

HASHTAGS AS MEANING TOOLS GEN Z LANGUAGE ON INSTAGRAM 2025: A STUDY OF SYSTEMIC FUNCTIONAL LINGUISTICS

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ABSTRACT

The study explores the function of hashtags as resources for meaning construction within Generation Z's Instagram discourse, employing the framework of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). Contrary to prior research that primarily conceptualizes hashtags as technical or organizational devices, this investigation focuses on their linguistic roles in conveying ideational, interpersonal, and textual meanings. Utilizing a qualitative descriptive design and discourse analysis, the study analyzes 120 Instagram captions authored by Gen Z users, encompassing 356 hashtags collected from January to March 2025. An SFL-based coding scheme targeting the three metafunctions guided the data analysis. Results indicate that hashtags contribute substantially across all metafunctions. Ideational meaning predominates (45.5%), with hashtags functioning as condensed representations of experience via experiential labels, circumstantial elements, and abstract notions. Interpersonal meaning constitutes 31.5% of the data, where hashtags articulate stance, affect, and social positioning, frequently through evaluative and emotive expressions. Textual meaning accounts for 23.0%, with hashtags acting as thematic signals, organizers of discourse, and devices linking intertextual elements. Notably, 39.9% of hashtags exhibit multifunctionality by simultaneously fulfilling more than one metafunction. These outcomes underscore that hashtags operate as integral elements within digital discourse, contributing to meaning-making processes that extend beyond conventional clause-based structures. This study broadens the application of SFL by illustrating how non-clausal features like hashtags can effectively perform metafunctional roles in contemporary social media communication. The findings call attention to the importance of incorporating platform-specific features into linguistic analyses to better capture meaning construction in digital environments.

Keywords: *Digital discourse, gen Z language, hashtags, systemic functional linguistics.*

INTRODUCTION

Digital tools have led to constant change, especially on the internet, in how people talk. As words roam the landscape of social networks, they reconfigure rapidly — according to who people are and what they create and how they bond. A big area where this is obvious? Instagram. Younger users, especially members of Gen Z — those born after 1996 — are often at the forefront of emerging ways of speaking there. Writing here isn't just letters on a screen — it's a melange of images, emojis, captions and even silence in between posts. A combination that creates a form of messaging richer than what the old video and text format ever offered (Jewitt & Kress, 2010).

Generation Z—people born from the mid-1990s to the early 2010s—talk online in ways that stand out. Growing up with tech all around them, their style just feels loose and creative.

It's a mix that keeps changing. Scroll through Instagram or TikTok and you spot it right away: new words, shortcuts, random symbols, even quirky markers for what they want to talk about. At first, all this might seem like they're just messing around or being casual. But really, this approach connects them, marks who's "in," and shapes how others see them (Androutsopoulos, 2014; Crystal, 2011). Previous research on digital language mostly concentrated on aspects such as emerging slang, code-switching, and overarching themes regarding user interactions and the utilization of pictures and sound (Barton & Lee, 2013; Seargeant & Tagg, 2014). That research gives us useful insights into online communication, but it often overlooks some important details—hashtags, for example. You see hashtags everywhere now: a “#” followed by a word or phrase. At first, they were just a sorting tool to help people find posts more easily. Now, though, they do a lot more. Hashtags can shape conversations, let people voice opinions, and even influence how others see them online (Zappavigna, 2015; Scott, 2015).

Still, researchers tend to miss how hashtags shape language itself. Most look at them through numbers or platform quirks, but that approach skips the bigger picture—how people use hashtags to express themselves. Instead of treating hashtags as part of real conversation, studies often get caught up in where they come from or what they look like. If we don't start paying attention to how hashtags fit into everyday communication, we end up with only half the story.

When you look at language through Systemic Functional Linguistics, it turns into more than just words or rules—it's something people use to make meaning in society (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). Instead of seeing speech or writing as a bunch of structures, this approach says every time we speak or write, we're doing three things at once: we're shaping ideas, building relationships, and organizing the flow of information. One part gets at how we understand the world; another shows our attitudes or feelings as we interact, and the last one makes sure what we say fits together and makes sense.

This flexibility is why researchers study everything from textbooks and news stories to how people connect online with this framework (Eggins, 2004; Thompson, 2013). At first, people just used it for spoken and printed texts, but now it's used to figure out how communication shifts in digital spaces, where things change fast. Systemic Functional Linguistics started out focusing on grammar, but now it's become a way to uncover why people choose certain words and what purposes their language serves. It's not stuck in one field—it goes wherever people use language to make meaning together.

Most research using systemic functional linguistics on social media tends to focus on captions, comments, or mixed-media content. Hashtags usually get ignored as if they're just add-ons, not worth much attention. But that's a big oversight, especially since young people use hashtags constantly and those little tags steer how ideas spread on Instagram. Honestly, hashtags often carry the main point of a post. They pack a lot into a few words: someone's opinion, a take on a topic, or a way to connect posts together. They aren't just extra — they get right to the heart of what someone is trying to say.

Hashtags are more than just labels online—they're how people show who they are and what they care about. When someone picks a hashtag, they're not just picking a word. They're saying, “This is my crowd,” or “This is where I stand.” You see a lot of this with Gen Z, since they live so much of their lives online. Hashtags become shortcuts to identity and a quick way to find others who feel the same. Emotions fly from post to post, and it's not just about what people say—it's about the mood and energy that ripple through entire groups, just like Papacharissi (2015) describes with affective publics. It's the feeling behind the words that really connects everyone.

Instagram doesn't just toss hashtags onto a blank slate. The platform throws together images, words, and little icons that all work together, giving hashtags richer meaning than

they'd carry by themselves. It's the mix—photos, captions, emojis—where meaning really grows, which lines up with what multimodal theory says: communication leans on a bunch of signs at the same time (Kress, 2010; O'Halloran, 2008). Still, a lot of researchers act like hashtags exist in a vacuum, treating them as separate add-ons instead of pieces connected to the bigger picture.

Here's something we can't ignore we just don't have enough new research on how Gen Z talks. These days, hashtags aren't just about organizing posts—they're full of inside jokes, sarcasm, emotions, and even opinions. The way people use them shifts all the time, so if you want to understand what's going on, you need updated studies. What feels relevant right now might disappear by next year.

So, what's been missing until now is a closer look at hashtags—not just as simple labels, but as tools for building meaning. This work dives into how hashtags shape ideas, relationships, and the overall structure of Gen Z's Instagram posts, all through the lens of Systemic Functional Linguistics. It also digs into how these little markers help people craft their identities online. As a result, you get a newer perspective on how younger folks manage the way they present themselves across different digital spaces.

When we put hashtags front and center instead of treating them like afterthoughts, we give systemic functional linguistics a real shot at making sense in online spaces. Looking through this lens, Gen Z speech gets a lot more interesting—there's more happening than most folks notice in day-to-day chatter. By showing how these older frameworks fit into how people use language now, the work doesn't toss out the classics. It just shifts how we use them. The result isn't a break with the past, but a fresh way to see established ideas in action today.

Although research on digital discourse and social media communication has expanded, notable gaps persist. Prior investigations have tended to concentrate on captions, comments, or multimodal interactions, while hashtags are frequently regarded as peripheral or technical features rather than as significant linguistic tools. Existing studies often approach hashtags from functional or algorithmic standpoints, focusing on aspects such as visibility, categorization, or network dynamics, with comparatively limited exploration of their role in constructing meaning. Within linguistic scholarship—particularly frameworks based on Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL)—analyses have predominantly targeted clause-level structures, leaving elements outside the clause, including hashtags, insufficiently examined. Additionally, much of the hashtag research has centered on platforms like Twitter, whereas Instagram, where hashtags serve more prominently in personal expression and identity formation among Generation Z users, has received comparatively little attention.

In response to these limitations, the current study advances the field by treating hashtags as integral semantic resources through the lens of SFL. It adopts a comprehensive metafunctional approach—addressing ideational, interpersonal, and textual dimensions—to analyze hashtags within Instagram captions produced by Generation Z, thereby extending SFL's application beyond its conventional concentration on clauses. This investigation further reconceptualizes hashtags as non-clausal units capable of simultaneously enacting multiple metafunctions. By integrating qualitative discourse analysis with quantitative distributional data, the study offers a systematic and empirically substantiated account of hashtag functions in contemporary digital communication. Consequently, it contributes to the theoretical development of SFL in online environments and enriches understanding of the linguistic behaviors' characteristic of Generation Z social media users. Here are the main questions guiding this work: 1) How do hashtags express ideational meaning in Gen Z Instagram captions? 2) How do hashtags shape interpersonal meaning between the writer and their followers in these captions? 3) How do hashtags help textual organization in Gen Z Instagram captions?

Systemic Functional Linguistics in Digital Discourse

M.A.K. Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics, or SFL, looks at language as something people actively shape based on what they're doing and who they're with. Meaning isn't just built from set rules—it's shaped by the choices folks make in real-life situations, guided by the context and why they're communicating in the first place (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). Grammar, from this view, isn't a bunch of rules to memorize. It's more like a toolkit for making sense together.

Systemic Functional Linguistics is catching on to study how people express themselves online, especially on the apps and sites we all use every day. Online communication isn't just about words anymore; it's full of movement, back-and-forth, and all sorts of layered signals. Meaning comes through pictures, emojis, and even the buttons and layouts each platform throws at you — not just the text itself. Kress and Jewitt have both pointed out that when we interact online, we pull from all kinds of sign systems at the same time, which means you need tools that can dig into how everything works together. Sure, words still matter, but now they're surrounded by design tweaks, digital gestures, timing changes, and odd little formatting habits that play a part in what we're really saying.

Scholars often turn to SFL because it helps break down how we communicate across different modes, especially online. Look at something like Instagram. People connect there, but not mainly through direct messages. Instead, meaning shows up through gestures, images, tags—those things carry just as much weight, sometimes even more, than actual words. Zappavigna (2018) calls this “ambient affiliation,” where people bond by echoing certain styles or ways of speaking.

It's like, behind every emoji, like, or repost, there's often an unspoken kind of alignment. It's not dialogue that binds people, but design—a visual language made up of captions, hashtags, and repeated formats. What it means to “connect” shifts too. It's not just about replying or chatting; it's about being visible. You belong because you use the same memes, copy the trending poses, or remix someone else's caption. The conversation keeps going, but it's happening through likes, patterns, and all those little echoes across dozens of different profiles.

Even though SFL shows a lot of promise for studying digital conversations, people haven't really pushed it that far yet. Most studies stick to the basics—captions, replies, sometimes how images work with text. But features that are unique to these platforms, like hashtags, usually get ignored. They end up treated like add-ons, just extra details, not the building blocks that shape the way people communicate online.

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Digital conversations are changing the way we think about language. Everything's quick—emojis, hashtags, little shorthand expressions—they're small but carry a surprising punch. Each one lands differently depending on where and when you use it. That leaves SFL (Systemic Functional Linguistics) with a lot of catching up to do if it wants to keep making sense of how people really communicate online.

Sure, SFL gives us solid tools to figure out what people mean when they talk, but it doesn't fully cover what's happening in online spaces, especially with things like hashtags. That's where this research comes in. I'm looking at hashtags as real pieces of language and putting them under SFL's microscope, treating them seriously to see what we might be missing.

Gen Z Language in Digital Contexts

People born from the mid-90s to early 2010s grew up right in the middle of the smartphone and social media boom. That's shaped the way they talk and write more than anything else. Their language is always shifting, picking up bits from everywhere, and new words or styles pop up all the time—just like internet culture, which never really sits still (Tagliamonte, 2016).

Researchers looking at how Gen Z talks online notice one big thing: it's all about creativity, being casual, and showing off who you are. Online conversations move fast, so young people blend regular words with memes, abbreviations, emojis, different languages, and hashtags (Androutsopoulos, 2014; Crystal, 2011). This mix makes chatting quicker but keeps their style and emotions front and center. Getting the point across fast matters but being unique and sharing a vibe does too.

Gen Z's way of talking really highlights how much they care about connecting with each other. It's not just about sharing information—they toss in their feelings, opinions, and you can sense the closeness in their words. This lines up with something from systemic functional linguistics: when people speak, they're building relationships, not just passing on facts. You'll see lots of jokes, over-the-top comments, or playful sarcasm—that's all over Gen Z's chats. But honestly, if you want to get what they're saying, you need to be in on their memes, references, or whatever trend they're riffing on. Otherwise, you miss half the conversation.

Gen Z tends to rely on context when they talk—they get their point across not just with words, but with inside jokes, pop culture nods, or whatever's trending online. Instead of spelling things out directly, they often use memes, viral references, or subtle signals to communicate. It's less about following grammar rules and more about reading between the lines, staying in tune with their group. Because of this, if you just look at the words or grammar they use, you'll probably miss what's happening beneath the surface.

Another big thing about how Gen Z talks is how it shapes who they are. Like Bucholtz and Hall pointed out back in 2005, people build their identities by the way they speak. Online, it's even more obvious hashtags show what people stand for, emojis tweak the tone, and everyone's got their own style. All of it helps people show where they belong and what sets them apart.

It starts with playful nicknames. People craft their online image using chosen phrases and quirky expressions. It's funny how a simple tag does more than just stick a label—it quietly tells others who you are. If you pay attention to the words folks pick, it's not just about what they mean, but what they're trying to say about themselves. Online, expression shifts from just being clear to finding your spot in whatever digital crowd you feel like joining.

Honestly, even with everything we know, research about Gen Z's way of talking still feels limited. A lot of studies focus on individual words or casual slang but miss how real meaning comes out in patterns and signals beyond language. There's also a weird gap where newer discoveries don't really link up with models like SFL. So, you get good details here and there, but the big picture just isn't fleshed out.

Looking at Gen Z from a fresh angle, you see they're building meaning with more than just words—they use hashtags and all sorts of digital tools. A more structured language model helps sort out how these things work. Digging into these patterns uncovers layers that aren't obvious, showing there's a lot more going on in everyday online communication than most people realize.

Hashtags in Linguistic Research

Hashtags jump out online, thanks to that little # at the front. They were supposed to make sorting posts easier, but honestly, they've become a whole lot more than that. People use them to tag ideas, join conversations, and get noticed. With just a single word or short phrase, anyone can send out a signal and pull others in. Hashtags used to be just about organization, but now

they're behind how messages spread and how content gains traction. Folks find their communities with them, and creators get their posts in front of more eyes.

Researchers started off by picking apart how hashtags fit into search systems and platform features (Highfield, 2018). But lately, they're digging into what people do with hashtags — how they use them in everyday talk and self-expression.

Searchable speech is, because Zappavigna (2015, 2018) argues on the base of Twitter data, the name associated with hashtags. Searchable means that tweets can join ambient talks already underway through visibility shared ground. Viewed through SFL theory, these tags can play different metafunctions. They can be ideational (presents experiences, things), interpersonal (attitudes emotions evaluations), and textual (signs of the times, themes of today).

A change in perspective shows that hashtags are not just tags, but also active parts that shape how meaning is made. They don't just label; they also help with interpretation. What looks like organization is really part of communication. When you look at it this way, their role goes beyond just sorting into sense-making tools. They don't just sit next to each other; they make meaning. They do more than sort; they change how people understand.

Hashtags do more than just label things; they change how people understand them. They often use sarcasm or emphasize emotion to change how the reader sees things. A single tag can completely change the meaning of a sentence, letting you say what you want without adding extra words. Their presence can sometimes make a person's intent stronger, making their opinion seem stronger. When these markers interact with the text around them in unexpected ways, the meaning becomes clearer.

Tagging doesn't just sit on the surface—it shapes your online identity and changes how people interact in digital spaces. When folks drop hashtags, they're often trying to connect with certain groups or movements, kind of quietly staking their claim. Papacharissi pointed out back in 2015 that emotions and shared meaning spread fast, creating these waves of collective feeling right in the moment. Engagement isn't just loud declarations; sometimes, it's the little signals that show you belong.

Even with all the progress, a lot of current research feels like it misses the mark. Instead of digging into what hashtags really mean, we mostly count how many times they show up. The deeper story behind them barely gets any attention. There's not much questioning of how hashtags steer conversations, either—it's all about how they're made, not what they do.

Identity online grows right alongside how people use hashtags. When someone adds a hashtag, they aren't just sorting posts—they're saying, "I belong here," or, "I care about this." These tiny tags glue people to communities and cause all over the internet. It's not just about words either. Hashtags help spread feelings and create a sense of "us," which Papacharissi (2015) calls affective publics. You can pretty much see people joining in—not just by what they write, but by the little signs and markers that show they're part of something.

Still, research on hashtags keeps hitting some walls. Way too often, studies just count hashtags—how many times a tag pops up—instead of asking what those tags actually mean or how people use them. There's another snag: lots of focus ends up on the structure of hashtags, like their wording or formatting, while the real action—how they shape conversations—gets overlooked.

When you dig into hashtag research, one thing jumps out—most studies lean pretty hard on data from Twitter. But honestly, Twitter's not really like Instagram. The layouts are different, interactions change, and Instagram is built around visuals. Images take center stage there, so the way people use and interpret hashtags shifts a lot. It's all about self-presentation and how that shapes meaning.

There are a few studies out there that use the full SFL model, covering all three metafunctions. But most only focus on a single layer, not really connecting ideational,

interpersonal, and textual roles. The bigger picture—how these layers work together—still hasn't gotten much attention.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative descriptive research design with a discourse analysis approach grounded in Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). The qualitative design is appropriate because the study aims to explore and interpret how meaning is constructed through hashtags in natural digital discourse, rather than to test hypotheses or measure variables statistically.

Specifically, this research adopts an interpretive discourse-analytic framework, focusing on how hashtags function as meaning-making resources across the three metafunctions of SFL: ideational, interpersonal, and textual. In this context, hashtags are treated as non-clausal linguistic units that contribute to semantic construction within Instagram captions.

The study also incorporates quantitative support in the form of frequency counts and percentage distributions to strengthen the analysis. However, these numerical data serve only as supporting evidence and do not replace the primary qualitative interpretation.

The research design can therefore be characterized as a qualitative-dominant mixed descriptive design, where qualitative analysis interprets meaning and function and quantitative data supports pattern identification. This design allows for a comprehensive understanding of how hashtags operate linguistically in real-life digital communication among Generation Z users.

Respondents

The respondents are Gen Z Instagram users aged 18–24 years old. Data were taken from 120 Instagram posts published between January–March 2025. Only public accounts were included. All posts contain at least one hashtag, use English (or mixed but understandable language), and reflect personal experiences (daily life, emotions, activities).

Instruments

The main instrument is a coding framework based on Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). Hashtags are analyzed using these categories:

- Ideational Meaning → representing experience (e.g., activities, events)
- Interpersonal Meaning → expressing emotion/attitude
- Textual Meaning → organizing discourse (topic markers, emphasis)
- Identity Function → self-representation (lifestyle, personality)

Supporting tools are Coding system (e.g., D1, D2, etc.) and dataset structure including caption text, hashtags and context of the post.

Procedures

Sampling technique

This study uses purposeful selection—a common approach in qualitative research that brings in cases that offer the best insights (Patton, 2002). Since the research sticks to specific goals, not every Instagram post made the cut. Only captions with clear, useful hashtag patterns got attention. Here's how the sampling went. First, I tracked down public Instagram accounts from Gen Z users. Then, I screened their posts according to the study's criteria. After that, I picked out captions that showed different, intentional ways people use hashtags. By sticking with this

focused approach, the method highlights meaningful patterns, not just random statistical variety.

Data collection procedure

Here is how data collection went, step by step:

1. We observed Instagram posts. Whenever a post matched our set conditions, it stood out and caught our attention. Only posts that people made public were considered—if it was not visible to everyone, we did not include it. The criteria helped us filter out what didn't fit. Once a post slipped through, we reviewed it carefully, but we did not interact with it or let anyone know we were watching.
2. We documented data by saving frames with dialogue as images before converting them into text. Some of these images were later typed out for analysis.
3. When we organized the information, we had gathered, a clear pattern started to show up. By structuring the details, we created a dataset that made sense. This dataset included caption text, hashtags used, and context, which refers to the topic of the post.
4. For data coding preparation, we assigned each caption a code, like D1 or D2, to simplify the examination process. Each code corresponded to a specific description, which helped streamline the review. We also kept ethics in mind by using information that is publicly available, not revealing user identities, and ensuring all examples were anonymous.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using a systemic functional linguistic framework.

Step 1: Data familiarization. The researcher conducted a thorough review of each caption. This process revealed recurring themes in the application of hashtags. Scrutiny of the language highlighted consistent patterns in how posts were framed. These patterns became evident as certain tags co-occurred across multiple entries. Identifying these recurring structures facilitated a broader understanding of the discourse, progressively clarifying how users associated different topics.

Step 2: Relevant Hashtags. Prior to commencing the analysis, hashtags were extracted from twenty-eight captions. Each hashtag identified during this process was assigned equal significance for the subsequent review. The extraction procedure concentrated exclusively on the hash symbol preceding specific terms. Upon completion of scanning, all posts yielded their respective tags. Reviewers recorded each hashtag verbatim as originally presented.

Step 3: Classify Functional. It involved analyzing each hashtag and categorizing it based on its role within the given context. The categories included ideational, interpersonal, and textual functions.

Step 4: Understanding Meaning in Context. The meaning of a hashtag arises from the context in which it is used. Context influences the significance attributed to each tag, with the interpretation of a label varying according to its placement. Through repeated use, hashtags acquire connotations, and their function adapts to the surrounding circumstances. Meaning is consequently actualized through practical application, as each symbol acquires significance within particular contexts. This process involves consideration of the caption content, the immediate situational context, and the wider social implications.

Step 5: Pattern Analysis. Through multiple observations, prominent trends became evident across the data. Recurrent actions highlighted distinct roles with notable clarity.

Step 6: Synthesis

The analysis yielded an interpretation of hashtag usage, illustrating how hashtags contribute to the construction of meaning within online interactions.

Instrument of Analysis

The main tool used for analysis here rests on a coding system built around SFL metafunctions.

Table 1. Analysis of hashtags guided by coding structure

Category	Description	Indicators	Example
Ideational Meaning	Representation of experience	Activity, event, situation	#studentlife
Interpersonal Meaning	Expression of stance or relation	Emotion, evaluation, attitude	#happy
Textual Meaning	Organization of discourse	Theme, topic marker, emphasis	#selfcare
Identity Function	Self-representation	Personality, lifestyle, affiliation	#introvert

From every hashtag, a main role was drawn out through analysis, even though some roles blurred into one another. Categories formed around these central uses, despite occasional blending across groups.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis was based on one hundred twenty Instagram captions, comprising a total of 356 hashtags. Although some hashtags fulfilled multiple functions simultaneously, each was classified into a single category representing its primary role. The classification adhered to three principal types: those aimed at disseminating information, those intended to foster connection, and those facilitating the organization of content flow. In cases where functions overlapped, the classification prioritized the predominant role of each hashtag. This approach ensured a consistent interpretative framework across the study.

Table 2. Use of Hashtags Across Categories

Function	Frequency	Percentage
Ideational Meaning	162	45.5%
Interpersonal Meaning	112	31.5%
Textual Meaning	82	23.0%

Starting with observations, ideational meaning constitutes 45.5%, indicating that hashtags frequently correspond to real-world events and individual experiences. In a similar vein, interpersonal meaning accounts for 31.5%, underscoring their function in expressing attitudes or fostering social bonds. Although less prominent, textual meaning represents 23.0%, suggesting a role in organizing discourse within online interactions. Despite differences in prominence, each dimension illustrates how these markers convey distinct types of information.

How Hashtags Express Ideational Meaning in Gen Z Instagram Captions

Table 3. Types of Ideational Hashtags

Type of Ideational Meaning	Frequency	Percentage
Experiential Labels (e.g., #studentlife, #fitness)	78	48.1%
Circumstantial Meanings (e.g., #morningroutine, #weekend)	52	32.1%
Abstract/Condensed Experience (e.g., #burnout, #success)	32	19.8%
Total	162	100%

Approximately 48.1 percent of ideational hashtags derive from tangible real-world actions, situating posts within familiar categories such as education, habits, or activities. These tags are informed by lived experience, thereby anchoring them in actual behavior. Nearly one-third, specifically 32.1 percent, provide contextual information that subtly guides interpretation, influencing reception without overt emphasis. A smaller portion, 19.8 percent, condenses complex concepts into succinct terms, encapsulating intricate ideas in brief expressions that retain significant meaning. This distribution suggests that hashtags function as compressed representations of real-life experiences.

Although concise, hashtags encapsulate complex elements of lived experience that influence the linguistic representation of events and actions. Through these tags, perceptions of reality are formulated, fitting into wider frameworks of meaning-making that operate within social discourse. A key focus is on how these fragments correspond to real-world occurrences—processes involving participants and their contexts. Halliday and Matthiessen (2014) characterize this representational aspect as the ideational metafunction. In this view, meaning emerges not solely from lexical items but through contextually situated selections within digital communication.

Hashtags as markers of experience

Beyond their role as simple tags, many hashtags serve as indicators of experiential moments, categorizing posts within shared spheres of human activity. Despite their brevity, they direct readers toward recognizable emotional or situational frameworks. Typically appended at the conclusion of captions, these phrases influence interpretive reception. Rather than merely denoting topics, they resonate with conventional ways individuals articulate their daily lives. Their influence, often subtle, resides in connecting personal narratives to larger patterns of sentiment and behavior.

Example 1:

“Final exams done 🤔 #studentlife #finalweek”

Analysis:

- #studentlife → represents a broader experiential domain (academic life)
- #Finalweek → sets the time frame

In this context, hashtags enhance the caption's meaning by situating it within a shared experience. Rather than being integrated into the syntactic flow of sentences, these fragments function independently, influencing the interpretation of the message. Although grammatically separate, they contribute additional dimensions through associative connections.

Hashtags as circumstantial elements

A notable phenomenon is that hashtags frequently introduce information regarding temporal, spatial, or situational aspects of an event. At times, they accompany the main message unobtrusively, shaping the surrounding context without dominating the discourse. Although

their role may be subtle, they serve as digital annotations that delineate specific moments within online communication.

Example 2:

“Morning run 🏃 #fitness #morningroutine”

Analysis:

- #fitness → domain of activity
- #morningroutine → habitual circumstance

A single hashtag can extend the interpretive scope of a message, analogous to how additional details within a sentence contribute to its contextual framing. Hashtags function similarly to background elements in traditional sentence structures, subtly enriching the conveyed meaning. They do not assert themselves overtly but influence the reception of the message, much like the adjuncts of time, place, or manner that accompany the central proposition.

Semantic condensation in hashtags

A notable characteristic of hashtags is their capacity to encapsulate complex concepts within a succinct lexical unit, effectively condensing extended ideas into a single term through semantic compression.

Example 3:

“So tired 😞 #burnout”

The term burnout encapsulates profound exhaustion, sustained pressure, and relentless effort within a single word. This phenomenon reflects the tendency of online discourse to rely on concise expressions that convey substantial meaning.

The findings indicate that hashtags operate as alternative vehicles for experiential meaning, extending the scope beyond the conventional clause-based frameworks. This observation poses a challenge to traditional systemic functional linguistics (SFL) approaches, which predominantly prioritize clauses as the central units of meaning. In the context of digital discourse, however, meaning is dispersed across a range of semiotic resources, with hashtags playing a significant role.

Consequently, it is appropriate to regard hashtags as components of an expanded ideational system, wherein experiential meaning is conveyed through a combination of grammatical constructions as well as symbolic and lexical elements.

How Hashtags Shape Interpersonal Meaning Between the Writer and Their Followers in These Captions

Table 4. Types of Interpersonal Hashtags

Type of Interpersonal Meaning	Frequency	Percentage
Emotional Expression (e.g., #happy, #sad)	46	41.1%
Evaluation/Attitude (e.g., #blessed, #amazing)	38	33.9%
Social Alignment (e.g., #motivation, #positivevibes)	28	25.0%
Total	112	100%

Among hashtags shared between users, emotional expressions constitute the largest category, comprising nearly 40 percent, indicating that affective content significantly shapes online discourse among Generation Z. Following closely are judgments and personal

viewpoints, accounting for just under one-third of such tags. Additionally, about 25 percent relate to broader group affiliations or collective identities, linking individual contributions to communal contexts. This pattern underscores the dual role of hashtags in signaling user positions and facilitating social connections.

The analysis reveals that hashtags are instrumental in shaping interpersonal meaning, especially in conveying stance, attitude, and social positioning. Within the framework of systemic functional linguistics (SFL), interpersonal meaning pertains to the ways language enacts social relationships and situates the speaker within interactions.

Hashtags serving as indicators of stance

Hashtags often serve to signal the speaker's evaluative or emotional perspective.

Example 4:

“Feeling good today #blessed #grateful”

Analysis:

- #blessed → expresses positive evaluation
- #grateful → expresses emotional stance

These hashtags enable users to convey their emotions directly, even when complete clauses are absent.

Hashtags and social alignment

In addition, hashtags play a role in fostering alignment with shared values or specific communities.

Example 5:

“Stay strong 🦊 #motivation #positivity”

Analysis:

- #motivation → These hashtags position the speaker within a broader motivational discourse
- #positivity → They indicate engagement with a collective social viewpoint

This underscores that interpersonal meaning encompasses not only personal expression but also social positioning.

Intensification through hashtag clustering

A further observed phenomenon involves clusters of multiple hashtags employed to amplify interpersonal meaning.

Example 6:

“Best day ever 🥰 #happy #excited #blessed”

Analysis:

The repetition of closely related evaluative hashtags serves to heighten the emotional intensity. This pattern implies that, in digital discourse, interpersonal meaning is frequently conveyed through the accumulation of lexical items rather than through grammatical modification.

The evidence suggests that hashtags constitute principal resources for conveying interpersonal meaning by enabling users to articulate attitudes and establish social bonds. Contrasting with traditional linguistic mechanisms such as modality or mood, hashtags offer a more adaptable and overt means of expressing stance. This observation aligns with the perspective that, within digital communication, interpersonal meaning is progressively

lexicalized and symbolic rather than confined to grammatical structures. Consequently, hashtags extend the interpersonal metafunction by introducing novel methods for expressing evaluation and social alignment.

How Hashtags Help Textual Organization in Gen Z Instagram Captions

Table 5. Types of Textual Hashtags

Type of Textual Function	Frequency	Percentage
Thematic Markers (e.g., #selfcare, #travel)	37	45.1%
Supporting/Elaborating Themes	28	34.1%
Intertextual Linking (e.g., #fitnesscommunity)	17	20.8%
Total	82	100%

Regarding their communicative functions, thematic marking constitutes approximately 45.1 percent of hashtag usage, reflecting their frequent role in highlighting the primary subject matter of posts. Supporting themes appear in 34.1 percent of cases, enriching central ideas with additional nuance. Intertextual linking, present in 20.8 percent of hashtags, connects individual messages within larger discursive networks. Collectively, these findings indicate that hashtags contribute substantially to organizing and structuring online communication.

The analysis indicates that hashtags serve an important function in organizing discourse, thereby contributing to the textual metafunction. Within Systemic Functional Linguistics, textual meaning pertains to the ways language achieves coherence and arranges information.

Hashtags as indicators of theme

Hashtags frequently act as indicators of the central theme of a post.

Example 7:

“Sunday reset ✨ #selfcare #healing”

Analysis:

- #selfcare → central theme
- #healing → thematic elaboration

By emphasizing specific concepts, these hashtags assist readers in navigating the intended interpretation.

Hashtags as tools for discourse structuring

In addition, hashtags help segment the information presented within captions.

Example 8:

“Beach day 🌊 #vacation #relax”

Here, hashtags organize the message into:

- Main event → “Beach day”
- Supporting themes → relaxation, vacation

This points to a modular approach to discourse organization, where meaning is distributed among distinct textual components.

Hashtags facilitating intertextual cohesion

Furthermore, hashtags establish connections between individual posts and wider discourses on the platform.

Example 9:

“Workout done 🏋️ #fitness”

By linking to relate content, hashtags contribute to intertextual cohesion across the digital environment.

The evidence suggests that hashtags perform a dual organizational role, structuring both the internal coherence of posts and their external relationships within broader discursive networks. Internally, they serve to foreground themes and organize information, while externally, they situate posts within a larger framework of interconnected content.

These observations broaden the understanding of textual meaning in the context of Systemic Functional Linguistics, indicating that coherence in digital communication emerges not solely through linguistic devices but also through platform-specific mechanisms such as hashtags.

CONCLUSION

Regarding the ideational metafunction, hashtags primarily operate as condensed representations of experiential meaning, constituting the largest proportion of occurrences (45.5%). These hashtags are mainly employed to categorize experiences, denote activities, and provide contextual information. Functioning as experiential labels, circumstantial elements, or abstract concepts, they allow users to encapsulate complex meanings in concise lexical units. This phenomenon suggests that ideational meaning extends beyond traditional clause boundaries, reflecting the dynamic character of meaning-making in digital communication. In terms of interpersonal meaning, hashtags account for 31.5% of the data and play a significant role in conveying stance, emotion, and social positioning. Through emotional expressions, evaluative language, and socially shared identifiers, users leverage hashtags to articulate their attitudes and engage with others. The frequent use of multiple interpersonal hashtags appears to intensify evaluative dimensions, implying that interpersonal meanings in digital discourse are often constructed through lexical accumulation rather than conventional grammatical means. Concerning textual meaning, hashtags represent 23.0% of the data and contribute to discourse organization and coherence. They function as thematic markers, supplementary elements, and intertextual connectors, facilitating interpretation and linking individual posts to wider discursive networks. This underscores that textual meaning in digital environments derives not only from internal cohesion but also from external relations enabled by platform-specific features such as hashtags. Notably, the study reveals that a considerable portion of hashtags (39.9%) exhibit multifunctionality, simultaneously expressing more than one metafunction. This observation highlights the hybrid nature of hashtags as semiotic resources and emphasizes their complexity within digital discourse. Collectively, the findings advance the application of Systemic Functional Linguistics by demonstrating that meaning-making in contemporary digital communication extends beyond traditional clause-based units. Non-clausal elements like hashtags can effectively fulfill ideational, interpersonal, and textual functions. By integrating hashtags as essential discourse components, this study contributes a more nuanced understanding of language use within social media contexts.

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