse about a particular topic, person, or event. A limitation of hashtag-based data collection strategies is, however, that they do not necessarily capture all the communication within and surrounding a primary communicative exchange. This is because there will be relevant posts that do not use the hashtag, and in particular, posts that are replies may omit the tag. However, hashtags do, at the very least, make obtaining a window of analysis on particular discourse at a particular time, achievable. Most corpus-based studies, for instance, collect ‘snapshots’ of discourse, with the hashtag used as a search term for sampling posts over a specific time period from the ‘social stream’ (the unfolding temporal stream of social media posts made available by a social media service) (Popescu and Pennacchiotti, 2010). Some studies focus more closely on temporal variables, exploring how hashtags diffuse and proliferate over time, or attempt to predict whether or not a particular hashtag will be popular in the future (Ma et al., 2012). Others still consider contextual variables influencing, for example, how hashtags become redundant or are hijacked (Sanderson et al., 2015).

The major function of hashtags, identified in early linguistic studies is emergent ‘folksonomic’ classification in the form of topic-marking that emerges through community use rather than prescription (Vander Wal, 2007). This is distinguished from ‘top down’ classification of the kind that occurs in library catalogues. Hashtags have also developed important interpersonal functions associated with the expression of attitudinal stance (Zappavigna, 2012, 2015, in press). These functions include contributing to ‘conversational style’ (Scott, 2015), with emotive and emphatic use linked to variations in illocutionary force of the kind achieved through paralinguistic in offline conversation (Wikström, 2014). They may also function as meta-pragmatic markers, for instance playing a role in negotiating levels of self-praise in practices of visual self-representation (Matley, this issue). In addition, hashtags have been viewed as brief ‘spontaneous’ interjections with increased emotive denotative power compared with the body of a post (Cislaru, 2015: 466). In summary hashtags, while a noted resource for indicating the topic of a post, have been seen as significant for construing opinion and sentiment in social media discourse.

This article explores how values, realised as attitudinal positions regarding experience, are presented as ‘bondable’ within the social stream (e.g. the stance that depression is a serious illness seen in the tweets sampled above). In other words, we aim to explore how these values are presented as shareable through hashtags that convoke or ‘call together’ potential personae or communities. Bonding has typically been considered as a dialogic activity, involving people negotiating values in, for example, a conversation. However, the concept of *communing affiliation* aims to supplement this kind of dialogic perspective in order to account for the way, in ambient environments such

as social media, personae can align around particular values even without directly interacting.

The article begins by introducing an existing linguistic model of dialogic affiliation based on social semiotic work on face-to-face communication grounded in Systemic Functional Linguistics. We then develop this model in order to account for the ‘ambient’ nature of social media communication, where social bonding can occur even without direct dialogue between users. We propose a discursive system, referred to as ‘communing affiliation’ for describing how values are positioned as socially alignable in three ways: by being directed at particular communities (*convoking*), entering into relationships with other potential value positions (*finessing*), and being foregrounded interpersonally in various ways (*promoting*).

## 2. Dialogic affiliation: negotiating values in interaction

Interpersonal meaning is clearly important to understanding how attitudinal stances are construed in social media posts (Zappavigna, 2012). A key issue is how social bonding around particular stances occurs. Knight (2010a, 2008, 2013), working on casual conversation, has explored the interpersonal negotiation of values in terms of dialogic affiliation. Her model applies Martin and White’s (2005) appraisal framework to explore the community building significance of evaluative language (see also Lee and Chau, this issue). The appraisal framework defines three discursive regions of attitudinal meaning: AFFECT (expressing emotion, e.g. love, disgust, fear, etc.), JUDGEMENT (assessing behaviour, e.g. evil, ethical, trustworthy, etc.) and APPRECIATION (estimating value, e.g. beautiful, treasured, noteworthy, etc.). The focus of Knight’s work is on how social alignments around such attitudinal meanings are forged within direct interactions between two or more interlocutors in dialogue.

Knight’s model of affiliation is based on the idea that social alignments are realised in discourse as patterns of ‘couplings’ of ideation and experience. For instance “*Apple pie tastes amazing*” involves a coupling of ‘apple pie’ and positive appreciation that we might notate as:

[ideation: apple pie/attitude: positive appreciation]

The / symbol is used to suggest that the evaluation and ideation are ‘fused’ together to create a value that can be negotiated by interlocutors. Knight noted the role of unfolding prosodies of attitude produced in dialogic interaction in the communication of “three conversational participants [who] commune around a bond realised by a coupling of intensified positive appreciation for a pie party that they regularly participate in together” (Knight, 2010b: 219) (Table 2).

**Table 1**

Positive evaluation of a pie party in a causal conversation (adapted from (Knight, 2010b: 219)).

Turn	Speaker	Talk	Coupling
1	A	Party’s over. For me;	
2	B	No more pie party ==	
3	C	== This was an <b>awesome</b> pie party guys	[ideation: pie party/attitude: positive appreciation]
4	B	I <b>love</b> pie parties	[ideation: pie party/attitude: positive <i>t</i> -appreciation]
5	C	I <b>can’t wait</b> to have another one	[ideation: pie party/attitude: positive <i>t</i> -appreciation]

‘t-’ is used in the above to indicate a ‘token’ of attitude. The affect (*love*) is a token of appreciation in Turn 4, implying that it is a ‘good’ pie party.

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