

## The phenomena of #hashtag

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It's a simple symbol – two lines intersecting two lines. It's been known as the number sign, the pound sign and the hash mark. It's used for different purposes in linguistics, mathematics and computing. Of course, we're talking about the # symbol. It's a simple sign, but one with growing influence.



Today, the # symbol is used to create “hashtags” in social media posts on sites like Twitter and Facebook. A hashtag is the # symbol followed by a word or phrase.

Hashtags create a system for grouping messages and allow social media users to see content, such as tweets, from people they do not follow. So, if you search #cats on Twitter, you'll see content from around the world about cats, which there is a lot of.

Exploring topics using hashtags is simple. On Facebook and Twitter, hashtags are clickable – so you just have to select the hashtag to view more about that topic. You can also search using hashtags (as opposed to traditional keywords), but there is a difference between keyword and hashtag queries. A hashtag is always written without spacing and might not contain normal words. That means searches for “#ILoveCats” and “I love cats” would generate different results.

More than simply sending a message into a larger pool for others to see, you are joining a conversation when you use hashtags. Whether referring to sporting events, political affairs or breaking news, your voice can be heard.

### How to use a hashtag

Hashtags are quite easy to use. However, it's important to keep in mind a few things when using them.

It's recommended that hashtags be short and concise, making it easy for messages to be grouped with others relating to the same topic. A search on Twitter for #cats delivers a large handful of tweets within the last 24 hours, while it takes more than five months for #mycatiscrazy to produce the same amount. In short, the simpler the hashtag, the bigger the grouping.

Hashtags can go anywhere – at the end of a post or within it. It's just as correct to see “I can't wait to leave for holiday! #Paris” or “#Paris, here we come!” It's also common to use multiple hashtags in one post. But, again, keep it simple: “I can't believe #Spain won the #WorldCup” or “Next weekend will be so much fun #winetasting #NapaValley”.

It's important to note that users can join topic groups without writing keywords in the message itself – as seen in our second example with Napa Valley being used as a hashtag outside of the message.

When a message is flooded with too many hashtags, it becomes difficult to read and loses meaning. “The #2012 #London #Olympics was so #amazing. Can’t #wait for #Rio. #athletes #goldmedal” doesn’t help people find your information, it just confuses them.

## **A window to the world**

Hashtags provide a glimpse into the topics that are important to people and the world at any given moment. In 2011, the top two hashtags on Twitter were vastly different: #egypt and #tigerblood. One refers to a country’s unrest, the other to the antics of an American actor. Hashtags help us share our wide spectrum of thoughts and feelings.

Imagine if social media existed in the 1960s, a dynamic and turbulent era. Popular hashtags might include: #TheBeatles, #MoonLanding, #JFKAssassination, #BerlinWall, and #VietnamWar. The voices of millions of people would have been easily recorded regarding key historical moments.

## **Hashtags for marketers**

For companies, hashtags are a vital tool in measuring the impact of brands and advertising campaigns. Not only can a company gauge its popularity based on the number of times a specific hashtag has been used, but it can also view what people are saying – hashtags provide both quantity and quality.

Today, more and more advertisers are using hashtags as campaign anchors. Whether it’s a new promotion for Coca-Cola or a summer blockbuster movie, hashtags are essential. They are even used outside the online world. The habit of watching television and surfing the web at the same time is very appealing for marketers, so a television commercial for Coca-Cola might direct users to post to Twitter using #CocaColaHappiness.

And with the rise of mobile usage, a billboard can spur people to post using hashtags while on the go to interact further with their favourite brands or access discounts and information.

## **Real-time feedback**

People can easily post negative messages about brands as well. If a customer tweets about a bad experience at a retail store using the company’s name in the hashtag, it’s very possible that the company’s brand team will see it. The good news is that the company has the ability to then reach out to that customer and resolve any issues, if possible.

The common behaviour of viewers tweeting about a show while watching it lets television networks easily monitor audience reactions. Hashtags create a focus group without needing to physically gather participants behind a two-way mirror – all you need is the viewer, wherever they are, and the computer screen.

## **The future of hashtags**

Remember, the hashtag is still evolving. In February 2013, its usage took a big step with the partnership between Twitter and American Express. By linking their American Express and Twitter accounts, people can now tweet specific hashtags and purchase products directly on the social network. Each product –

such as an Amazon Kindle – has its own hashtag. Users simply tweet the designated hashtag and receive a confirmation code. They then have fifteen minutes to tweet the code again to finalize the order.

And now Facebook programming has been adapted to recognize hashtags, creating thousands of conversations for more than a billion users. Facebook hashtags give people one more reason to spend time on the network – and that means more opportunities for marketers to see where their interests lie.

## **What's next?**

While main digital players like Facebook and Twitter are at the helm, many online ventures can influence the hashtag's future. Will email services such as Gmail begin incorporating hashtags? It's also worth asking if hashtags will become so pervasive that they lose impact. If every website uses them, could they become a burden on users? Or will its expanding use only assist users in finding the information they're searching for and become the default language of the web?

As our digital experiences continue to evolve, the hashtag must keep up. It might be two lines intersecting two lines, but it seems as though the #hashtag is truly #unstoppable.