

What motivates users to hashtag on social media?

Philipp A. Rauschnabel¹  | Pavica Sheldon² | Erna Herzfeldt³

¹Department of Business, Universität der Bundeswehr München, Neubiberg, Germany

²Department of Communication Arts, College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences, The University of Alabama in Huntsville, Huntsville, Alabama

³Department of Work and Organizational Psychology, School of Economics and Organizational Sciences, Universität der Bundeswehr München, Neubiberg, Germany

Correspondence

Philipp A. Rauschnabel, PhD, Department of Business, Universität der Bundeswehr München Werner-Heisenberg-Weg 36, 85577 Neubiberg, Germany.
Email: philipp.rauschnabel@gmail.com

Funding information

University of Michigan-Dearborn

Abstract

Hashtags (i.e., the # symbol) are gaining increased popularity among social media users. However, despite their intense use, little is known about their meanings. Only a few published studies have investigated fragmented aspects of hashtags and treated them as a functional means to structure content. In this study, we provide evidence that hashtags' meanings go beyond structuring or spreading content and represent an integral element of contemporary communication via social media. In particular, this study presents a series of six empirical studies, following traditions in grounded theory and measurement theory research, to systematically assess motivations for using hashtags. The results uncover the existence of 10 different motivations for use (amusing, organizing, designing, conforming, trendgating, bonding, inspiring, reaching, summarizing, and endorsing). In addition, we show how these motivations differ between platforms and also relate to different patterns of social media behavior. The results contribute to a better academic understanding of social media, provide managers with profound insights and can guide marketing tactics with hashtags.

KEYWORDS

hashtag, hashtagging, hashtags, motivation, scale development, social media, user behavior

1 | INTRODUCTION

Understanding the role of social media is increasingly becoming a priority for scholars in the social sciences. Prior research provides profound insights into why and how people use social media (e.g., Hansen & Levin, 2016) and also how social media use affects personal well-being (e.g., Duan, & Dholakia, 2017) or business practices (Felix, Rauschnabel, & Hinsch, 2017).

With the rise of Twitter in 2006, and later adopted by other social networks, hashtags (#; i.e., the pound key) have become an integral part of social media communications. Initially, the idea of hashtagging was to add a # symbol before a relevant keyword, which allows users to link their postings to other content around the same topic. Prior research confirms that hashtags are a popular element of social media communication. For example, hashtags have contributed to the development of publics (Jackson & Foucault Welles, 2015), to the spread of social and political movements (Gleason, 2013; Wang, Liu, & Gao, 2016), to public relations campaigns (Jackson & Foucault Welles, 2015), and to market research (Nam, Joshi, & Kannan, 2017).

Marketing scholars and managers alike are interested in studying the factors that make consumers engage more with their social media content (Ashley & Tuten, 2015; De Vries, Gensler, & LeeFlang, 2012). Hashtags can be an effective means to do so (Stathopoulou, Borel, Christodoulides, & West, 2017), especially if consumers include branded hashtags into their own postings. For example, Coca Cola implemented the #shareacoke-hashtag in their communications, which generated millions of user-generated pieces of content on social media (Deye, 2015). To achieve such successes, companies need to find ways to motivate consumers to include hashtags. We argue that a profound understanding about their target groups' underlying motivations of hashtagging is crucial for effective campaign management. To the best of our knowledge, such research remains scarce. In particular, those studies investigating specific aspects of hashtags are under the implicit assumption that users employ hashtags only to structure or spread their content (e.g., Jackson & Foucault Welles, 2015). However, a nonacademic survey among 500 hashtaggers by the media agency RadiumOne (2013) showed that 41% of respondents reported using hashtags to communicate "personal ideas and feelings," while only 34% were

“searching or following categories and brands for personal interest. While academic research on the psychological roots of hashtagging is limited, few studies indicate that motivations beyond structuring and spreading content exist. For example, Sheldon, Rauschnabel, Antony, and Car (2017) show that Instagram users who wanted to fulfill certain motivations reported a more intense use of hashtags, and a follow-up study found that people also tend to use entertaining or inspiring hashtags (Sheldon, Herzfeldt, & Rauschnabel, 2018). These studies indicate that additional motivations and meanings of hashtagging exist, which academic research and social media theories likely do not explain.

Against this background, the objectives of this study are two-fold. First, this study aims to identify why people use hashtags by applying a theory-building research design. In contrast to the application of existing theories from media research (e.g., Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973) or social psychology, this approach allows the identification of novel, yet unknown, motivations. Media scholars recommend this approach, since new media often leads to novel gratifications (Sundar & Limperos, 2013) that existing theories might not cover. Second, after identifying these motivations, scholars, and managers might be interested in integrating them into their work. Therefore, we develop a valid and reliable measurement instrument that researchers can integrate in academic and managerial surveys, and thus, contribute to a better academic understanding of social media and more effective social media marketing.

To achieve the objectives, this study conducted qualitative, theory-building research to extract motivations and then applied quantitative studies to identify and validate the existence, structure, and dependencies of these motivations. Thus, the results of the six subsequent studies contribute to a better understanding of social media use in general and hashtags in particular. The results show (a) the existence of 10 different motivations, (b) how these motivations can be measured, (c) how they differ between platforms, and (d) how they relate to different behavioral patterns.

2 | HASHTAGS: THEORY AND PRIOR RESEARCH

2.1 | Motivations and social media use

A wealth of research has adopted uses and gratifications theory (Katz et al., 1973) to understand why and how people use particular media (e.g., Sheldon & Bryant, 2016; Simon, 2017; Simon & Tossan, 2018). Unlike other media theories (e.g., cultivation theory), uses and gratifications theory does not focus on the content of the media but rather emphasizes users and their active role in choosing media that can satisfy one or more of their needs. Thus, some social media (e.g., LinkedIn) satisfy professional advancement needs, while others allow individuals to engage in expressive-information sharing. Sheldon and Bryant (2016) show that the main reason for using Instagram is surveillance, followed by documentation. Baldus, Voorhees, and Calantone (2015) and Muntinga, Moorman, and Smith (2011) identified multiple motivations for using brand pages on Social Media.

Findings indicate that different motivations drive different patterns of behavior. That is, even users on the same social media platform use the platform differently depending on their motivations (Sheldon et al., 2018). Following this logic, we argue that specific, but still unknown, motivations explain why (and how) people use hashtags.

2.2 | Hashtags: Definition and prior research

The Twitter support page (2018) explains the features of hashtags in terms of the way they permit users to “index keywords or topics” of their own content and “to easily follow topics they are interested in.” Thus, Twitter recommends that people use the pound symbol “before a relevant keyword or phrase in their Tweet to categorize those tweets and help them show more easily in Twitter search.” This is because “[c]licking or tapping on a hashtagged word in any message shows you other tweets that include that hashtag”; in addition, hashtagged words can result in promoted topics, termed “trending topics.” Not surprisingly, using popular hashtags can increase postings’ reach (Wang et al., 2016) and allows users to identify postings related to topics of their interest (Jackson & Foucault Welles, 2015). These popular features of hashtags have triggered their wide adoption by many other popular social media platforms, including Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, and WeChat.

Prior research has echoed this initial functional purpose of hashtags. For example, by monitoring hashtags, communication managers can glean insights into trending topics and other brand-related information (e.g., Nam et al., 2017). Hashtags can also be implemented in public relations or advertising campaigns (Jackson & Foucault Welles, 2015) and thus allow users to support a campaign through user-generated content and viral effects. That is, an organization can propose a hashtag and encourage users to include it in contextually related postings. However, doing so also increases the risk that users will “hijack” the hashtag. Jackson and Foucault Welles (2015) report how Internet users captured a campaign-related hashtag (#myNYPD, by the New York Police Department) to establish counterpublic narratives about police misconduct.

Graves, McDonald, and Goggins (2016) apply information grounds theory to understand how people use Twitter hashtags. Pettigrew (1999, p. 811) defines information grounds as environments “temporarily created when people come together for a singular purpose,” resulting in a social atmosphere that “fosters spontaneous and serendipitous sharing of information.” Graves et al. (2016) argue that hashtags are the textual equivalent of a casual hangout where people converge on the same topic to share and advertise their interest. Hashtags thus create a virtual location or “third space.”

2.3 | Research gap and intended contribution

As discussed, most prior research has implicitly assumed that people use hashtags in a utilitarian way—to structure and link own content to a larger theme. Therefore, the current research aims to extend prior research by systematically applying a theory-building, multimethod research design to (a) identify underlying motivations of hashtagging,

(b) provide valid and reliable measurement theory, and (c) explain how these motivations drive hashtagging. In doing so, this study provides the first attempt to close the identified gaps in the literature and develops a framework to stimulate further research in this domain.

3 | UNDERSTANDING HASHTAGS: STUDY OVERVIEW

This study applies a multimethod research design, beginning with qualitative research (Studies 1–3) to identify a comprehensive pool of items reflecting underlying motivations and ending with three quantitative studies (Studies 4–6) to identify and validate the motivations and their measurement, following advancements in grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Glaser & Strauss, 1967), and measurement theory (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988; Hair, Babin, & Krey, 2017). To further validate the measurement, we factor-analyze the pool of items following well-accepted, psychometric scale development and validation procedures (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988; Churchill, 1979; Hair et al., 2017). Table 1 provides an overview of the studies.

4 | STUDY 1: ITEM GENERATION

Study 1 identifies statements reflecting underlying motivations for hashtagging through an online survey of 71 online users (64% female; age: $M = 26.2$ years, $SD = 7.3$). Because prior research suggests culture-related differences in hashtagging behavior (Sheldon et al., 2017), we ensured a culturally heterogeneous sample of respondents. Specifically, we recruited respondents from two American universities, one of which has a large number of international students, by sharing the link through

eLearning systems. In addition, we recruited respondents via Twitter and Facebook internationally. Seventy-three percent of the respondents reported being university students. Given the focus of this study, the young sample characteristics reflect hashtaggers quite well (Pew Research Center, 2017). Most of the respondents came from North American (67%), Asian (13%), or European (7%) countries.

The survey consisted mostly of open-ended questions that asked respondents to describe their use of hashtags, to give examples, and to explain their behavior. We followed recommendations in the literature (e.g., Smyth, Dillman, Christian, & McBride, 2009) to encourage respondents to provide detailed answers, such as by providing extra-large answer fields, guaranteeing anonymity, explicitly stating that there were no right or wrong answers, and indicating that the more they wrote, the better.

We content-analyzed the comments by investigating the comments per user, extracted items, and counted the number of different reasons mentioned. The respondents who reported using hashtags mentioned between two and 12 different reasons ($M = 5$). In the next step, three independent coders created a list of >350 statements. After discussion, we eliminated redundant statements, which resulted in 135 items. Of those, another 13 had substantial overlaps with statements identified in the literature review, resulting in a final sample of 122 statements.

5 | STUDY 2: FURTHER ITEM GENERATION

Whereas Study 1 focused on a relatively broad sample of respondents, Study 2 applied unstructured in-depth interviews. Following a purposive sampling strategy (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), we recruited six social media users who all reported using hashtags in

TABLE 1 Identifying the meanings of hashtags: Study overview

Study	Objectives	Research design	Findings
Literature review	Identifying investigated motivations for hashtagging in prior research	3 Academic publications	25 Items
		3 Managerial publications	
Study 1	Identifying motivations for hashtagging based on a broader sample of consumers	71 Respondents using online survey with open-ended questions	135 Items
			After eliminating redundant items: Sum: 102 items
Study 2	Identifying motivations for hashtagging based on a smaller sample of consumers using in-depth interviews	6 Social media users, in-depth interviews	+17 new items sum: 119 items
Study 3	Reducing the 119 to 53 items	12 Informants (experts and users)	53 Items
Study 4	Calibration study (i.e., identification of the factor structure using EFA)	Survey (university sample)	10 factors based on 37 items
Study 5	Validation study (i.e., validating the factor structure on a second data set)	Survey (US consumers)	Replication & nomological assessment, norms
Study 6	Further validation of the study and assessing its nomological validity	Survey (Amazon Mechanical Turk workers)	Further replication & further nomological assessment

Note. EFA: exploratory factor analysis.

TABLE 2 Samples of Study 2 (item generation)

No	Age, gender, country	Education & job	Social media/technology	Interview duration	Hashtag intensity
1	29, F, Austria	Undergrad and grad degrees, marketing manager	Uses all common social media platforms, very tech-savvy	40	Many hashtags in each post, ranging, specific one and artistic ones
2	32, F, Malaysian	Grad student, Master Degree in Business Former factory worker	Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn (passive), WeChat, messengers, very tech-savvy (e.g., smartphone, tablet)	15	Hashtags not on every posting, 1–3 hashtags per posting, combination of specific and artistic ones
3	34, F, German	Master Degree, Freelance interpreter, and blogger	Facebook, Instagram, Linked In, Twitter, very tech-savvy	40	# not on every posting, sometimes 2–3 hashtags per posting, sometimes more
4	34, F, German	Master Degree, Management assistance	Facebook, Instagram, Xing, LinkedIn, tech-savvy	55	Many hashtags in each post
5	29, M, German	Master Degree, Marketing professional	Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, Twitter, Xing, very tech-savvy	45	Many hashtags in each post
6	22, M, USA	Undergrad computer engineering	Instagram (professional), Twitter, Facebook, Snapchat, LinkedIn, YouTube etc.	20	Sometimes puts a lot of hashtags and does not use caption—the goal is to expand audience; avoids personal hashtags

Note. F: female; m: male.

their social media postings. Table 2 provides an overview of their demographics.

The objective of these interviews was twofold. First, in light of the literature review and the responses in Study 1, we aimed to triangulate the knowledge obtained with additional data focused more on depth rather than breadth (Jack & Raturi, 2006; Patton, 1990). Second, in-depth interviews can uncover hidden motivations that people might not express in open-ended survey questions.

Interviews lasted between 20 and 60 min. Each interview began with some general questions on social media use and then shifted to hashtags. With the permission of the interviewees, we also discussed their actual social media profiles and asked them to explain their meanings and also decision making about hashtags. Common questions (both general and specific) related to the identification of hashtags (e.g., “Tell me what you were thinking when you made a decision on this hashtag,” “What was your intention when choosing this hashtag?”), to comparing the meanings of different hashtags (“What’s the difference between these two hashtags?”). Analysis of these interviews led to another 17 statements not identified in Study 1. Furthermore, in-depth insights from the responses led to minor adjustments of the existing set of statements. Thus, the final pool of items after Study 2 was 139.

6 | STUDY 3: ITEM VALIDATION AND REDUCTION

The pool of items from the first two studies reached 139, too many to include in a questionnaire. Therefore, the objective of Study 3 was to assess the items in terms of clarity, completeness, and relevance.

Following the tradition across different streams in measurement theory (e.g., Böttger, Rudolph, Evanschitzky, & Pfrang, 2017; Diamantopoulos, 2005; Rossiter, 2002), we triangulated experts and consumers to generate feedback. We did this for three reasons. First, we wanted to include social media users’ feedback in this study because all items need to be clearly understandable by potential respondents (Rossiter, 2002). Second, we argue that practitioner feedback is relevant because experienced practitioners might have a great deal of “tacit knowledge” (Leeflang & Wittink, 2000), due to their experience in their domain (Diamantopoulos, 2005; Rossiter, 2002). That is, from their everyday experiences in social media, they develop assumptions that can provide insights into the relevance of hashtagging. Third, we contend that academic and methodological expertise can shed light on both underlying constructs and topics that consumers and practitioners typically would not verbally express (e.g., socially undesirable topics, managerially irrelevant arguments).

This study used feedback from 12 informants with different backgrounds, as listed in Table 3. It is important to note that not every informant can be clearly assigned to one category (e.g., one respondent can be a practitioner and also personally use hashtags).

We e-mailed the informants a questionnaire with a table that listed 83 statements¹ and asked them to rate the relevance of each item from a personal and/or professional view on a 7-point scale

¹Before presenting the pool of statements to experts, we worked to shorten the list in advance. Therefore, two members of the research team and two independent research assistants not involved in this study read all comments and identified identical or unclear statements, as well as statements clearly related to professional hashtag use (e.g., “to promote our company and brand”). After discussion, these statements were eliminated, leaving 83 statements to be rated by informants.

TABLE 3 Study 3 (item reduction)

No	Category	Occupation	Demographics	Background and expertise
1	Consumer	Student	F, 22, USA	Instagrammer (workout and sports) and uses multiple other social media platforms
2	Expert (industry and academic), user	Consultant, researcher	M, 32, Switzerland	PhD (marketing), now consultant. Published scale development research in academic journals. Uses social media (incl. hashtags) personally
3	Expert (academic), user	Research assistant	F, 21, USA	Communication background and intense personal social media use. Also involved in multiple academic social media research projects
4	Expert (industry), user	Social media manager	M, 32, GER	Marketing manager in a software company and responsible for social media activities. Uses social media also personally and uses hashtags occasionally
5	Academic, user	Research assistant	F, 32, GER	Researcher focused on digital literacy & collaboration, personal social media user
6	Academic, user	Research assistant	F, 28, GER	Graduate degree in psychology and researcher on brand management
7	Consumer	Nurse	W, 29, USA	Moderate social media user, has used hashtags, but not intensely
8	Expert consumer	Digital Nomad	F, 30, GER (now intl)	Past: strategy consultant, now: "digital nomad" offering social media services to clients, incl. a project on hashtags. Also runs a popular Instagram channel
9	Expert (industry and scale), user	Entrepreneur social Media manager	F, 27, GER	Has been working as a social media manager in an international cooperation, now entrepreneur with social media responsibility. Expertise in scale development
10	User	Manager	M, 36, China	Uses social media personally, incl. hashtags (mostly on Asian social networks)
11	Academic	Researcher	F, 40	Author of scientific publications on social media (in particular Twitter)
12	User	Used	F, 29	Uses European and Asian social media platform; "moderate" hashtag use

(1 = *not relevant*, 7 = *very relevant*) and to comment on items when necessary. This procedure is common in scale development research (e.g., Rauschnabel, Krey, Babin, & Ivens, 2016) to achieve both quantitative ratings and qualitative feedback on a large set of items. For each item, we calculated an average rating and assessed informants' comments (if any). In general, we eliminated items with a mean <4, unless verbal feedback provided constructive suggestions on how to improve an item. From the qualitative comments and quantitative ratings from the informants, we also made slight revisions to the wording of eight items, added nine items, and deleted 39 items. Thus, the final pool of items after Study 3 comprised 53.

7 | STUDY 4: EXPLORATION OF HASHTAGGING MOTIVATIONS

7.1 | Methodology and sample

Study 4 uses data collected from existing e-mail lists of two universities, one of which contains a large portion of international students and students with an immigration background. The list included students, faculty/staff, part time students, and alumni. Given the relevance of cultural values in social media use, particularly hashtagging (Sheldon et al., 2017), this cultural heterogeneity (approximately 20% non-Americans) is a strength of the data set. The data set incorporates responses from 317 hashtaggers, 51% of

whom were students, 19% full-time employed, 29% part-time employed, and 1% other (e.g., unemployed, retired).

The survey began with a question on the use of hashtags ("Do you, at least every once in a while, use hashtags? If yes, on which of the following platforms are you using hashtags (the # symbol) most intensely? (Note: If you use hashtags on multiple platforms, chose the platform you are most comfortable with here)" with the answer options of Twitter ($n = 90$; 28.4%), Facebook ($n = 47$, 14.8%), Instagram ($n = 180$, 56.8%), and LinkedIn ($n = 0$; 0%). We removed any respondents who stated not using hashtags or who did not use social media.

8 | RESULTS

We began the data analysis using exploratory factor analysis (EFA; principal component analysis) on the 53 motivation items. Using multiple methodological specifications (e.g., rotation methods), subsamples (e.g., gender and age), and multiple criteria (e.g., eigenvalue >1, assessment of scree plots, interpretability), we identified a stable 10-factor solution. We also ran multiple factor analyses for the items per factor to assess unidimensionality or potential higher-order factors. We subsequently eliminated 17 items that had low factor loadings (<0.5) or high cross-loadings (>0.4) or if loadings differed substantially between multiple model specifications. Thus, the final 10-factor solution comprised 36 items.

TABLE 4 Hashtags: Motivations based on EFA (Study 4)

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
...provide comedic value to my friends/followers on social media	0.93									
...be funny by using entertaining words in hashtags	0.93									
...entertain my friends with hilarious hashtags	0.91									
...make my followers on social media smile	0.83									
...highlight funny words	0.83									
... show related topics		0.82								
...refer to other areas that are linked to the topic of my posting		0.82								
...organize postings around topics (e.g., events, places etc.)		0.80								
...structure my content		0.80								
... make postings look unique			0.86							
...make a posting more visually appealing			0.84							
...create my own style of my postings			0.79							
...give a posting more character			0.77							
...post in a similar style my friends do				0.88						
...match my posting style of people I respect				0.83						
...meet the "standards" how postings look on this social media platform				0.79						
... mimic the posting style of people who are close to me				0.73						
...be associated with trending topics					0.77					
...share my view on certain topics publicly					0.77					
...show how I contribute to up-to-date topics					0.77					
...join conversations on a specific topic					0.73					
...spread "insiders" that only friends and me understand						0.90				
...refer to topics that only my friends can understand						0.89				
..."connect" with my friends by using "our internal" language as hashtags						0.88				
...encourage people to think about the meanings of my posts							0.88			
...motivate people to decipher the hidden meaning of my posts							0.86			
...stimulate other people's thinking about what I want to express with my postings							0.85			
...spread a message to a specific audience of people interested in the topic of the hashtag								0.83		
...reach relevant audiences								0.83		
...reach people interested in a specific topic								0.81		
...mirror the content of my postings									0.84	
...emphasize the main message of a posting									0.79	
...reflect what my postings mean									0.77	
...emphasize a certain event, thing, or people										0.79
...support people or brands I like										0.73
...to endorse interesting things or topics										0.72
Reliability α	0.95	0.84	0.87	0.84	0.80	0.93	0.75	0.87	0.78	0.72
Lowest corrected item-to-total correlation	0.75	0.65	0.65	0.55	0.57	0.83	0.39	0.64	0.55	0.52

Note. Rotation method: varimax; values < 0.40 are suppressed for readability.
Question text: "I use hashtags on [PLATFORM] to..."

8.1 | Factor structure

The 10 factors covered 80.1% of the overall variance. Both the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin measure (KMO–MSA = 0.88) and Bartlett’s test of sphericity, $\chi^2(630 \text{ df}) = 8806$; $p < 0.001$, indicated adequate psychometric characteristics. Table 4 presents the final solution of the EFA using varimax rotation.

Referencing related scales on social media use (e.g., Sheldon & Bryant, 2016) and additional feedback from the informants in Study 3, we named the factors as amusing, organizing, designing, conforming, trendgaging (a novel term combining the concept of engaging and trending topics), bonding, inspiring, reaching, summarizing, and endorsing.

8.2 | Reliability

A common approach to assess the reliability in EFA is Cronbach’s α . As Table 4 shows, all factors have values >0.7 , indicating sufficient levels of reliability (Hair et al., 2017). Moreover, we inspected additional coefficients, such as corrected item-to-total correlation, and evaluated how the deletion of specific items affected scale reliability. Overall, all reliability assessments indicate the high reliability of the identified factor structure.

8.3 | Further validation

Although the purpose of this study was to identify a factor structure, we assessed the factor structure using confirmatory factor analysis. As Table 5 shows, all global and local fit measures are in line with recommendations in the literature (Bagozzi & Yi, 2012; Hair et al., 2017): comparative fit index (CFI; 0.94, i.e., >0.93), Tucker–Lewis index (TLI; 0.95, i.e., >0.92), root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA; 0.05, i.e., <0.07), and standardized root mean square residual (SRMR; 0.05, i.e., <0.08). In addition, although the χ^2 of 913.5 is significant ($df = 549$, $p < 0.001$), the χ^2/df ratio of 1.7 is acceptable. We also assessed discriminant validity, using the procedure Fornell and Larcker (1981) recommended. The results verify discriminant validity, as the average variance extracted (AVE) values of each pair of constructs exceeded their squared correlation.

9 | STUDY 5: VALIDATION OF HASHTAGGING MOTIVATIONS

Study 4 identified a 10-factor structure based on a sample of social media users associated with two universities. In accordance with the tradition in scale development theory (e.g., Hair et al., 2017; MacKenzie, Podsakoff, & Podsakoff, 2011), the factorial structure requires confirmation based on an independent data set. Therefore, the first purpose of Study 5 is to validate the factor structure identified in Study 4 using a broader data set. Second, Study 5 aims to assess nomological validity.

9.1 | Methodology and sample

With the help of a commercial market research firm, we surveyed 525 hashtagging respondents with a broad range of sociodemographic characteristics (56% female; age: $M = 37$ years, $SD = 14$; nationality: 95% Americans; Occupation: 55% employed, 7% students, 9% retired; 6% self-employed, 23% other/no answer). Respondents received financial compensation for participation. As in Study 4, respondents answered the motivation questions with a focus on their main hashtagging social media platform (Twitter: $n = 141$; Facebook: $n = 224$, 43%; Instagram: $n = 156$, 30%; 27%; LinkedIn: $n = 4$, $<1\%$).

In addition to the 10 motivations, we surveyed users’ hashtag identification styles to assess nomological validity and to explore how the 10 motivations relate to other constructs of interest (Böttger et al., 2017). Therefore, we asked respondents how they identify their hashtags using 7-point semantic differentials: “I chose whatever pops up in my mind,” “I do some research to identify the best hashtags,” “I chose hashtags intuitively,” and “I look at statistics (e.g., trending hashtags) to identify them.” Higher values indicate a more cognitive hashtagging style, whereas lower values indicate a more affective style. In addition, we surveyed users’ general interest in other people’s hashtags (“I never click on other people’s hashtags,” “I often click on other people’s hashtags,” “I am not interested in other people’s hashtags,” and “Other people’s hashtags raise my interest”).

9.2 | Factor structure of the hashtagging motivations

As Table 5 presents in more detail, Study 5 replicates the proposed factor structure. All local and global fit measures indicate a good model fit. Tests for discriminant validity, as in Study 4, support distinct factors.

9.3 | Nomological validity: Relationships between hashtags and social media behavior

To provide further nomological validity, we assessed correlations between the 10 constructs and the two assessment variables (see Table 6). The results indicate significant, positive correlations for all 10 motivations on users’ general interest in other people’s hashtags (all $r \geq 0.14$; all $p \leq 0.02$) and most of them with a hashtag identification style. In particular, amusing shows a negative effect ($r = -0.14$, $p = 0.02$), which plausibly indicates that people who use hashtags to entertain their followers chose whatever pops up in their minds (rather than analytically developing hashtags). Bonding, summarizing, and endorsing did not reach significance, though we would assume a positive correlation. Most likely, the nature of the items (“research,” “statistics”) did not capture thoughts about insiders respondents have with their friends.

9.4 | Developing hashtag-motivational norms

MacKenzie et al. (2011, p. 325) discuss the importance of developing “norms to aid the interpretation of the scale.” We followed this

TABLE 5 Hashtagging motivations: Confirmatory factor analyses (Studies 4, 5, and 6)

	Study 4	Study 5	Study 6
Global Model			
χ^2 (549df)	913	940	893
χ^2/df ratio	1.66	1.71	1.63
CFI	0.95	0.96	0.94
TLI	0.94	0.96	0.94
RMSEA	0.05	0.04	0.05
SRMR	0.05	0.04	0.06
Factor 1: Amusing			
AVE	0.78	0.79	0.83
CR	0.95	0.95	0.96
...provide comedic value to my friends/followers on social media	0.94	0.91	0.95
...be funny by using entertaining words in hashtags	0.96	0.93	0.95
...entertain my friends with hilarious hashtags	0.91	0.91	0.93
...make my followers on social media smile	0.79	0.84	0.89
...highlight funny words	0.80	0.84	0.83
Factor 2: Organizing			
AVE	0.70	0.66	0.71
CR	0.90	0.89	0.91
...show related topics	0.92	0.86	0.85
...refer to other areas that are linked to the topic of my posting	0.81	0.80	0.89
...organize postings around topics (e.g., events and places)	0.80	0.78	0.81
...structure my content	0.81	0.81	0.81
Factor 3: Designing			
AVE	0.72	0.75	0.77
CR	0.91	0.92	0.93
...make postings look unique	0.93	0.91	0.93
...make a posting more visually appealing	0.86	0.88	0.89
...create my own style of my postings	0.85	0.87	0.90
...give a posting more character	0.75	0.80	0.79
Factor 4: Conforming			
AVE	0.67	0.74	0.83
CR	0.89	0.92	0.95
...post in a similar style my friends do	0.87	0.90	0.94
...match my posting style of people I respect	0.86	0.91	0.96
...meet the "standards" how postings look on this social media platform	0.76	0.85	0.86
...mimic the posting style of people who are close to me	0.78	0.78	0.89
Factor 5: Trendgaging			
AVE	0.65	0.70	0.65
CR	0.88	0.90	0.88
...be associated with trending topics	0.79	0.86	0.85
...share my view on certain topics publicly	0.83	0.80	0.78
...show how I contribute to up-to-date topics	0.81	0.87	0.82
...join conversations on a specific topic	0.80	0.80	0.79
Factor 6: Bonding			
AVE	0.85	0.78	0.85
CR	0.94	0.91	0.94
...spread "insiders" that only friends and me understand	0.93	0.88	0.88
...refer to topics that only my friends can understand	0.94	0.90	0.95
..."connect" with my friends by using "our internal" language as hashtags	0.89	0.87	0.93
Factor 7: Inspiring			
AVE	0.77	0.72	0.79
CR	0.91	0.88	0.92
...encourage people to think about the meanings of my posts	0.91	0.91	0.93
...motivate people to decipher the hidden meaning of my posts	0.83	0.75	0.86
...stimulate other people's thinking about what I want to express with my postings	0.90	0.87	0.87
Factor 8: Reaching			
AVE	0.81	0.79	0.80
CR	0.93	0.92	0.92
...spread a message to a specific audience of people interested in the topic of the hashtag	0.93	0.91	0.90
...reach relevant audiences	0.92	0.90	0.90
...reach people interested in a specific topic	0.85	0.85	0.88

(Continues)

TABLE 5 (Continued)

	Study 4	Study 5	Study 6
Factor 9: Summarizing			
AVE	0.58	0.62	0.69
CR	0.80	0.83	0.87
...mirror the content of my postings	0.80	0.71	0.85
...emphasize the main message of a posting	0.68	0.81	0.77
...reflect what my postings mean	0.79	0.83	0.86
Factor 10: Endorsing			
AVE	0.56	0.58	0.60
CR	0.79	0.80	0.82
...emphasize a certain event, thing, or people	0.70	0.80	0.85
...support people or brands I like	0.73	0.72	0.71
...to endorse interesting things or topics	0.80	0.75	0.75

Note. Estimator: MLR; all factor loadings are significant (all $p < 0.001$).

CFI: comparative fit index; TLI: Tucker–Lewis index; RMSEA: root mean square error of approximation; SRMR: standardized root mean square residual.

recommendation by assessing the means and standard deviations of the 10 motivations and by assessing differences between platforms. Study 5's sample is appropriate for this purpose because it incorporates a broad range of American consumers. Space restrictions prevent us from discussing each score in detail. Table 7 presents the relevant statistics (e.g., mean, *SD*, and median) and further information on the distribution (quartiles). In addition, we ran analyses of variances (ANOVAs) to assess whether a motivation differs among the platforms. A post hoc Scheffe test then assessed these differences in more detail. Although norms can differ over time and sample characteristics (MacKenzie et al., 2011), the results can guide the interpretation of scores in related research applying our scale.

10 | STUDY 6: FURTHER VALIDATION OF HASHTAGGING MOTIVATIONS

The objective of Study 6 is two-fold. First, the study aims to replicate the data using another independent data set. Second, it aims to

TABLE 6 Study 5: Nomological assessment of the hashtagging motivations

	Affective/cognitive hashtagging style	Interest in other People's hashtags
Amusing	-0.14*	0.14*
Organizing	0.21**	0.50***
Designing	0.11 ^T	0.33***
Conforming	0.14*	0.27***
Trendgaging	0.19***	0.47***
Bonding	0.04	0.34***
Inspiring	0.11 ^T	0.34***
Reaching	0.18***	0.45***
Summarizing	-0.04	0.34***
Endorsing	0.09	0.45***

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$, ^T $p < 0.10$.

ensure nomological validity to provide further validation of the scale and to integrate the scale in prior hashtagging research. In particular, we argue that different motivations lead to the use of different hashtags. Sheldon et al. (2017) find that hashtags differ in their characteristics, and Study 6 assesses whether different motivations can explain these variations.

10.1 | Methodology and sample

We surveyed 221 American Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) users (58% female, age: $M = 32.7$ years, $SD = 9.2$; occupation: 73% used, 10% self-employed, 10% students, 7% other/no answer) who reported using hashtags. MTurk is an online marketplace run by Amazon in which people can post human intelligence tasks (HITs), such as taking part in a survey. Registered MTurk Workers can complete these tasks for varying levels of compensation. Several quality assurance mechanisms can be implemented; we included filters that only workers with very positive ratings were allowed to take part in our survey. Although, as in any research methodology, there is an ongoing debate about the quality of MTurk data (e.g., Sharpe wessling, Huber, & Netzer, 2017), others (e.g., Casler, Bickel, & Hackett, 2013; Hulland, Baumgartner, & Smith, 2018) find almost indistinguishable results when comparing MTurk data with data collected from established sources.

Study 6 uses the same questions and survey design as in Studies 4 and 5 (Twitter: $n = 70$, 32%; Facebook: $n = 67$, 30%; Instagram: $n = 84$; 38%; LinkedIn: $n = 0$; 0%). After measuring hashtag motivations, we adopted the 10 hashtag characteristic items by Sheldon et al. (2018) and supplemented them with the five new items we identified in Studies 1 and 2.

10.2 | Validation of the factor structure

As Table 5 shows, Study 6 replicates the identified factor structure and thus validates the measurement model. Both AVE and composite reliability (CR) show acceptable values on a factor level, and the global measurement indices echo this (Hair et al., 2017).

TABLE 7 Establishing Norms on the meanings of hashtags on social media (study 5)

	Overall Sample										Twitter										Facebook									
	Percentiles					Percentiles					Percentiles					Percentiles					Percentiles					Percentiles				
	M	SD	Mdn	25	50	75	M	SD	Mdn	25	50	75	M	SD	Mdn	25	50	75	M	SD	Mdn	25	50	75	M	SD	Mdn	25	50	75
Amusing	4.92	1.65	5.20	4.00	5.20	6.20	4.84	1.62	5.20	4.00	5.20	6.00	4.84	1.62	5.20	4.00	5.20	6.00	5.10	1.62	5.40	4.20	5.40	6.40	5.10	1.62	5.40	4.20	5.40	6.40
Organizing	4.93	1.47	5.00	4.00	5.00	6.00	5.17	1.30	5.25	4.50	5.25	6.00	5.17	1.30	5.25	4.50	5.25	6.00	4.65	1.53	4.75	3.75	4.75	6.00	4.65	1.53	4.75	3.75	4.75	6.00
Designing	4.49	1.68	4.75	3.75	4.75	5.75	4.46	1.61	4.50	3.75	4.50	5.50	4.46	1.61	4.50	3.75	4.50	5.50	4.55	1.68	4.75	4.00	4.75	5.75	4.55	1.68	4.75	4.00	4.75	5.75
Conforming	3.89	1.71	4.00	2.50	4.00	5.25	4.22	1.60	4.50	3.25	4.50	5.50	4.22	1.60	4.50	3.25	4.50	5.50	3.83	1.74	4.00	2.50	4.00	5.25	3.83	1.74	4.00	2.50	4.00	5.25
Trendgaging	4.45	1.63	4.75	3.50	4.75	5.50	5.11	1.43	5.25	4.25	5.25	6.25	5.11	1.43	5.25	4.25	5.25	6.25	4.30	1.60	4.50	3.50	4.50	5.25	4.30	1.60	4.50	3.50	4.50	5.25
Bonding	4.07	1.77	4.33	3.00	4.33	5.33	4.24	1.75	4.67	3.17	4.67	5.33	4.24	1.75	4.67	3.17	4.67	5.33	4.02	1.77	4.00	2.67	4.00	5.33	4.02	1.77	4.00	2.67	4.00	5.33
Inspiring	4.62	1.56	4.67	3.67	4.67	5.67	4.63	1.50	5.00	3.83	5.00	5.67	4.63	1.50	5.00	3.83	5.00	5.67	4.77	1.42	5.00	4.00	5.00	5.67	4.77	1.42	5.00	4.00	5.00	5.67
Reaching	4.97	1.68	5.33	4.00	5.33	6.33	5.42	1.51	5.67	4.67	5.67	6.67	5.42	1.51	5.67	4.67	5.67	6.67	4.59	1.66	5.00	4.00	5.00	5.92	4.59	1.66	5.00	4.00	5.00	5.92
Summarizing	5.13	1.31	5.33	4.33	5.33	6.00	5.18	1.34	5.33	4.67	5.33	6.33	5.18	1.34	5.33	4.67	5.33	6.33	4.99	1.33	5.00	4.33	5.00	6.00	4.99	1.33	5.00	4.33	5.00	6.00
Endorsing	4.97	1.48	5.00	4.00	5.00	6.00	5.20	1.36	5.33	4.50	5.33	6.33	5.20	1.36	5.33	4.50	5.33	6.33	4.95	1.38	5.00	4.08	5.00	6.00	4.95	1.38	5.00	4.08	5.00	6.00
Instagram											Platform Differences																			
	Percentiles					ANOVA					Scheffe Post hoc (p-values)																			
M	SD	Mdn	25	50	75	F	Sig.	T < > I	T < > I	T < > I	F	Sig.	T < > I	T < > I	F	Sig.	T < > I	T < > I	F	Sig.	T < > I	T < > I	F	Sig.	T < > I	T < > I	F	Sig.	T < > I	
4.74	1.73	4.90	4.00	4.90	6.00	2.39	0.09	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	7.12	0.00	n.s.	n.s.	0.01	0.01	n.s.													
5.11	1.49	5.50	4.25	5.50	6.25	0.35	0.71	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	4.11	0.02	n.s.	n.s.	< 0.001	< 0.001	n.s.	n.s.	< 0.001	< 0.001	n.s.	n.s.	< 0.001	< 0.001	n.s.	n.s.	< 0.001	< 0.001		
4.41	1.75	4.75	3.25	4.75	5.75	0.98	0.38	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	3.16	0.04	n.s.	n.s.	0.04	0.04	n.s.													
3.67	1.75	4.00	2.00	4.00	5.25	11.59	0.00	< 0.001	< 0.001	< 0.001	3.16	0.04	n.s.	n.s.	0.04	0.04	n.s.													
4.07	1.68	4.25	2.75	4.25	5.50	2.67	0.07	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	3.12	0.04	n.s.	n.s.	0.04	0.04	n.s.													
3.97	1.79	4.00	2.75	4.00	5.33	11.59	0.00	< 0.001	< 0.001	< 0.001	3.12	0.04	n.s.	n.s.	0.04	0.04	n.s.													
4.37	1.77	4.33	3.33	4.33	5.67	2.67	0.07	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	3.12	0.04	n.s.	n.s.	0.04	0.04	n.s.													
5.08	1.75	5.33	4.33	5.33	6.33	2.67	0.07	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	3.12	0.04	n.s.	n.s.	0.04	0.04	n.s.													
5.30	1.24	5.33	4.67	5.33	6.00	2.67	0.07	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	3.12	0.04	n.s.	n.s.	0.04	0.04	n.s.													
4.77	1.69	5.00	3.67	5.00	6.00	3.12	0.04	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	3.12	0.04	n.s.	n.s.	0.04	0.04	n.s.													

Note. ANOVA based on $df = 2$ (between) and $df = 518$ (within). Post hoc Scheffe test; T = Twitter; I = Instagram; F = Facebook; n.s.: $p > 0.10$; $n = 4$ for LinkedIn were excluded for ANOVA and post hoc tests. Reading example: According to the post hoc test, the difference for "structure" is significant ($p = 0.01$) between Twitter ($M = 5.17$) and Facebook ($M = 4.65$) and ($p = 0.01$) between Facebook ($M = 4.65$) and Instagram ($M = 5.11$), but not between Twitter and Instagram ($p > 0.10$).

10.3 | Nomological validity: Relationship to hashtag characteristics

So far, we identified 10 motivations that answer the question as to *why* people use hashtags. If nomological validity is a given, these motivations should plausibly relate to the types of hashtags people are using (*how* people hashtag). Study 6 builds on this assumption and argues that different motivations should relate plausibly to different types of hashtagging styles. For example, a user motivated to amuse his or her followers should be more likely to use entertaining (e.g., funny) hashtags.

To assess how hashtagging motivations relate to hashtagging styles, we factor-analyzed the 15 hashtagging style characteristic items using the same procedure as in Study 4. After dropping four items because of high cross-loadings, a factor analysis identified five dimensions (KMO-MSA = 0.82; Bartlett's test: $\chi^2 = 1,607$, $df = 78$; $p < 0.001$; 80.2% explained variance) with the following items: *entertaining* (entertaining, funny, and creative), *modern* (trending words, popular among social media users, and modern), *inspirational* (mystic, inspirational, and provocative), *related* (connected with groups of people [e.g., fans of a team, customers of a brand] or with people with similar interests [e.g., hobbies and brands]), and *structured* (descriptive, a summary of posts).

Table 8 presents the findings of all five models, with all 10 motivations as dependent variables and one of the five hashtag styles as the explanatory variable. All models have an explanatory power greater than zero ($p < 0.001$), and the results show strong support for nomological validity. In particular, each independent variable shows significant results at least for one of the five hashtag characteristics. Inspection of the most relevant motivations (as reflected by the magnitude of the β -values presented in each column of Table 8) for each hashtag characteristic dimension also provides conceivable conclusions: *entertaining* is mostly driven by amusing, *modern* by trendgaging, *inspirational* by inspiring, *related* by organizing, and *structured* by summarizing. These patterns are plausible and thus support nomological validity.

10.4 | Further exploratory analyses on the meaning of hashtags

The results of the previous studies indicate that hashtags' meanings go beyond structuring content. Therefore, we could argue that hashtags remain an integral part of contemporary communication, probably even as a subcultural practice among social media users. To further explore this, we added one hashtag intensity item ("I try to include hashtags in all my postings"; $M = 3.34$, $SD = 2.22$) and one statement to measure (sub)cultural meaning of hashtags ("To me, hashtagging is like a special form of modern culture"; $\alpha = 0.87$; $M = 4.32$, $SD = 1.67$). These two constructs are significantly correlated ($r = 0.44$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that users who hashtag more also perceive hashtags more as an integral part of the communication culture, not just a funny and amusing trend or practice and vice versa. In addition, the cultural meaning of hashtags shows significant correlations with all motivations (ranging from $r = 0.197$, $p = 0.003$ for

insiders to $r = 0.426$, $p < 0.001$ for structure), except amusing ($r = 0.105$, $p = 0.120$).

11 | DISCUSSION

Hashtags, initially introduced to allow users to structure and organize content, have developed into a complex communication pattern in social media. Prior research has explored numerous aspects of hashtags, particularly those related to the purpose of structuring and organizing user-generated content around a specific theme or topic. As discussed, whereas this purpose remains an important motivation to use hashtags in social media postings, we argue that hashtagging is associated with additional motivations that prior uses and gratification research has not sufficiently addressed. Consequently, this study applied a multistudy, multimethod approach to systematically identify and validate the motivations to use hashtags. As Table 1 shows, four qualitative and three quantitative studies incorporated information from more than 1,100 hashtaggers. The findings provide a framework and measurement scale consisting of 10 motivations for hashtagging, which two studies validated across different samples and platforms.

11.1 | Hashtagging motivations

First, *amusing* emerges as one of the rather more prevalent hashtagging motivations. This motivation reflects a desire to be funny, entertaining followers, and making them smile. Research on humor indicates that amusing and entertaining others can serve different functions in communication. For example, humor can build a sense of community or elicit approval from others (Francis, Monahan, & Berger, 1999). Humor can also induce positive affect in receivers (Carnevale & Isen, 1986) and thus trigger feelings of attraction (Byrne, 1971). This motivation, which was mentioned more often among Facebook users, corresponds to previous findings showing that Facebook is more about "having fun" than other forms of social media (Quan-Haase & Young, 2010). However, most social media research (e.g., Sheldon et al., 2017) suggests that people use social media to "be amused" (e.g., watching funny videos on YouTube); findings from the current research show the proactive role of "amusing other social media users." Studies 5 and 6 reveal that hashtaggers motivated to amuse others tend to use funny words as hashtags but make these decisions rather spontaneously. Study 5 also reveals that amusing is similarly important across the investigated platforms.

Organizing is the second motivation we identified from our data. Considering that the original purpose of hashtags is to structure and organize the content of posting (e.g., Wang et al., 2016), it is not surprising that organizing is one of the more common motivations for using hashtags. In addition to structuring the internal content of postings, this motivation encompasses the broader understanding of organizing one's own social media participation, including showing and linking other related content areas and organizing own postings

TABLE 8 Study 6: Hashtags: The relationships between motivations and use

	How people hashtag				
	Entertaining	Modern	Inspirational	Related	Structured
Motivations (why people hashtag)					
Amusing	0.58***	0.06	-0.13*	-0.12 ^T	-0.02
Organizing	-0.16	0.10	0.01	0.36***	0.19*
Designing	0.11	0.17**	0.25***	0.01	0.23***
Conforming	0.09	0.17**	-0.06	-0.06	-0.15 ^T
Trendgaging	0.00	0.56***	0.21**	0.14 ^T	-0.02
Bonding	0.06	-0.1 ^T	0.23***	0.23***	0.11
Inspiring	-0.06	-0.01	0.41***	-0.05	0.07
Reaching	0.04	-0.13 ^T	-0.12 ^T	0.16*	0.2*
Summarizing	0.13*	-0.02	-0.08	-0.03	0.26***
Endorsing	0.11 ^T	0.13*	0.06	0.10	-0.09
Model fit					
R ²	0.57	0.61	0.57	0.45	0.39
R ² (adjusted)	0.54	0.59	0.55	0.43	0.37

Note. All R² values are significant (*F*-test, all $p < 0.001$). All variance inflation factor < 2.7 . * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$, ^T $p < 0.10$.

around topics (e.g., events and places). We find that organizing is more frequently used on Twitter and Instagram than on Facebook (Study 5).

The third motivation, *designing*, refers to the desire to create unique and creative postings. Social media users with this motivation want to give their postings more “character” and make them visually appealing to other users. This motivation might be due to the need for self-presentation, which previous research suggests is one of two basic needs behind the broader motivation for using social media platforms (Nadkarni & Hofmann, 2012). In the case of hashtags, users driven by the designing motivation use them for aesthetic reasons, such as to present their creative abilities through eye-catching designs. Whereas a hashtag’s original purpose has a functional role dealing with the content of a posting, our findings reveal that certain people use these tags as a tool for artistic reasons. Study 5 indicates that this motivation plays a similar role for all investigated platforms. A potential explanation is that none of these platforms offer similar ways to adjust the formatting style of postings (e.g., different fonts).

Users driven by the fourth motivation, *confirming*, exhibit the desire to meet the conventions of either their friend groups or the respective social media platform in general. Established research on social norms has investigated the role of descriptive (what other people are doing) and injunctive (what other people expect someone to do) norms in consumer behavior in multiple contexts (Cialdini, Reno, & Kallgren, 1990; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). However, research on social norms typically measures the existence of norms (e.g., “All my friends are using hashtags”), whereas the current study measures this theoretical mechanism from a motivational view (i.e., because someone *wants* to assimilate his or her behavior). Fundamental research has found that acting according to social norms has a

“surviving” advantage, from the evolutionary perspective (Simon, 1990). In particular, this study argues that the more people identify with a particular group, the more they identify with the goals of this group, and thus the more they tend to follow the norms of the group (Fielding & Hogg, 2000). Study 5 indicates that this is particularly relevant on Twitter (Table 6).

Trendgaging, the fifth motivation, is a portmanteau derived from the words “trends” and “engaging” that describes the motivation to engage in and be associated with popular conversations and trendy topics. This motivation might be related to a deeper need for belonging in general, which drives social media users in general (Nadkarni & Hofmann, 2012), and, more particularly, to the positive effects from identifying oneself with others who are engaged in trendy discussions. That is, belonging to an attractive and popular social group can have positive effects on an individual’s self-esteem (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Hogg & Sunderland, 1991). Trendgaging also matches Graves et al.’s (2016) observations that sports fans use hashtags to discuss certain aspects of a game and to promote their view. This motivation is represented significantly stronger on Twitter than on Facebook or Instagram.

The sixth motivation, *bonding*, is another expression of the fundamental human need of establishing and sustaining belongingness (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Bonding is more intimate in nature than trendgaging and describes the desire to show that one belongs to an inner circle of friends and connects with them by using hashtags with an insider content. Baumeister and Leary (1995, p. 500) suggest that having long-term contacts characterized by a certain level of intimacy “provide[s] some satisfactions, including a sense of belonging that would not be available in interactions with... new acquaintances.” Accordingly, bonding through hashtagging

becomes possible by means of an “internal” language that only members of an insider group would understand and from having shared experiences that inspire bonding-motivated hashtags. Previous research indicates that individuals with a strong need for belongingness are more likely to reach higher levels of subjective well-being and happiness (McAdams & Bryant, 1987). Being a universal human need, bonding appears equally often in all social media platforms in Study 5.

The seventh motivation, *inspiring*, reflects the aim to encourage or stimulate others to think about the meanings of one’s postings. The concept of inspiration in general is not new. For example, just recently, Böttger et al. (2017) assessed consumer inspiration and found that consumers either are inspired by something (i.e., get new ideas) or are inspired to do something (e.g., buy a product). The current study, however, sheds light on the concept of inspiration not from the view of the person who is inspired but from the view of the “inspirator”—the person who proactively wants to inspire other users with the use of specific hashtags. In particular, some people tend to use hashtags to uncover a hidden meaning included in a post, inspiring others to decipher it. This motivation might be related to the broader motivation to enjoy and engage in effortful cognitive activity, which in the literature is referred to as need for cognition (Cacioppo, Petty, Kao, & Rodriguez, 1986). Individuals high in need for cognition are likely to have positive attitudes toward tasks that require reasoning and thus also might enjoy and be inclined to create hashtags that stimulate others’ cognitive engagement. In previous studies, this motivation is rather understood as an intrinsic motivation that can be developed rather than a true innate need (Petty, Briñol, Loersch, & McCaslin, 2009).

The eighth motivation, *reaching*, refers to the goal of bringing one’s message or opinion to a broader audience and address people interested in a specific topic. This motivation is part of the more general motivation to develop a sense of empowerment (Katz, 1984; Zimmerman, Israel, Schulz, & Checkoway, 1992), which includes leading and influencing social opinion. Zimmerman et al. (1992) conceptualize empowerment as a construct consisting of the dimensions of control, self-efficacy, and perceived competency, all of which can emerge by contributing ideas and opinions in a public sphere. Accordingly, investigating the motivation behind user-generated content on the Internet, Leung (2009, p. 1,330) argues that the concept of psychological empowerment can be applied to describe how users might use social media to “elevate awareness and engage in debates on important issues.” Study 5 shows that reaching is the most frequent motivation among Twitter users and is significantly more often the motivation behind hashtags used on Twitter than on Facebook or Instagram.

The ninth motivation for hashtagging is *summarizing*, which describes the desire to recap and reflect on the meaning of one’s posting and to emphasize its main message. The hashtagging activity resulting from this motivation might serve users in two ways: (a) by fulfilling their cognitive needs for structure (Neuberg & Newsom, 1993) and (b) by fulfilling their need to be understood by their audiences. According to Neuberg and Newsom (1993), individuals

“differ in the extent to which they are dispositionally motivated to cognitively structure their worlds” and the extent to which they are likely to organize information in simple ways. These differences might become visible on social media platforms through hashtags for summarizing purposes. Summarizing is the most common motivation behind hashtags on Instagram and more prevalent than on Twitter or Facebook.

The tenth motivation, *endorsing*, underlies hashtagging activities geared to supporting other people, brands, or events or championing other things or topics that one finds interesting. Arguably, the type of hashtagging resulting from this motivation can be subsumed under prosocial hashtagging. One driving force behind the endorsing motivation comes from established social norms (Buck & Ginsburg, 1991; De Waal, 1997), such as responsibility (helping those who need help), justice (helping those who earned help), and reciprocity (helping those who helped you; Schwartz, 1977). Another force might be the identification with a brand, event, or topic, as individuals are more likely to enact supportive behavior for something or someone with whom they identify. Of note, research has shown that seeing one’s own picture on a screen enhances the readiness to engage in supportive behavior (Duval, Duval, & Neely, 1979). Given that profiles on social media normally include pictures of users, this finding might also explain why individuals might experience the motivation to endorse others and to use hashtags for that purpose when using social media.

12 | THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTION

Identifying and validating these dimensions provides several contributions to the understanding of user behavior on social media. First, this study advances our understanding of uses and gratifications theory. Although prior research has identified hashtags as a popular element in many people’s social media communication, most of these studies have conceptualized hashtags as a utilitarian means to structure and organize content (the initial purpose of hashtags). This study confirms the idea of hashtags through the organizing motivation and also shows that people tend to use hashtags because of nine additional but heretofore unknown dimensions. While some of these dimensions are related to established social media use constructs (e.g., self-presentation), this study finds several novel results. For example, in contrast with most prior social media research, we find that entertaining can also be proactive (amusing dimensions). Likewise, we present trendgaging as a new construct that covers users’ motivation to engage in and contribute to discussions around trending topics.

Second, our findings also provide insights into hashtagging behavior on a broader level. For example, while Sheldon et al.’s (2017) study provides first insights into different styles of hashtagging, the current research (Study 6) links them to motivations. Likewise, Studies 5 and 6 shed more light on how social media users use hashtags. For example, we show that depending on their motivations, they tend to choose hashtags either cognitively or affectively.

Third, this study advances measurement theory for hashtag motivations. We show that the scale has high levels of reliability and validity. With 36 items, the scale can easily be implemented in surveys and can inspire research in multiple disciplines. It also provides researchers with an intensely validated measurement tool and information on the motivations' relationship to related constructs to inspire and guide future research.

12.1 | Managerial implications

Our findings can also guide managers' user of hashtags in social media marketing. In particular, we show that hashtagging is associated with 10 motivations, many of them substantially different from the initial purpose of hashtags (i.e., structuring content). During this study, we screened leading brands' social media accounts and assessed how they use hashtags. In conclusion, most of them use very functional hashtags. Our findings can encourage managers to rethink this practice. For example, besides branded hashtags, marketers could highlight important words through hashtags, use them as a source of inspiration (a relevant topic for marketers, see Böttger et al. [2017]) or to motivate their followers to engage in "trendgating" behaviors.

12.2 | Limitations and future research

As with any study, this study has several limitations. Although we ensured the heterogeneity of respondents in all studies, empirical validations and cross-country comparisons remain an avenue for future research. In addition, a cross-sectional study might not fully capture the dynamics of hashtags; this could be relevant, as our study identifies assimilation as a motivation to use hashtags. Beyond these limitations, this study provides a starting point for multiple future research endeavors. For example, whereas this study assessed the hashtagger's perspective, future studies could assess how other users perceive these messages. For example, how do social media users perceive a user who employs many vs. no hashtags at all? Do (trending) hashtags really lead to more interactivity (i.e., likes)? Finally, there is also an increased interest in the use of social media in organizational communication, in particular social media marketing and content marketing. Many organizations already make use of hashtags, but little is known about why and how they do so. Future studies could assess the effectiveness of professional hashtagging practices.

13 | CONCLUDING REMARKS ON HASHTAGS

The six studies reported in this study show that hashtags are not just a means to structure user-generated content on social media. The # symbol appears as an element on people's social media communication driven by 10 different motivations. We hope that future research can build on these findings to provide more knowledge on an integral element of social media postings.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

ORCID

Philipp A. Rauschnabel  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2188-6747>

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Philipp was an Assistant Professor of Marketing at the University of Michigan-Dearborn and is now a tenured Professor at Universität der Bundeswehr München in Germany. His research interests include social media, augmented reality and scale development.

Pavica is an Associate Professor of Communication and Department Chair of Communication Arts at the University of Alabama in Huntsville. She is the author of multiple books and articles on social media with a special emphasis on uses and gratifications theory.

Erna is a PhD student and research associate at Universität der Bundeswehr in Germany at the Department of Work and Organizational Psychology at the School of Economics and Organizational Sciences. She has also held a visiting position at the University of Victoria in Canada. Her interests include cultural aspects in media and communication.

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