



Pragmatic Role of Offline Hashtags: Guide to Readers' Inference

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Abstract

This research seeks to shed light on the pragmatic role of hashtags used in offline contexts. Guided by the relevance-theoretic perspective, the study shows that hashtags used in any utterance contribute to relevance by activating and making more accessible some contextual assumptions, therefore guiding the reader in inferring the utterance to reach the intended meaning of the addresser. The content of the hashtags helps the readers derive both explicit and implicit messages from the context they are used in. To present more information in a limited space, hashtags from cyberspace have been adopted and adapted for use in offline contexts. This study in particular highlights the use of hashtags in offline advertisements and the way they help communicate the overall message to the audience.

Keywords: relevance theory, offline hashtags, inference, pragmatics, offline advertisements

1. Introduction

Many studies have found that the online world or cyberspace has gradually developed a specific language with certain characteristics associated with online communication. One of these prominent features is the use of hashtags. Hashtags consist of the symbol # followed by a word or a phrase. The primary function of hashtags is to facilitate the retrieval of data from social networking websites such as Facebook, Twitter, etc. as metadata tags (Giannoulakis & Tsapatsoulis, 2015). However, this research article attempts to argue that hashtags have spread and evolved beyond their actual or basic usage as they can also serve as a guide for readers' inferential processes. Instead of tagging for findability, some of the hashtags comprise words and phrases that are not meant to be searched online but rather reflect meta-commentary on the advertisement itself. The research also aims to shed light on the dissemination of hashtags from the online world into the offline world, for example, in television commercials (TVCs), newspaper ads, banners and billboards, products' packaging, the titles of books, etc. The research reveals the stylistic role of hashtags that allows the users to create personal and casual style in the context of mediated, one-way public discourse.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

With its useful and necessary capability of sorting, finding, and organising data, semantic tagging has continued to be a prominent feature of online and digital media. The increased use of this feature all over cyberspace, especially on social media websites, during the last few years has resulted in radical changes in its appearance and role. On social media, serving the primary purpose for which this feature was designed, tagging helps in the labelling of data and its easy retrieval in various ways. However, this feature is not only restricted to the online world or cyberspace but has also crept into the offline world. This expansion in the use of hashtags has also resulted in a reformulation of their functions.

This research takes into account the use of hashtags as a guide to the reader's inferential process in offline situations. While many studies have examined the use of hashtags on social media for organisation of information and search functions, to the researcher's knowledge, none has attempted to account for the way they act as an important part of the utterance, which helps guide the reader's or listener's inferential process to reach the intended meaning of the speaker or writer.

1.2 Theoretical Framework

Relevance-theoretic pragmatic framework has been used in the study to guide the analysis of the collected data. The relevance theory states that human cognition is designed to maximize relevance, for example, human mind naturally attempts to derive the maximum possible cognitive effects from an input, putting in the minimum effort possible. Also, like utterances, if the input is evidently directed towards an audience, it presumably carries a particular level of relevance for that audience. In fact, the audience is authorized to assume the optimal relevance of the utterance. According to Wilson and Sperber (1986, p. 270) the optimally relevant utterance is the one that is (a) "relevant enough for it to be worth the addressee's effort to process", and (b) "the most relevant one compatible with the communicator's abilities and preferences". The receiver of the input derives the interpretation fulfilling the criteria of both these conditions. The hearer's attempt to make sense of the addressee's complete message comprises three subtasks, typically performed simultaneously. First of all, the hearer needs to deduce the explicature of the input (i.e. s/he should hypothesize the explicit meaning of the message). The hearer first decodes the content of the message and then enriches it through disambiguation of word/phrase senses and assignment of references etc. to derive the fundamental explicature which is also called "the proposition expressed" (Scott, 2015, p. 13). This fundamental explicature is then utilized to derive a string of advanced or secondary-level explicatures that carry information regarding speech acts or attitude of the speaker (Carston, 2002).

The rest of the subtasks help deriving the implicit meaning of the utterance. The hearer is supposed to make up hypotheses about "the implicated premises" and "the implicated conclusions" (Wilson & Sperber, 2004, p. 261) intended contextual assumptions and intended contextual implications respectively. According to the relevance theory, both of them can be referred to as implicatures. For example, take into consideration the following exchange:

- 1) A: Did you try McDonald's new burger?



B: I don't eat rubbish.

In this exchange, B has only mentioned the fact that he does not eat rubbish. In an attempt to interpret this exchange, the possible fundamental explicature is:

- 2) Explicature: B does not eat rubbish.

But, for the sake of developing relevance of B's answer to A's question, A needs to combine the explicature with the implicated premise to reach to the relevant implicated conclusion. For this exchange, the process of interpretation according to the relevance theory, can be coded as below:

- 3) Explicature: B does not eat rubbish.
 4) Implicated Premise: McDonald's new burger is rubbish.
 5) Implicated Conclusion: B did not try McDonald's new burger.

OR

B does not like fast food in general.

Though neither of the (4) and (5) are explicitly mentioned, the speaker intended to communicate them as implicatures. The three subtasks of deducing explicatures, implicated premises, and implicated conclusions work together in order to generate final interpretation. The final interpretation, in an ideal situation, is the one that satisfies the receiver's expectations of relevance.

All types of communication, written or spoken are considered ostensive in view of the relevance theory. The communicator is considered to be attempting to transform the cognitive environment of the receiver of the information/ hearer/ reader (Wilson & Sperber, 1986). As discussed earlier, the use of hashtags in the offline context is mainly the result of space constraint. The space constraint compels the addresser to keep much of the intended meaning implicit and put trust in the ability of the addressees to bridge the gaps during inferential process. Born online, and spread into the offline world, the use of hashtags has been appropriated to deal with this issue.

The hashtags not only help managing the space in casual or informal style, but also help in highlighting the main message. This is true for both online and offline hashtags. With particular focus of this study on offline hashtags, it will be analyzed how hashtags help the addresser to foreground some contextual assumptions and provide a roadmap to actual intended meaning of the message in an effective and economical way. In an offline world, the tagged content draws the reader's attention and guide the process of interpretation of not only the utterance itself, but also the context through highlighting certain inferential courses.

Next section entails the discussion on occurrence of hashtags in the offline world and the particular contexts that support their occurrence. A comparison between the online and offline contexts of hashtags is also drawn in this section.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Evolving Use of Tagging Practice

Tags were traditionally used in the beginning days of online social networking websites such as Internet Relay Chat, Flickr etc. for data findability as folksonomic system (Daer, Hoffman, & Goodman, 2015). However, in accordance with the website or application design, tagging was done in many different forms. A huge step towards evolution in tagging was taken in 2007 when a common form of tagging started to be used on Twitter (Gannes, 2010) (i.e. a pound sign (#)). A word or a phrase following a pound sign indicates to the audience that the word or phrase is findable, if searched online for example, #PSL. On Twitter hashtags started to serve as a way for the users to share the thoughts about common topics of interest without having to follow one another.

On Twitter, a hashtag for any topic can be searched and all the tweets using that hashtag can be accessed.

As stated before, the feature of tagging had already been introduced in the cyber world long before the introduction of hashtags, however this specific hashtag form (#) started to be used on social networking sites other than Twitter as well, such as Pinterest, Instagram, Tumblr, and Facebook (Lindley, 2013). With the increase in popularity and usage of the hashtag form (#), its function also developed further beyond findability. The frequent use of the feature has now made it a complex linguistic feature, offering many interpretations and analyses. It can be said that something that was introduced as a simple organizational feature in cyber space has now become a prominent part of everyday interactions.

Many recent researches on hashtags and their functions have revealed that at the present day, hashtags are not used primarily for categorization, rather a range of different communicative functions is associated to them. These include recognition of tagging as conversational rather than organizational practice, analysis of pragmatic meaning of online hashtags (Huang, Thornton, & Efthimiadis, 2010), function of hashtags as "micro-memes" (Wikström, 2014, p. 129), use of topic-marking hashtags for appraisal (Zappavigna, 2011) etc. Some studies also highlight the facilitation of "searchable talk" and "ambient affiliation" (Zappavigna, 2012, p. 15; 2014, p. 210) through hashtags and their use in marking different interpersonal connections. Wikström (2014) analyses different communicative functions of hashtags on Twitter.

2.2 Offline Hashtags

As has already been mentioned, hashtags originated from Twitter and spread out to other social networking websites such as Instagram, Pinterest, Facebook etc. and are frequently used there. More interestingly, their use is no longer confined to the computer-mediated communication, rather has also crept into the "linguistic landscape" (Bourhis & Landry, 1997, p. 23) and various other offline contexts that include offline advertisement on billboards and handbills, television commercials, newspapers and magazines, product packaging, prints on clothing items, and also to a more formal context as titles of books.

This shift of hashtag uses from online to the offline world can be attributed to some of the common features shared by online and offline contexts in which they are used. Zappavigna (2012, p. 127) states that online communication on social networking websites are "casual and interpersonal", particularly Honeycutt and Herring (2009, p. 1) refer to the exchanges on Twitter as "conversational exchanges". Many of the offline contexts in which hashtags have been observed also exhibit casual interpersonal exchange (mostly one-way) of information/content, except for the titles of books, which being part of literary practice represent formal discourse. Another feature that characterizes online exchanges entailing hashtags is the limited space and restricted number of characters allowed in one post (particularly on Twitter) (Zappavigna, 2012). Thus, the user adds hashtags to say more with few words and maintain brevity. The offline use of hashtags seems to be the offshoot of similar constraints; the limited space available on TV screens, advertisement boards, newspaper headlines,

product wrappers/packaging and even on book cover, can be considered as a reason for the people to adjust hashtags in these contexts in order to convey more information keeping the text brief.

2.3 Tagging Practice and Relevance Theory

Scott (2015) states that the length and space restriction in online posts and the user's attempt to put the information concisely, signals his/her dependence on readers for the construction of complete intended meaning. Relevance theory (Wilson & Sperber, 2004, p. 262) considers any utterance only to be a "schematic indication" of what the speaker actually intends to convey. The amount or degree of inferential effort the reader/addressee has to pay is directly dependent on the vagueness of the utterance. The information, presented in condensed form due to space limitation, requires the readers to fill the gaps in background information in order to correctly reach the intended meaning. This inferential activity involves building up a context that is not explicitly provided (Wilson & Sperber, 2012). That is why deriving meaning out of hashtags, either used online or offline, involves inferential process and not only decoding (Yus, 2011).

The speakers, at the time of producing any utterance, decide the extent of explicitness to which they want to convey the message with. Stylistic and contextual implications are likely to affect their choice. This research uses Relevance-theoretic approach for the interpretation of utterances presented by Sperber and Wilson (Wilson & Sperber, 2012; 2004; 1986). They postulate: [a] speaker aiming at optimal relevance will leave implicit everything her hearer can be trusted to supply with less effort than would be needed to process an explicit prompt. The more information she leaves implicit, the greater the degree of mutual understanding she makes it manifest that she takes to exist between her and her hearer (Wilson & Sperber, 1986, p. 218).

According to this theory, the speaker will only leave some aspects of the overall message implicit if s/he considers that the hearer will be able to interpret it correctly, based on some kind of shared understanding between the two. Wilson and Sperber (1986, p. 218) term this shared understanding as "degree of mutuality" between the hearer and speaker. This requires certain trust on part of the speaker that the hearer will be able to derive the intended meaning even in absence of obvious/explicit linguistic cues.

Relevance theory provides an explanation of the way hearer/reader interprets any utterance based on their own assumptions about the world. The audience and their supposed world assumptions are kept in mind by the speakers while constructing the utterance. So, the speaker, if intends his/her utterance to be inferred in a specific way s/he anticipates the reader/hearer to build the context that enables him/her to reach that particular interpretation (Wilson & Sperber, 2004).

2.4 Functions of Hashtags

Hashtags were primarily developed to generate hyperlinks by adding a string of characters following a hash symbol, which would help the users in searching for the relevant content. Particularly on Twitter, when a same hashtag is used by many people in a short period of time, the hashtag appears as trending and the user can browse the current trends by viewing the trending hashtags list. Messina (2007) mentions that hashtags became popular due to the ease of use they provide the users. Hashtags help users to "track content and updates more relevant and interesting to them without exerting a great deal of extra effort or learning any kind of extraneous of syntax" (Messina, 2007).

Albeit linking, organizing, and spreading content remains the primary function of hashtags (Yus, 2011, p. 2012; Zappavigna, 2012), there can be seen many hashtags used in different situations (online and offline) which do not seem to serve the search function. Consider the following tweet posted on Twitter on October 31, 2016:

(1) #Pakistan is fast becoming #SuperMario where ppl need to jump over the containers to get anywhere. Mushrooms, anyone? #PTI #PMLN #insanity

Here, the main content of the tweet comprises a satirical comment on the political situation of Pakistan, and the hashtags used (i.e. #PTI and #PMLN do relate to the content discussed). However, it appears unlikely for anyone interested in Pakistan's political situation as a topic to search for the hashtag #insanity. If done so, they would find a number of tweets dealing with a variety of content along with the tweet in (1). Therefore, it cannot be considered as the effective way of accessing content relating to that specific subject. The hashtag #insanity here seems to be serving functions beyond findability and content/data retrieval. To the researcher, the hashtags like this guide the reader's interpretation of the content they are attached with. Such hashtags help the reader build up the missing contextual information in short and mediated utterances in the briefest manner possible.

3. Method

The research entails qualitative analysis of the hashtags from relevance-theoretic pragmatic perspective, with special focus on offline hashtags. Out of the overall population of offline hashtags, only the hashtags appearing in advertisements, such as TVCs or billboards and posters, have been selected as a sample for the study. The hashtags used in television commercials and those that appeared on the billboards of Islamabad and Rawalpindi (two major cities of Pakistan) during the months of June, July, and August, 2022 have been analyzed in this study in order to investigate the contemporary use and relevance of hashtags in the offline world.

The next section deals with the analysis of different types of offline hashtags taken as sample for the study and the way they help in guiding the inference of the reader, while highlighting the main content at the same time. The analysis has been divided into three sections, discussing how different offline hashtags help in generating explicatures and implicatures of different level, serving as a guide to the readers' inferential process.

4. Analysis and Discussion

This section presents the analysis of offline hashtags as they appear in TVCs and on billboards, and the way they help the readers in interpreting the message. The first part will discuss the way hashtags help in deriving the basic explicatures, the second part sheds light on the derivation of implicated premises and the third part discusses the role of offline hashtags in reaching the implicated conclusion.

4.1 Fundamental Explicatures

Carston (2002) opines that the process of inference not only includes the derivation of implicit meaning but also accounts for the interpretation of explicitly stated message. The first step in the process of interpretation is to construct a suitable hypothesis about the explicitly available content (Wilson & Sperber, 2004). Yus (2011) notes that the interpretation of hashtags involves the same inferential activity as is required for the interpretation of any other utterance in general.

It has already been stated that hashtags mainly appear in the contexts where the user is provided with limited space to present his/her content within for example, in offline situations the television screens, the size of billboards, and the wrappers of products pose the challenge of incorporating the advertising content in a nutshell. However, the current fad of adding hashtags in these situations helps increasing the accessibility of particular contextual assumptions making additions to the content of the main message. To take an example, consider the following hashtag used on advertisement billboard (Appendix A1):

(6) #ShareaCoke

This hashtag appeared on the advertisement of a famous beverage in Pakistan i.e. Coca Cola. The addition of the name of the product in the hashtag appears to be aiding the traditional function of search and findability of the product/brand online. Although, the hashtags used offline do not turn into hyperlinks providing the readers with the ease to click and search the related content, however hashtags like (6), which mainly include the name of the product or the brand are expected to be searched online by the readers. This means that they are introduced in an offline world for the purpose of promotion and to increase familiarity of the hashtag among general audience, which are in turn expected to relate to the tag by using it online. Tags like (6) are also understood as part of a social campaign or group activity by the readers. The addition of product names helps the readers to deduce explicatures that directly relate to the product or brand itself and that buying/using this product and posting about it online with the similar hashtag will make them a part of the bigger group of people who share the same experience. In the same vein, take the following hashtag used in the advertisement of Pepsi (Appendix A2):

(7) #SayitwithPepsi

The advertisement includes no other textual information but this hashtag along with a background image that shows different Pepsi bottles printed with hearts and a flag of Pakistan. The explicit information presented in the body of the hashtag covers the whole message, which the reader or onlooker is expected to deduce by understanding the context it is provided within. The bottles of Pepsi printed with different objects refer to some message (in this example, lyrics of a famous national song Dil Dil Pakistan) and the hashtag (7) generate the explicature that the audience/readers can use the bottles of Pepsi to convey their messages to their closed ones. Here again, the inclusion of the product name in the hashtag makes people understand it as part of some campaign and also makes them infer that using this hashtag online will make them part of a small community sharing same interest. It is also expected to serve its traditional function of searchability.

Other examples of offline hashtags which include products/brands names and help the readers in generating explicit contextual assumptions (Appendix A3, A4, A5, A6) are given below:

(8) #JazzCare

(9) It's a #TideAd

(10) #RoofAfza #PlantforPakistan

(11) #CASTMEHSY

This use of product/brand name in the hashtag also plays a role of demonstrative gesture, which helps foregrounding the product/brand and highlighting its main message in a nutshell.

Albeit the hashtags presented in the above examples appear to perform dual function i.e. generating relevance and providing search functionality online, there can be seen other examples of offline hashtags which do not appear to be supporting any function of online search and contribute to relevance only by increasing the accessibility of some specific contextual assumptions. For example, consider the hashtag that appears in the Fair and Lovely Face wash TVC (Appendix B1):

(12) #FullGlow

The addition of the hashtag (12) in an advertisement of Fair and Lovely Face wash, does not highlight the product name so it can easily be assumed that someone interested in this particular product will not possibly use (12) to reach to the online community of its users. Thus, the search functionality of this hashtag is not plausible. However, the content of the hashtag provides the reader with an ease to deduce the explicature about the overall interpretation of the advertisement. Hashtag in (12) used with a beauty product generates an explicature that the use of this beauty product leads to a full glowing skin. The information in the hashtag helps the reader/viewer to construct a hypothesis about the interpretation that was intended through this ad.

Similarly, another TVC of a biscuit by Innovative Biscuits (Pvt.) Ltd uses the following hashtag (Appendix B2):

(13) #ImpossiblyCrunchy!

This hashtag is used in an ad of Butter Crunch biscuits by Innovative Pvt. Ltd. Here too, the hashtag obviously is not helpful in online promotion of the product as anyone interested in the product cannot possibly think of this hashtag to search it online. This hashtag again is used in order to highlight some part of the text that appears on television screen so that it may be brought to the viewers' attention and help them generate an explicature. The adjective "crunchy" used in the hashtag immediately triggers an encyclopedic information linked with this word. Wilson and Sperber (2012, p. 181) describe encyclopedic information as "ready-made chunk or schemas describing often-encountered sequences of actions or events". Generally, our schemas about "crunchy" are expected to have the image or the feeling of a crispy snack, or for some it may include even some taste they enjoyed while having some crunchy snack. With the activation of this schema, the viewers are likely to assume that the product being advertised is crunchy to eat, that adds to its appeal. Moreover, by using "impossibly" as an intensifier, the readers are made to assume that the snacks are crunchier than anything they have tasted before. Thus, in this case too, the hashtag is helpful only in making certain contextual assumptions more accessible for the viewers to form explicature.

One more example in this regard is of the hashtag used in Pakistan's famous tea brand Lipton. They use the following hashtag in their recent ad on billboard (Appendix B3):

(14) #PAKISTANSBESTBEVERAGE

This hashtag again helps in making the intended assumptions more reachable to the viewers and the audience. The use of the word "beverage" instead of "tea" clarifies and adds to the contextual assumptions the brand wants the viewers to reach at. The text included in the ad states: "Pakistanis Love Chai, Zalima ... Nice Try" which implies that the brand does not intend to compete with other tea brands only but also with all other beverages that are popular in Pakistan, as "Zalima" is the word taken from the ad of Coca Cola. In this context, the provided hashtag strengthens the intended meaning that the brand wants to convey by claiming the product to be Pakistan's best BEVERAGE, and not only best TEA.

4.2 Advanced/ Secondary level explicatures

The examples in the previous section included hashtags which were needed for the reader or viewer to interpret the context and reach a logical proposition. There are however other examples of offline hashtags which do not appear to have any pronounced role in the extraction of expressed proposition. Wilson and Sperber (2012) state that high level explicatures involve identification of illocutionary acts and manifestation of attitudes. A greater level of meta-representational ability is required for this as compared to the derivation of fundamental explicatures which justifies the name assigned to them (i.e. secondary level explicatures). Based on this, some of the offline

hashtags found in some ads, which do not have obvious role in aiding the inferential processes of the viewers or readers but are indicative of the illocutionary act/ force performed by these ads, are discussed in this section.

The hashtag used in the ad of Dove soap, a product of Unilever Company, can be taken as an example in this regard (Appendix C1):

(15) #RealStrength

This hashtag does not logically seem to have a direct link with the product advertised (i.e. beauty soap). However, it seems to be performing here the role of assertive illocutionary act. According to Searle (1999) assertive acts are performed to inform the audience about the way things are. Their function is to commit the addresser to the truth of the stated proposition. In this case, the speaker is the advertiser or the company advertising its product, thus, the hashtag (15) presents the assertion by the speaker in form of the claim they make (i.e. they are providing the reader with the information which they believe to be true). This helps the reader generate an explicature about the ad in a way that using this product symbolizes the real strength for men.

Some other examples of the offline hashtags have been observed that perform the function of directive illocutionary acts. These are intended to make the audience do something. Consider for example the following hashtag printed on the tin pack of Diet Coke by Coca Cola Company (Appendix C2):

(16) #ShowyourHEART

The imperative structure of this hashtag is evident with the use of verb in the beginning. The hashtag here again does not seem to be advertising/ promoting the product directly or guiding the audience's inferential processes to get the real meaning of the ad. However, the use of imperative structure shows the addresser's persuasive attitude, generating the secondary level explicature that the product should be used to show your heart (feelings) to others.

Similar directive illocutionary act is performed by the hashtag used in the advertisement of Nayatel Company, a private telecom service provider in Pakistan (Appendix C3):

(17) #BeLikePakistani

This hashtag, starting with "be" is also an example of directive that does not explicitly convey the brands or products' motto, but with the directive illocutionary force, helps generating the secondary level explicature that the audience should use the advertised product to be like Pakistani (i.e. to identify themselves with Pakistan).

Another famous cosmetic company Garnier uses a similar hashtag in their advertisement of a face scrub (Appendix C4):

(18) #GETITALL

Here too, the hashtag presents an imperative structure which can be interpreted by the audience as the product should be bought in order to get it all (all that the product has to offer for skin care).

Another type of illocutionary act observed in use of offline hashtags is commissives. Commissives are usually used by the speaker to commit him/herself to some future action. In advertising, commissive often presents some kind of assured result offered by the product (Mustofa, 2017). Keeping that in mind, the hashtag used by Garnier Company in offline advertisement of its face mask can be used as an example (Appendix C5):

(19) #PurefectSkin

The hashtag presents a commissive act as it states the result promised after the use of the product. In this hashtag, innovative spellings such as "purefect" have been used, combining the words "pure" and "perfect" to keep the hashtag short and make it more attention grabbing. The readers can generate the explicature that the use of this product yields "purefect" skin (i.e. pure and perfect skin). Thus, the hashtags used in offline scenarios, particularly advertising, have been found offering a way to convey information about the illocutionary acts embedded in advertisement content.

4.2 Implicatures

Wilson and Sperber (2012) state that not all utterances are explicitly stated, rather the hearer or the reader has to deal with many implicatures, ironies and different other ambiguities. In such cases, the reader or the hearer is expected to supply a suitable set of contextual assumptions. Deriving from The Communicative Principle of Relevance, they say that the receiver of the information should deduce the explicature and to supplement it at implicit level till s/he reaches to the interpretation that meets his/her anticipation of relevance.

For the data gathered for this study, the audience or readers or viewers are expected to deduce implicated premises or contextual implications by filling the gaps in provided information. The hashtags found offline, particularly in advertisements, have found to be helpful in filling this gap in information provided to reach to the overall message that the advisers wanted to convey. The examples included in this section mostly comprise of the longer hashtags and also hashtags produced in Roman Urdu. One of the recent studies on hashtags shows that the longer the hashtag, the least the chances are that it would be tracked by any of the users online (Cunha et al., 2011). Thus, the search functionality of these hashtags is simply out of question. Also, the use of Roman Urdu in the content of these hashtags also limits the audience that will find them relevant. The content of these tags merely functions as a guideline to reach to the implicit meaning conveyed through these ads. This involves reader/viewer to utilize his/her schema or background knowledge in the derivation of the implicit (or not so explicit) message. First example in this regard is the hashtag used in the advertisement of product of Unilever Brand, Surf Excel (Appendix D1):

(20) #Ek Neki Rozana (one act of goodness everyday)

The co-text of the ad, as can be seen in Appendix 4a, helps the viewer generate explicature. But, in order to interpret the message of the ad fully, the viewer needs to deduce the implicated premises and then implicated conclusion. The process can be coded as below:

(21) Explicature: Surf Excel says dirt is good. Implicated Premises:

(a) Surf Excel is a brand that sells laundry detergent.

(b) The brand's tagline is "Dirt is good".

4.3 Implicated Conclusions

(a) The brand promotes the performance of #Ek Neki Rozana (one act of goodness everyday), even if it results in dirty clothes.

(b) Dirt can be washed by Surf Excel.

(c) Surf Excel promotes that acts of goodness should be done without worrying about getting dirt on the clothes.

Another example in this regard is the TVC of MilkPak, a product of Nestle Company (Appendix D2). The text mentioned in the ad and the hashtag used are:

(22) Text: 36 Quality Tests ensure

Hashtag: #SaathBharosayKa (relationship of trust)

The process of generating explicature, implicated premises and implicated conclusions to understand the overall meaning of the message the advertisers have tried to convey, can be seen below:

(23) Explicature: MilkPak runs 36 tests to ensure its quality. Implicated Premise: MilkPak is a packaged milk.

Implicated Conclusion: MilkPak has developed a relationship of trust with its consumers because it provides the quality ensured packaged milk, having run 36 tests on it.

Another example that can be considered in this regard is an advertisement for Lux soap. This example is a little different in its nature, as only one hashtag can be seen in this ad with no co-text provided. In this way, more emphasis has been added to the hashtag, and the reader or viewer has also been trusted with generating the contextual assumptions during the process of inference because nothing has been stated or mentioned explicitly except for the name of the product (Appendix D3). This demonstrates that the addresser, in this case the advertisers, has placed a high level of trust in the viewers to understand the overall message of the advertisement by leaving much of it implicit. Following is one of the possible ways the viewers are expected to understand the overall message, provided that they are to some extent familiar with the product being advertised.

(24) Hashatg used: #Khoobsurtisekyasharmana

(Beauty is not something to be concealed)

Since there is no co-text provided, the researcher believes that the audience is not likely to generate any kind of explicature, and those with no background knowledge of the product and its use will not try to infer the message as it does not prove to be relevant for them. Those with some product knowledge, on the other hand, will generate implicatures in the following ways:

(25) Implicated Premise: Lux is a beauty brand.

Implicated Conclusion: Lux should be used to increase and display your beauty as beauty is not something to be concealed.

Several examples of offline hashtags have been discussed in this section, along with the way they guide the reader's inference to understand the implicit message. It has also been discussed that offline hashtags serve a variety of functions in the utterance interpretation process.

5. Conclusion

This study is an attempt to analyse the functions of hashtags that appear in the offline world. The results show that while some of the hashtags used in offline contexts can still be associated with the search functionality, which was the primary aim of their creation, there are some other hashtags that have been appropriated by the users in the offline contexts to perform different functions in aiding the process of communication.

Relevance theory (Wilson & Sperber, 2004) states that inference is involved in working out the meaning of both implicit and explicitly stated messages. The overall inferential work that the reader or hearer has to do to reach the intended meaning of the addresser involves generating fundamental and secondary explicatures and deducing the implicatures. The data analysis has presented examples relating to all these levels of inference, showing that the reader can use the content of the hashtags to help their minds follow certain inferential routes. The relevance-theoretic approach to the interpretation of utterances presents the similar view that an utterance is only a clue to the addresser's intended meaning and that misjudgment of the context and the background knowledge of the addresser can lead to misinterpretation of the utterance.

The discussion has also highlighted that, like online usage of hashtags, hashtags in the offline context also appear where there is limited space available, such as in advertisements in newspapers, on television, on billboards, etc. This compressed way of presenting information in the form of hashtags not only helps the advertisers highlight the main content or message of the ad, but also helps in developing a close relationship with the audience by using a casual and informal style of presenting information. These hashtags, since they foreground certain content, also help guide the inferential process of the audience, making some inferential routes more accessible for them.

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Bio-note:

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Appendices

Appendix A

Hashtags for Fundamental Explicatures (dual function)

Figure 1A: #ShareaCoke



Figure 2A: #SayitwithPepsi



Figure 3A: #JazzCare



Figure A4: #TideAd

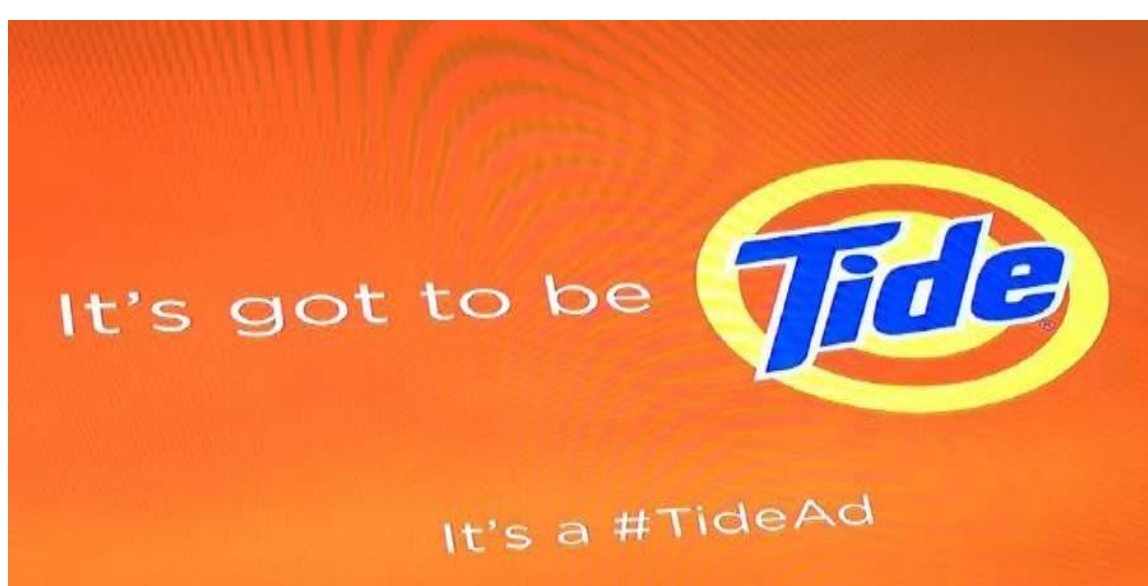
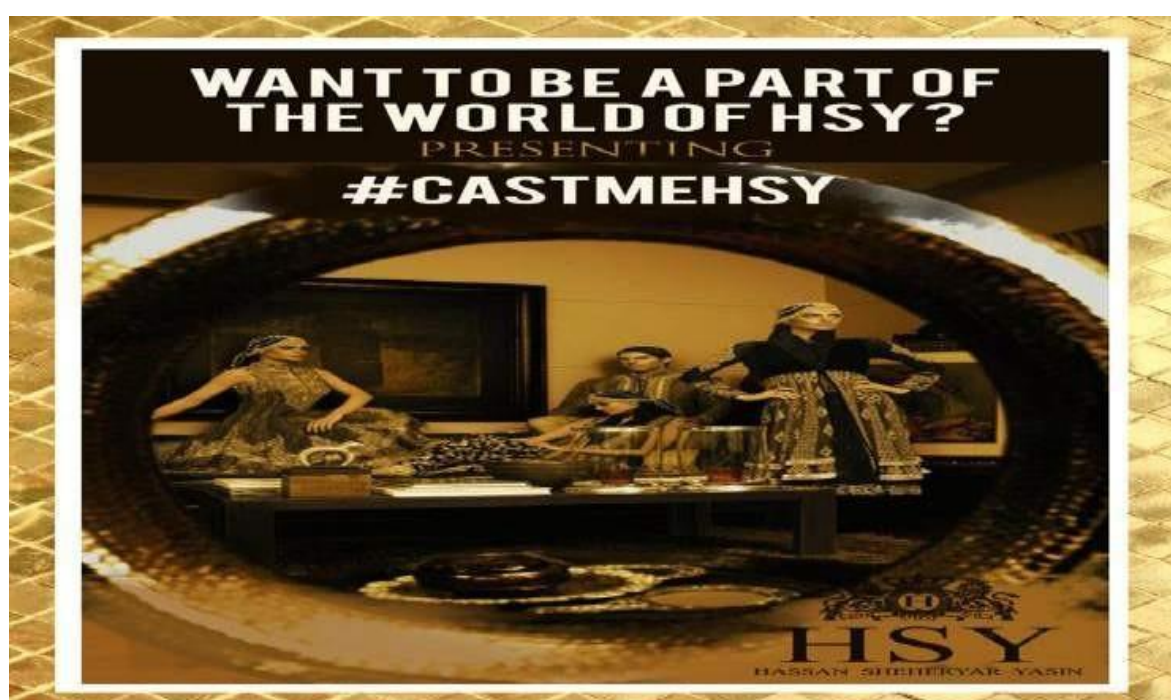


Figure A5: #RoofAfza



Figure A6: #Castmehsy



Appendix B: Hashtags for Fundamental Explicature (with no search function)

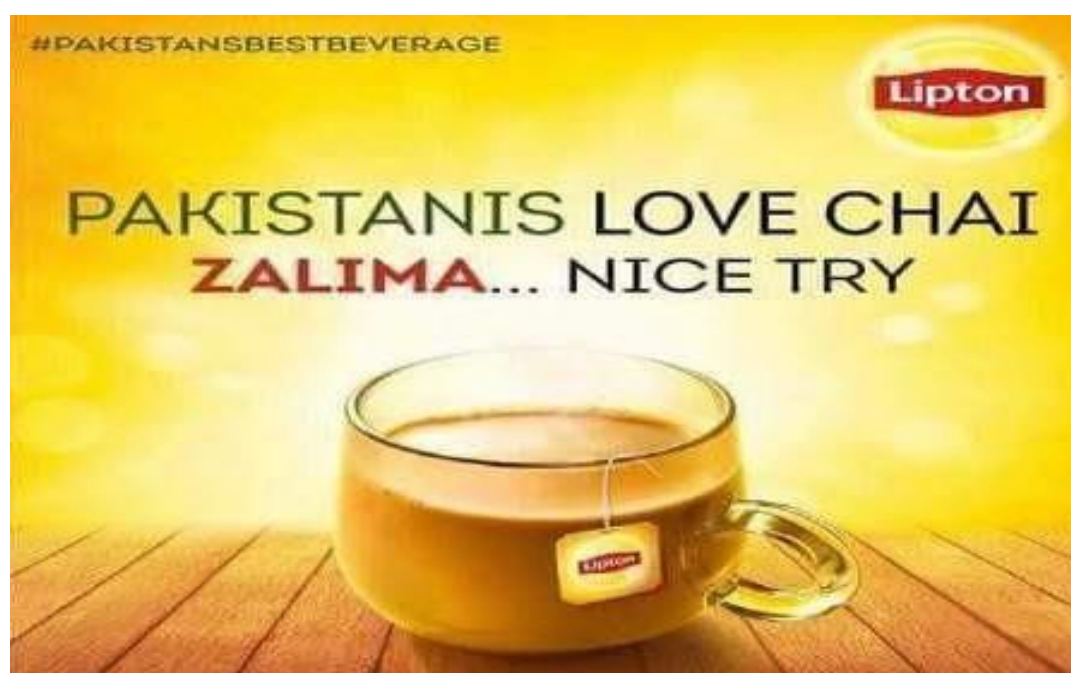
Figure 1B: #Fullglow



Figure 2B: #ImpossiblyCrunchy



Figure 3B: #PakistansBestBeverage



Appendix C: Hashtags for Secondary Explicature

Figure 1C: #RealStrength



Figure 2C: #Showyourheart



Figure 3C: #BeLikePakistani



Figure 4C: #Getitall



Figure 5C: #PurefectSkin



Appendix D: Hashtags for Implicatures

Figure 1D: #EkNekiRozana



Figure 2D: #SaathBharosayKa



Figure 3D: #Khoobsurtisekyasharmana

