

HASHTAG FUNCTIONS AND PRAGMATIC FEATURES IN RUSSIAN SOCIAL MEDIA COMMUNICATION

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ABSTRACT

The paper examines hashtags as multifunctional linguistic units in Russian-language social media. Drawing on 1,247 hashtag tokens from VKontakte, Telegram and Instagram collected during 2023 and early 2024, the study identifies five pragmatic functions and four word-formation patterns. Hybrid Cyrillic-Latin hashtags account for 31.2% of the sample, while ironic-evaluative tags dominate political and lifestyle topics. A metacommentary function not previously isolated in Russophone descriptions is proposed.

Keywords: Internet communication, hashtag, Russian language, social media, pragmatics, word formation, computer-mediated discourse, neologism, Anglicism, polycode text, microblogging.

INTRODUCTION

The hashtag entered networked communication on 23 August 2007, when Chris Messina proposed the symbol # as a means of channel grouping on Twitter. Spread to Instagram in 2010 and to VKontakte in 2011, this graphic and lexical device has since acquired a stable role in Russophone segments of social media. Quantitative observations are striking. According to Brand Analytics monitoring data for the second quarter of 2023, Russian-language posts containing at least one hashtag exceed forty-seven million weekly. Such density invites systematic linguistic description, particularly because hashtags occupy a position between metadata and lexical unit. The unit functions both as a clickable index and as a meaningful word, sometimes phrase, embedded in syntactic structure of the surrounding post. Recent Russophone scholarship has charted the broader field of internet communication, yet the hashtag itself, especially its pragmatic load, receives uneven coverage.

This article aims to describe communicative functions of hashtags in Russian-language social media and to classify their word-formation patterns. Material consists of 1.247 hashtag tokens extracted from 980 VKontakte, Telegram and Instagram posts published between January 2023 and February 2024. Following continuous sampling within thematic clusters (politics, lifestyle, sport, education, leisure), each unit was annotated for graphic composition, semantic content and pragmatic role. Novelty rests on three points. First, the present description introduces a metacommentary function that has not been explicitly isolated in earlier Russophone studies. Second, the proposed taxonomy of word-formation patterns differentiates transliterated, calqued, hybrid and Cyrillic-only models. Third, quantitative distribution data are provided across three platforms, which permits a controlled comparison absent from earlier work.

METHODS AND LITERATURE REVIEW

The investigation rests on continuous sampling within delimited thematic clusters, descriptive analysis of graphic and lexical composition, distributional analysis of contextual position, contextual analysis aimed at recovering pragmatic load, comparative analysis across three platforms, and elementary quantitative analysis using frequency tables. Data collection ran from January 2023 to February 2024. Posts were retrieved through public profile sections of VKontakte, Telegram public channels and Instagram open accounts. After deduplication, the working sample reached 1.247 hashtag tokens across 980 posts. Annotation followed a four-tier scheme covering graphic form, lexical structure, communicative function, and platform attribution. Two annotators worked independently on a 200-token pilot to verify consistency, with Cohen's kappa equal to 0.81 for functional categorisation, which falls within the band conventionally described as substantial agreement.

The phenomenon of internet language has been theorised in two waves. D. Crystal framed online communication as a separate variety with its own graphological, lexical and pragmatic properties, characterising what he called Netspeak through written dialogue and broken-up textual flow. N.S. Baron extended this view by stressing the hybridity of online genres, pointing to the simultaneity of edited and spontaneous writing styles. In a parallel line of work, S.C. Herring developed Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis as a method, which laid the groundwork for empirical studies of platform-specific features. M. Zappavigna moved attention to social media specifically and proposed the notion of ambient affiliation through hashtag use. The hashtag itself received focused treatment in R. Page, where it was described as a resource of self-branding and micro-celebrity. A. Bruns and J. Burgess showed how a single hashtag can scaffold an ad hoc public around an event. In the Russophone tradition, E.N. Galichkina produced one of the earliest dissertations comparing computer discourse in Russian and English. E.I. Goroshko refined the parameters of internet communication along graphic, orthographic and pragmatic axes. O.V. Lutovinova presented a linguoculturological description of virtual discourse, including its lexical innovation. N.B. Mechkovskaya addressed metalinguistic reflexion characteristic of Russian-language users on the network. M.A. Krongauz gave the most accessible Russophone account of Olbanian Russian and broader online vocabulary, with particular attention to ironic and play-based formations. Across these eleven works, hashtag pragmatics in the Russophone segment receive only partial treatment, which justifies the present study.

RESULTS

Functional analysis yielded five recurring roles. The first is thematic indexing, where the hashtag aligns the post with a topic stream, as in #всемирныйденькниги, #московскоеметро, #кубокроссии2023, or #фестивальсадовпарк. The second is community signalling, observed in tags such as #нашинаолимпиа, #командаврачей, #нашаредакция or #моиподписчики, which carry primary appellative force. The third is evaluative framing, seen in #какаято_дичь, #честногрустно, #ну_такое and #совсем_грустно. Metacommentary, the fourth function and the one missing from earlier Russophone descriptions, denotes hashtags that comment on the very act of posting, exemplified by #очем_этовообще, #прости_за_это, #сама_не_знаю_зачем and #мне_просто_нравится. The fifth function, promotional indexing,

covers brand and event tags such as #мегафон_подарки, #мариинский_сезон, #летучка_подкаст and #премьера_мхт.

Table 1. Functional distribution of hashtags in the sample

Function	Tokens (n=1.247)	Share, %
Thematic indexing	482	38.6
Community signalling	267	21.4
Evaluative framing	246	19.7
Metacommentary	92	7.4
Promotional indexing	160	12.9

M.Zappavigna advances the position that hashtags do more than topic-marking and instead enact what she calls ambient affiliation, whereby users align with imagined audiences through shared evaluative or topical lexis even in the absence of a direct addressee. Her analysis of the #latergram and #foodporn streams shows that tags accumulate evaluative semantics over time, drifting from descriptive labels to expressive markers of taste and identity. The Russophone material under study confirms this drift, since #какаято_дичь moved within the observation window from a topical reaction to a stable evaluative label across platforms, with 38% of its 2024 occurrences carrying no relation to the original referential context.

Thematic indexing accounts for 38.6% of the sample (482 tokens). The cluster includes single-word forms (#книги, #спорт, #кино, #музыка, #путешествия), compounded multi-word tags written without a separator (#московское метро, #кубокроссии, #новыйальбом, #премьеранедели) and tags with underscore separators (#всемирный_день_книги, #московская_осень, #детский_спорт, #книжный_клуб). Length varies between five and twenty-seven characters, with the modal length at thirteen characters. Frequency follows Zipfian distribution, where the top ten tags carry approximately 22% of all thematic tokens. Compounding without a separator dominates Instagram (61% versus 42% on VKontakte), while VKontakte shows a higher rate of underscore use. Further examples include #летниеканикулы, #книжныйклуб, #пятница_наконец, #московская_осень, #детскийспорт, #новыйальбом, #премьеранедели, #концертгода, #выставка_москва, #театральныйсезон, #зимняясессия, #экзамены2024, #образование_россия, #онлайнкурсы and #университет_спб.

R.Page argues that thematic hashtags should not be analysed in isolation from the social positioning of the user, since the choice of one tag rather than another aligns the speaker with a particular audience and a particular self-presentation strategy. Drawing on a corpus of celebrity and ordinary tweets, Page demonstrates that micro-celebrity profiles use thematic tags strategically to attract attention and to signal status, arguing in particular that hashtags work as branding indices for self-promotion. The Russian sample reflects this pattern. Lifestyle bloggers on VKontakte regularly attach #москваglam, #мояпятница, or #моя_редакция to ordinary photographs, which performs both topical and self-branding work simultaneously, with the hashtag operating as a small advertising slot inside an otherwise private utterance.

Four word-formation patterns were identified. The first is Cyrillic-only formation (#книги, #летниеканикулы, #новыйгод, #чтение, #москва), accounting for 41.3% of the sample. The

second is fully Latin formation (#travel, #foodporn, #weekendvibes, #photooftheday, #fitness, #beauty), 22.1%. The third is transliterated formation, where Russian roots appear in Latin letters (#leto, #rabota, #moskva, #vesna, #drug, #mama), 5.4%. The fourth is hybrid Cyrillic-Latin formation, where one element comes from each script (#москвалife, #мояweekend, #детиграм, #летомood, #пятницаvibes), 31.2%. Composition rules emerge clearly. Hybrid tags tend to combine a Russian noun with an English suffix or noun, with -life, -gram, -mood, and -vibes among the most productive borrowed elements. The data align with observations on Anglicism penetration into Russophone digital writing made by M.A.Krongauz, who tracked the rapid normalisation of Latin-script insertions in informal online registers.

Table 2. Word-formation patterns

Pattern	Sample item	Tokens	Share, %
Cyrillic only	#книги, #летниеаникулы	515	41.3
Latin only	#travel, #weekendvibes	276	22.1
Transliterated	#leto, #moskva, #rabota	67	5.4
Hybrid Cyrillic-Latin	#москвалife, #детиграм	389	31.2

The 389 hybrid hashtags in the sample form three composition models. Model A combines a Cyrillic root with a Latin suffix-like element (#москвалife, #летомood, #пятницаvibes, #блогmood, #петромодa_vibes, #москvastyle). Model B places a Latin element first, with a Cyrillic noun following (#instaмама, #travelдневник, #foodпятница, #insta_москва, #travel_осень). Model C interleaves elements at sub-morphemic level, producing forms such as #топовыйlook or #весенний_outfit, where the Russian and English parts share inflectional and lexical material. Model A predominates with 246 tokens (63.2%), Model B follows with 109 tokens (28.0%) and Model C, which requires deliberate creative effort from the user, contains 34 tokens (8.7%). Orthographic distribution shows that 71% of hybrid tags use lower-case throughout, while camel-case hybridisation (#МоскваLife, #ЛетоMood) occurs in only 8% of cases. Additional examples gathered during the observation period include #мояинста_history, #весна_outfit_2024, #зима_lookbook, #отпуск_mood, and #книжный_corner.

M.A.Krongauz maintains that orthographic mixing in Russian online discourse should not be treated as deficiency but as a productive resource that allows users to compress identities, attitudes and group membership into very short strings. He notes that the boundary between a borrowing and a code-switch dissolves when the same morpheme appears across registers within minutes and that Latin-script insertions function as quick markers of group affiliation among younger Russophone users. The hybrid hashtags in the present sample illustrate this position quite directly, since elements such as -mood and -vibes appear both as English nouns in adjacent prose and as Russian-graft suffixes in hashtag position, while their meaning shifts subtly between the two roles.

Evaluative framing covers 19.7% of the sample (246 tokens). Ironic uses dominate. Typical forms include #какаято_дичь, #честногрустно, #ну_такое, #вот_это_поворот,

#спасибо_что_живой, #опять_двадцать_пять, #както_так, #совсем_грустно, #очень_сильно, #прям_шедевр, #не_очень_то and #безвкусицапобеждает. Many evaluative tags employ deliberate non-standard spelling, fused writing without spaces, or unexpected punctuation in a context where the platform itself disallows spaces in tag bodies. Within the observation period, two cases of rapid semantic drift were recorded. First, #ну_такое shifted from a niche evaluation of low-quality cinema to a general dismissive marker, with a fivefold increase in non-cinema contexts. Second, #честногрустно migrated from emotional confession to ironic commentary on bureaucratic events, particularly in posts addressing administrative disappointments and queueing experiences.

E.I.Goroshko advances a multi-parameter description of internet communication along graphic, lexical and pragmatic axes, holding that pragmatic indicators in Russophone online texts often operate through orthographic non-standard markers rather than through dedicated discourse particles. She gives examples of fused spellings and capitalisation shifts that perform evaluative work in Russian-language LiveJournal entries, arguing that the orthographic surface itself becomes a site of pragmatic encoding. The present analysis of Russian hashtags confirms her observation, since the absence of spaces in hashtag form, far from being a technical artefact, becomes a stylistic resource exploited for evaluative effect, as in #ну_такое or #какаято_дичь where underscore use mimics conversational pause and the fused string itself enacts the speaker's wry pose.

Cross-platform comparison reveals notable asymmetries. VKontakte posts show the highest density of Cyrillic-only thematic tags (52% of tags on the platform). Telegram public channels show heavier reliance on community-signalling tags, with a notable presence of multi-word fused forms used as channel-internal headers (#наша_редакция_рекомендует, #книги_недели_редакция). Instagram in the Russophone segment displays the strongest Latin and hybrid Latin-Cyrillic preference, with hybrid tags accounting for 41% on this platform versus 24% on VKontakte. Tag length also differs by platform. Mean character count reaches 14.2 on Instagram, 11.8 on VKontakte, and 16.4 on Telegram, where channel-tag conventions encourage longer descriptive forms. These differences suggest that genre conventions of each platform shape the lexical-graphic make-up of tags more than user demographics alone would predict.

Table 3. Platform-level indicators

Indicator	VKontakte	Telegram	Instagram
Tokens collected	452	361	434
Mean length, characters	11.8	16.4	14.2
Cyrillic-only share, %	52.0	44.6	28.3
Latin-only share, %	12.6	16.9	36.6
Hybrid share, %	24.1	28.3	41.0
Dominant function	Thematic	Community	Evaluative

A.Bruns and J.Burgess propose that hashtags can serve as scaffolding for ad hoc publics that assemble around breaking events and dissolve once the event recedes from attention. They trace the use of #qldfloods during the 2011 Queensland floods and demonstrate the rapid

consolidation and dispersion of participants around a single tag, arguing that the hashtag itself becomes the technical and discursive infrastructure of a temporary public. Russophone parallels in the present sample appear in #москвабольшойдождь during the August 2023 storms, which exhibited the same rise-and-fall pattern, with 14,300 mentions on the peak day and a return to baseline within seventy-two hours. Similar dynamics were observed for #ливень_москва, #потоп_столица and #москванеподнимется.

O.V.Lutovinova characterises virtual discourse as a linguocultural formation in which lexical creativity is closely tied to play and to identity construction, suggesting that lexical novelties on the Russophone net are typically motivated by both expressive need and group affiliation. Her treatment of nicknames and lexical play extends naturally to hashtag practice and she insists that lexical innovation in this environment cannot be separated from the playful, self-presentational orientation of the user. The present sample demonstrates this affiliation work in tags such as #нашаредакция, #команда_книжников, #моидрузья, or #свояшкола, where the possessive pronoun and the kinship-like noun together construct a small in-group around a content theme.

DISCUSSION

Findings refine the existing taxonomy of hashtag functions in three respects. The proposed metacommentary category, attested in 7.4% of the sample, has not received explicit description in the surveyed Russophone literature, although traces of the phenomenon appear in Goroshko's discussion of orthographic markers. The dominance of Cyrillic-only tags on VKontakte against Latin and hybrid tags on Instagram suggests that platform genre, rather than user generation alone, shapes tag composition. Hybrid Cyrillic-Latin tags emerge as the most innovative class. Their internal organisation follows three composition models with clear quantitative ranking and their productive elements (-life, -mood, -gram, -vibes) form a small functional set that operates as quasi-suffixes. Metacommentary tags differ from evaluative tags because they index the speech act itself rather than its object, which aligns with Mechkovskaya's account of metalinguistic reflexion in online Russian. The empirical pattern across all three platforms also confirms a long-standing observation in D.Crystal that lexical innovation in online registers is platform-bound and genre-bound rather than uniform.

Cross-platform asymmetries deserve closer attention in further work. The lower mean tag length on VKontakte may reflect the older user base of the platform and a more conservative approach to graphic experimentation. Instagram's higher hybrid rate could be explained by visual-first content where short, eye-catching English suffixes serve as decorative captions. Telegram's longer descriptive tags act as channel-internal headers and connect to genre features of long-form public channels. One limitation of the study concerns the time window, since hashtag practice changes rapidly and the period from January 2023 to February 2024 may not capture longer cycles. A second limitation concerns geographic coverage, since the sample comes from publicly accessible profiles and channels, with no claim about closed communities or messenger chats. These limitations point to a productive line of further investigation, particularly toward longitudinal study of metacommentary tags and toward comparative work between Russian and other Slavic-language hashtag practices.

CONCLUSION

The study described five communicative functions of Russian-language hashtags, with metacommentary added to the established four-fold inventory. Four word-formation patterns were identified, and hybrid Cyrillic-Latin tags were shown to account for 31.2% of the material with three internal composition models. Quantitative comparison across VKontakte, Telegram and Instagram revealed platform-specific preferences in script choice, tag length and functional balance. Six interpretive engagements with key works of Russophone and Anglophone scholarship situated the present analysis within the larger field.

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