HASHTAG(GING) BETWEEN DEVICE AND PRACTICE

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is first of all to try to integrate the hashtag into the wider context of the devices the web offers to its users in order to make browsing easier. But more than that, the hashtag is not simply a tool used to organise web material, but it in itself may easily be understood as an artefact carrying cultural meaning that is worth analysing within the individual's cultural practice. Additionally, the hashtag can be interpreted as a research tool of the 'native' kind alongside the others that have been identified and as a way of communication as part of the language of the web. Besides this, the hashtag can be read not only as the end product at the users' disposal, but, significantly, as a process of building meaning inside the web. Having all this in mind, the paper will investigate the hashtag based on a case study on (video) social media that will eventually identify a few ways of integrating it in the identity of both the user generating the content and the content generated by such user.

Keywords: *hashtag, visual social media, cultural practice, organisation*

Against the backdrop of the ever increasing pace of life, as this was approached from different angles (Tomlison 2007, Baudrillard 2002 [2000]), studies on connectedness have spiked in recent years. It is not the place here to review the very diverse reference lists of Internet studies[2], but rather to revisit a few of the now classical studies on the online environment which may very well open the path for understanding a part of the web, the automatic features. What was originally created as tools to enable browsing, shapes now as elements which have become incorporated in the cultural practices of the digital individual and which moulds these individuals' online based cultural production.

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[2] In order to create a general idea on how the reference list may be put together, see http://www.websm.org/. Used as an automated research tool in the sense of Roger's understanding of 'digitally native' tools, the website can offer a glimpse into the abundance of empirical or review studies on web content, functions and practice.

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Approaching mediated user-generated content using the automatic tools available on various web platforms raises the ever more present matter that an analysis on web content independent of the medium features the web holds may no longer be possible.

1. Research Context

Although the current trend that shapes the Internet studies is to abolish the online/offline dichotomy (Boellstorff 2012, but, for contrast, especially, Turkle 1984, 1995, 2011 who still emphasises on fractures between them), some research can still be done on either side. Such approaches, irrespective of the filed which incorporate them, result in three parallel categories of studies, namely how the online shapes the offline behaviour, secondly, the other way around, how the offline shapes the online interactions and productions, and finally, focusing on the cultural products and their use understood not as binomial influences but rather as constitutive parts of the same unitary identity.

Moving further, other researches focused on the particulars of the Internet cross-sectioning it in terms of the development of platforms, tools and devices used within. Naming randomly a few of examples of such research brings forth analyses of blogging and microblogging seen as cogenerating content, shaped by technology or by the place of emerging new types of subculture (Bruns/ Jacobs (eds.) 2006, Bruns/Stieglitz 2012), of agency in new types of sociality (Papachrissi (ed.) 2011, Rainie/Wellman 2012), of social network(ing) and later on video social media (Miller/Slater 2000, boyd 2007, Marwick 2015, Miller 2015, Penney 2015), or of internal structure of the web showcased within interfaces, with special attention on hypermedia, hyperlinks or hypertext (Ingwersen 1998, Brusilovski 2001, Dicks/Mason *et al.* 2005, Solway 2011, Doherty 2014).

With the latter set of investigation areas, we are stepping towards one of the most significant methodological approaches that has ever been made on what can be included under the general phrase of internet studies: the clear difference between the Internet seen simply as a medium and the Internet seen in itself as an artefact (Hine 2000). Much of the research still goes on without clearly discriminating between these two critical approaches even though the discourse is indirectly shaped by such dichotomy. Furthermore, only the studies from the social science perspectives enlarge upon matters related to the cultural aspects stemming from the technological constraint or, the other way around, technical enabling, but more from methodological points of view and less from the contents itself. A clear distinction is strongly made especially on the side of media / communication studies which tend to shape their analyses from that side of research that factors in the features of Internet in relation to the co-generated content. A very small portion of studies on the other hand really focuses on the

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Internet technical features as preserved by the content itself and thus allowing an insight on how the cultural practices within the web are themselves products of the web.

Another significant shift in approaches after Hine's is that of Rogers'. Unlike Hine who talks about some methodological aspects borrowed from ethnography[3], Rogers postulates that the offline migration to the online, as digitised content, is pretty different from the 'digitally native' one (Rogers 2009: 1) and so, the research tools must be very clearly set apart by the origin of their birth. As a result, the author identifies the native methods and comments on how they may reshape the research.

Last but not least, another aspect that is paramount in painting the general theoretical framework picture for the following case study is the distinction between 'digital natives' and 'digital immigrants' (Prensky 2001). Originated as a discussion and taxonomy made in order to distinguish two different patterns of interaction as developed by students and their educators, this approach easily extends to all type of users and content-generator users. Although debated over (Thomas (ed.) 2011), Prensky's distinction comes in handy especially form the point of view of enculturating and acculturating the practices of the Internet (Stoicescu 2015a: 19).

All in one, the selection of literature review made in this research context which may be seen as scant, has the purpose of integrating the case presented here within a well-defined matrix of interpretation: the analysis of a case of 'digital immigrant' who may fully be assessed and a 'digital native' in his use of the Internet as an artefact, by using a mixture of digital and digitised methods of research.

2. The Scope of Research, Methodology and the 'Field'

I will further on try to analyse the hashtags integrated to the approach on folksonomies as digital methods in Roges' understanding, but at the same time viewing them as cultural products themselves in Hine's research tradition.

A few aspects are worth mentioning. The hashtag has spread across all sorts of social media from the original use in Internet Relay Charts (Bruns/ Moon *et. al.* 2016: 20). It has increasingly become a popular tool of indexing the web generated (and, more importantly, co-generated by tagging) content in computer-mediated communication. Additionally, the hashtag carries meaning in the sense that it has became a way of communicating information rather than simply indexing it and so, it has shaped into a bearer of meaningful content and not simply a punctuation symbol that modulates graphically what the

[3] Similarly, Kozinets 2010 resorts to borrowing methods from ethnography and marketing research in order to devise a methodological approach specific to what he defines as 'netnography'.

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individuals' intentions to communicate are. And finally, the hashtag can be interpreted as integrated in the cultural practice of online mediated interactions that possess their particular codes of practice and symbols.

In terms of methods, this empirical research is based on the ethnographical direct observation conducted on Facebook wall postings of two distinct profiles belonging the same person and the interviews carried out on the phone, WhatsApp, and Facebook chat. Such interviews were not conducted starting with a predefined set of questions, but with questions based on the particular hashtagged posts from the two profiles scrolled through while being involved in the discussions. Additionally, similar to the use of folksonomies as an automatic web-based research tool, the hashtag is also used for its capacity of placing together various types of content, enabling the researcher to see easily various kinds of postings automatically brought forth and so permitting the users' options in labelling the self-generated content.

The Facebook profile pages used are Mircea Ostoia's[4] personal one and that of *Casa cu flori*[5], the profile of a new retirement home owned by the same person. My research focuses on the wall postings on both profile pages starting with the date of the profile creation on Facebook and continuing until the moment this paper was written. The owner of these pages gave me the fully informed consent on using the information on these pages.



Fig. 1. The profile pages (these are available on the links in footnotes 2 and 3)

4 https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100004146798193&fref=ts
5 https://www.facebook.com/casacuflori.focsani/

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The reasons I chose this combination of pages is based on the fact that Mircea corresponds to a scientifically intriguing profile, of course not a singularity, of evolving from the status of immigrant, especially by birth[6], to that of a skills possessor blending undistinguishably in the group of digital natives. The 'accent' (Prensky 2001: 3) seen as an indication of past formation, is no longer perceived in Mircea's communication. Furthermore, he is also fairly active in posting although displaying a rather different strategy in terms of frequency, mainly due to the personal vs. business related nature of the two profile pages. Additionally, he is trained as a dentist who has his own practice, is keen on sports, diets, movies and travelling and he owns the business running the retirement home which makes him a valuable resource in the diversity of interests easily reflecting in the types of postings for which he uses the hashtags. Last, but with a crucial impact on the development of the interviews, Mircea is a close acquaintance which moulded his open answers and smoothened the communication flow, this preventing him from displaying reserves on giving the reasons or explanations for his online behaviour.

There is also another aspect that determined this choice of research material which is strongly linked to a particular transformation in Mircea's life. After being overweight and pretty much showing increasing signs of mobility issues around his 30th anniversary and, more importantly, after being diagnosed with ankylosing spondylitis after testing positive for the presence of HLA-B27 antigen, his life showcased a radical turn in fighting body mass problems by starting sports and controlling diets. This crucial life change impacted strongly on his new life style and, furthermore, on the identity building process as a need to self-reinvent[7], as he often says. This change will, as we shall later on see, explain a lot of his online activity and hashtag choices.

3. The Research on the Investigated 'Field'

The wall postings on the two profile pages differ a lot both in terms of quantity and in that of the content. On his personal profile page, the number of posts is on average about 45 a month, with a little more in September when during the first ten days of the month the number of postings has reached already 51. On the other hand, the *Casa cu flori* retirement home Facebook profile page is less abundant in posting. The reasons for this is, as Mircea says, mainly due to the different nature of the two profiles. The significantly reduced

[6] Mircea is a part of the 80s generation with a particular status due to dramatic turns in social and cultural formation, especially shaped by the aftermath of communism fall, the exposure to significantly altered pattern of communication and use of technology.

[7] When asked about his age, Mircea has a double system of reference, one to the biological age, the other counting the years after his life style change.

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number of postings on the retirement home page is attributable to the advertisement nature the profile has and it driven by 'the principle of frequency and not of abundancy'[8].

Before discussing the examples offered by the two profile pages it's worth saying that first, not all postings are accompanied by a hashtag, and, secondly that a very limited number of postings interconnect the two pages.

From the very beginning, a quick search on Mircea's profile pages discloses the use of the widely shared content tagging tools like #apple for the tech manufactures or #Mitre10cup for the rugby fans.

Apart from using random hashtags and already existing one, he developed a few of his own to serve his well-defined purposes. For the retirement home one can see #casadebatrani (old people house, my translation) and #casacuflori (house with flowers, my translation), for no other reasons than identifying the business and #healthupyourlife which has a totally different story and meaning.

#healthupyourlife is in fact, as Mircea says, his own branded hashtag identity sample, which he created in order to express the dramatic transformation in his life. He made up this line having in mind the British group Spice Girls which launched its second album in 1997 and which has *Spice up your life* among its tune titles. With obvious intertextual link to this, #healthupyourlife is, as he says, his birth to a reinvented life style, after the decision to fight against weight and health issues. Ascertaining it as his 'life motto', and accompanying his postings on various social media platform, for him it stands for 'health, diet, sport, mind, I mean what you learn and changes your life'. In fact, what Mircea told me during the interviews was long before stated on a Facebook posting from September 2015, which reads 'I like champions. I can't stand people who give up, who show no go and never try anything. #lași (cowards, my translation). For a period of time I was the type of *the last place person* and I never want to get back to that again. Each and every one of you evolve in your way in any field. Seek to do what you like and certainly you will succeed. The winner takes it all the loser's standing small (original ABBA lyrics in English, my note) #healthupyourlife'.

[8] All statements given as quotes are from the discussions with Mircea, especially from September 11th.

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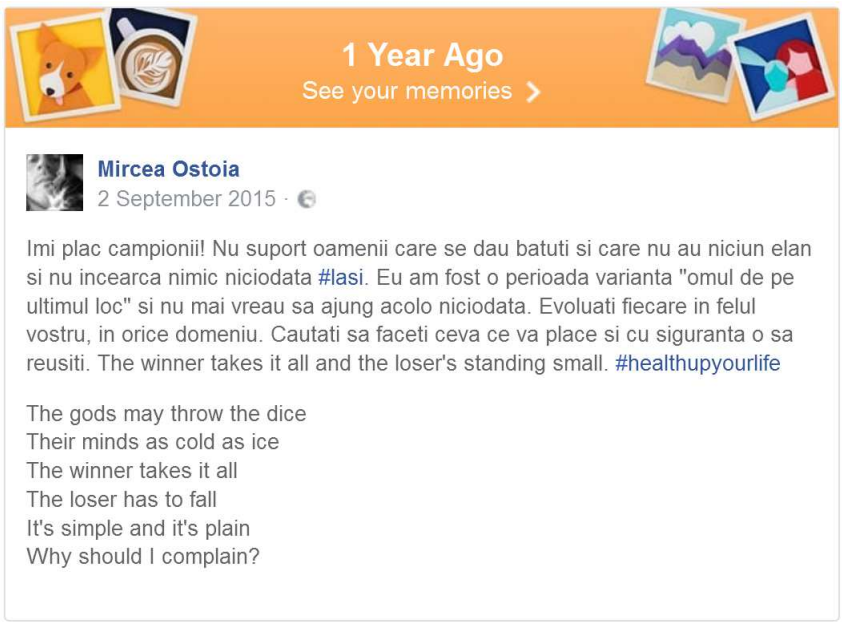


Fig. 2. Sample of #healthupyourlife (this is available on the link in footnote 2)

Using on the other hand this hashtag as a research tool in the sense of Roger's folksonomies retrieves a lot greater deal of posts all related to various aspects ranging from travel pictures to technology, from movies featuring characters that correspond to the struggle of succeeding to doctor's appointments and physiotherapy sessions, from food to sports equipment, from UNESCO world heritage sites pictures to the discovery of ancient relics. Such diversity of opinion is achieved in many ways. The first and the most commonly used is the self-produced text in which he comments an event, either personal or a repost, sometimes anchored in the political or social aspects of life from the generaly interest public sphere or, as this is often the case, in smaller private life events of friends on Facebook. Besides these texts, he also hashtags widely circulating memes or photos he takes showing various general or familiar snapshots.

Taking the observation one step further, the list the hashtag #healthupyourlife generates stretches over Mircea's personal posts and comprises a similar hashtagging systems used by another Facebook profile of a business active in health and fitness. Such retrieved results may on the other hand hinder easily the truth in Mircea's account on how he made this label. Yet, the story of how he build this formula, the connections he makes and, last but not least, his statement related to the above and the three year timeframe he has been using the hashtag function all on building credibility and legitimating the accidental joint use of such a tag.

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But Mircea's personal profile page does not contain only this hashtag, he also uses pre-existing ones to which he further adds meaning. I will use as an example here a text originally written on the personal profile page but shared on *Casa cu flori*, since the reasons behind this text are actually generated by his role in the retirement home. The text is too long to translate here, but the main idea is that what started as a real business tuned out to be a less lucrative one and the help the retired people need (or at least especially those suffering from a degenerative mental conditions like Parkinson's or Alzheimer's diseases) exceeds his expectations and fires up his frustrations related to the lack of care and concern the society displays towards such a category of people. Not speaking about material help, he states, among others 'You won't lose anything if you offer something out of the goodness of your hearts. #shareasmile. You will feel better by helping, by offering a day of your life. Only people working here and the residents' family offer support. The Doctors, who are extremely kind do so I won't wait in line and help me. Besides that NOBODY. #nimeni' (my translation, besides the first tag which was in English).



Fig. 3. #shreasmile and #nimeni page use (this is available on the link in footnote 3)

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Resorting again to folksonomies as a research tool in terms of the use of #shareasmile, the list generated recovers all sorts of posts ranging from marketing campaigns to social activism, from personal posts with an actual smile to posts with comical intended content. I asked him about the purpose of his post and the automatic associations the web makes and he replied that it is less important in what sequence of images or posts it appears as long as it reaches people and it disseminates snippets of information on a rather neglected problem of the Romanian society. This answer, on the other hand, proves the intentionality of his approach to hashtagging as a form of social activism.

The struggle to build awareness on the problem of people with such medical conditions is, on the other hand, perceived as a rather futile undertaking since the second hashtag he uses #nimeni (#nobody, my translation) may be understood as an outcry in deep frustration. Mircea enlarges upon the use of the sequence of capital letters writing and the hashtag as follows 'it's a cry, a shout, loud words, maybe somebody will eventually prove me wrong'.

Finally, a last hashtag category I intend to bring forth is represented by #stoma and #prune which he uses differently here on Facebook, but also on other social media sites which connect to other profile pages he created and uses a microblogging page on Tumblr, *Fun dental staff*, in the case of the first one, and on *Casa cu flori*, for the second of the hashtags. Although very different, the two hashtags are relevant from the same point of view of different meanings in different languages.

In the case of #stoma, to a Romanian speaker this hashtagged word may very easily lead to a short form of *stomatology* and the author of the hashtag himself recalls it being a rather commonly used word while being in medical school. Even today, he goes on, when talking to old medical school mates or other doctors they still use such a short form probably due to the ease of usage. He uses the hashtag on the web exclusively related to dentistry posts. But, looking at the list of similar postings the web retrieves on clicking the #stoma hashtag what strikes is the diversity of results stemming from the use in different languages with different meanings. Since I searched while being logged on to Facebook using my profile the first result is Mircea's and shows how he opens a bottle of fizzy drink using a dentistry extractor. The next results completely differently retrieve *public posts* using the English usage of this abbreviation which is that of ostomy and are mainly pictures of people having undergone surgery due to various conditions or adds of companies offering care products for post-surgery.

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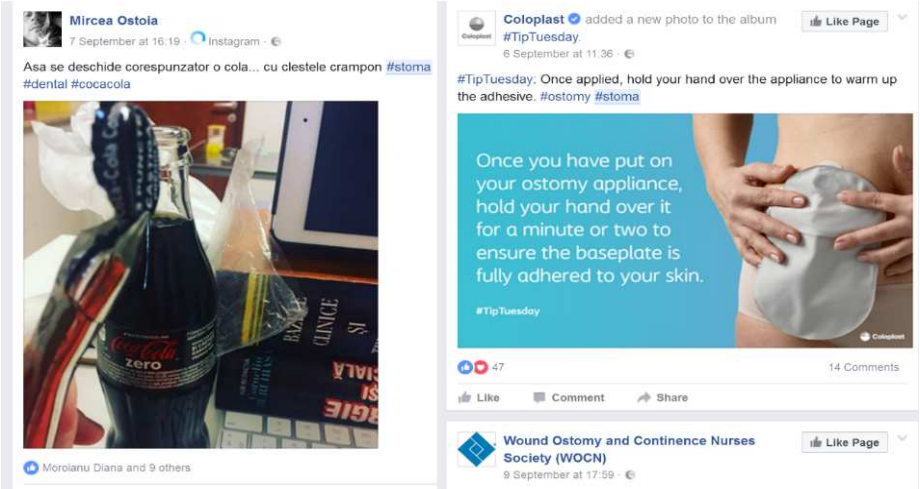


Fig. 4. Results for #stoma[9]

Similarly, the second search made using this time #prune displays various posts again differing depending on the language the post was made in. Such results range from the fruit (in the Romanian written posts) to the dry fruits as it means in English and the metaphorical meaning associated with unpleasant smiles, faces or people.

4. Findings and Interpretation of Results

Moving to the possible meanings such tagging may develop based on the presentation so far, we should take into account a few ideas stemming from the previous analyses on this matter.

First, the various samples of hashtagged labels on Mircea's posts fall under the category of 'flat folksonomies' (Yoo/Choi *et al.* 2013: 594) which enable content generating users to freely encode their personal views under the hashtags, without agreeing or disagreeing with the previous thoughts encoded systems. Such encoding may be of at least two various natures, namely a completely innovative label (or at least thought to be innovative by the user who generates the content) or the use of a predefined one which may very easily incorporate a very diverse set of meanings. This is due, as the cited authors say, to a double dependence of folksonomies on people who give particular subjective meaning to the post and on the machine which processes such in

[9] https://www.facebook.com/search/top/[2000]?q=%23stoma%20, accessed on September 9th, 2016.

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terms of uniting the tags together based on the physical letter coding system. All in one, the retrieval of hashtagged material as seen from the above described flat folksonomies is shaped on algorithms detecting exclusively strings of letters and no semantic correlations.

Judging from the point of the user generating content, the hashtaggings of both types using innovative or pre-defined labels may be understood as a way people view the realities they tag pretty similarly to a process of turning the event into fiction in an undeliberate automatic process of converting what is seen or said into representation of the image seen or the text read or heard.

From this point of view of the combination between automated retrieval of information in web searches and the meaning attached by individual users to the hashtag itself I consider the interpretation of hashtag in the context of communication and building a cultural online practice should be viewed from a double perspective. First, the hashtag is more a practice of encoding which showcases a particular individual view on a matter, either by novelty or by a sense of conformity to the already established classes of meaning. This practice is strongly correlative and draws pretty much on the ability of the individual user to partake in the process of content co-generation. Second, viewed from the perspective of automatic research tool, the hashtags displace the interest from the reasons, meaning, and creation to that of the results in the form of compiling list which by their very nature, are fundamentally diverse.

Moreover, a semantic approach to the hashtag symbol, one should first integrate it in the wider class of symbols the language of the internet consists of. Bruns/Mood *et al.* (2016: 21) consider the symbol of tagging as similar to emoticons and emojis in terms of their 'semiotic charge'.

Although there is much truth behind this identification, I think matters are by far more complicated. To begin with, unlike the case of the emoticons, the semantics of the hashtag must be sought of dually in the sign (#) and in the string of characters that follows. Simply seen as a sign, a tag contains intrinsic ideas of traceability and ease of search (Drüeke/Zobl 2016) and, furthermore, it must also be seen as combination of an image and a link thus borrowing the features of both, namely being visual (here similar to an emoticon or its later sibling symbol the emoji) and leading to non-linear ways of reading in Ingwersen (1998) approach. To this end, the hashtags interpretation draws extensively on the features of a hyperlink since they represent a particular later development of it.

Not very much can be added to the idea of rethinking reading as more that a left to right letter identification process. But when it comes to the hashtag, the function to discontinue the linear reading is doubled by the possibility of linking to more than the simple other text or image the previous forms of links managed to do. The hashtag yet complicates matters in the sense of associations. Not only does it link to another content, but the principle of subjective linking

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goes beyond the possibility of paring up in Cartesian products, similarly to a definition of function from maths. The elements from the set functioning as output automatically become retrievable and the similar results are displayed together. The results seen this way enable the researcher to investigate back to understand the very rationale that was the basis of pairing up in the first place and so the cultural reasons driving the function of associative nature of hashtagging.

In addition, when it comes to the visual value of the symbol, it really must be checked against the features of the emoticon. This last one benefited from various and copious interpretations, mainly from the perspectives of a distinct type of language in between oral and written forms or made up of these two types together (Crystal 2001, 2005). The emoticon interpretation history identified it with a punctuation sign (Crystal 2001), a compensatory tool for the lack of non-verbal features of communication (Skovholt/Grønning/Kankaanrata 2014), standardised emotion indicator (Dresner/ Herring 2010) or indexical sign for the digital language (Stoicescu 2015b).

Besides the features of indexical sign, not much can be said about the common features of the two components of the digital language it does not bring forth emotion, nor does it add the missing cues in mediated asynchronous communication. The # symbol may be interpreted more in terms of anticipatory value which leads to the idea of announcing the beginning of a non-linear text and the possibility of interlinking or cross-referencing that particular text to others which various content generators might have previously ushered in.

Finally, the matter of integrating the hashtag and the hashtagging in the cultural practice of the digital individual brings about, besides the idea of strict web contextualisation, the possibility of easing up connectivity and furthermore, like in the examples of widely used and known tags like #apple or #Mitre10cup creating by using such hashtags a sense of social media-based community belonging (Bruns/Stieglitz 2012, Bruns/Moon *et. al.* 2016, Drüeke/Zobl 2016).

On the other hand, since the usage examples of hashtagging were taken from Facebook, not particularly relevant for such practice, it is necessary to combine some specific tools this platform offers in order to identity a particular cultural practice to be found on the web social interaction, namely the status building and consolidation. When I asked Mircea how he felt about others using his #healthupyoulife motto he answered that ‘of course I would like to be used. It would be like retwitts for me. I really follow that’. The substitute for status building on Facebook would be, besides the shares which are similar, the number of likes receives for a post that integrated hashtagging as a practice of dissemination.

4. Conclusions

Of course, the analysis on the complex cultural practice of tagging as of the cultural practice contextualised to the Internet would take much more space to be

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dealt with. The case study here and the interpretation of this rather narrow field of investigation is rather a general, but refocuses the idea of tagging on Facebook.

As seen up so far, the Facebook hashtag may be used as a research tool leading to a plethora of results very diverse in nature, mainly due to the lack of semantics associated to the string of characters in the retrieval process. Leaving aside the cases of language difference as seen before, the returned list of such tool may be significant in terms of exploring the diversity of views on the alleged by same matter. This leads to questions related to matters of indexing which might as well be translated in terms of various fictions on the same reference. It is more a question of systems of encoding information under a certain hashtag rather than a problem of lack of semantic. Even if the web semantic ontologies will be taken into account besides the vocabulary of the tagging, this will not suffice since the cultural codes used might still play a key role in diversity. Finally, the information communication feature by means of adhesion to a certain mediated community legitimates the process of integrating hashtagging in the cultural practices of online interactions.

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