



Research Article

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The Power of Hashtag in the New Era of Social Media Dominance: Study on the Use of Hashtag Trends Among College Students in Albania

Blerim Kola¹

Vaeld Zhezha¹

Stefano Gratteri²

¹Marketing Department, Faculty of Business,
University Aleksander Moisiu,
Kampusi I Ri Universitar,
Rr. Miqesia Spitalle,
Durrës, Albania

²Department of Dynamic and Clinical Psychology,
and Health Studies,
University Sapienza di Roma,
Italy

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Abstract

Innovative marketing approaches have been developed because of the growth of social networks. A simple tool, the hashtag has grown to take on new functions and has quickly assimilated into our digital language. This study starts with a brief overview on the importance of hashtags. It examines the related literature considering the dominance of social media in the modern world. The paper also focuses on an examination of hashtag usage in Albania. Primary data includes original information gathered through a survey. This study aims to analyze the level of recognition and the trends of hashtag usage among university students. Also, the paper aims to analyze the perception of the hashtag as a tool that can contribute to increasing the visibility of posts on social networks.

Keywords: hashtag, social networks, promotion, marketing

1. Introduction

The history of the hashtag begins with its initial appearance on Twitter back in 2007 when Chris Messina suggested using it to group tweets by topic or theme (Salazar, 2017). Initially met with skepticism from some users who viewed it as unnecessary clutter within tweets themselves rather than separate metadata created outside them (Tufekci & Wilson, 2012), hashtags quickly gained popularity thanks due to their ability not only to organize but also to generate conversations around particular topics in real-time across vast distances. As hashtag utilization spread among various other platforms, they became increasingly important for brands attracting influencers and targeting

customers interested in niche products, services and ideas related to issues ranging from environmentalism, sustainability, fashion, politics, etc.

With time came innovation. Creative uses emerged allowing users worldwide to contribute towards shared goals while promoting awareness about different societal challenges such as mental health, LGBTQ+ rights, and climate change (Fang, Jenn, 2016). Hashtags helped to establish online communities, foster mutual support among individuals who may have never met in person otherwise. In today's era of social media dominance, the hashtag has become a crucial element in content identification and organization (Boyd, Golder, & Lotan, 2010). It is now a universally recognized symbol across various social media platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, TikTok and LinkedIn. With its widespread use for tagging and grouping user-generated posts around a common theme or topic, hashtags have revolutionized the way we express our opinions, embrace societal trends, and disseminate information (Zappavigna, 2012; Lerman & Ghosh, 2010). Hashtags have become an essential tool for online advocacy efforts and movements trying to spread their message organically or virally to like-minded individuals and organizations (Saxton et al., 2015). These simple tools have been transformed into a cultural phenomenon with widespread impacts on activism and marketing strategies. It is clear that hashtags are here to stay (Salazar, 2017). This paper aims to explore the role and trends of using this powerful tool by Albanian students and their perception on the role of hashtag in increasing the visibility of students' posts on social networks.

2. Literature Review

To understand the importance of the hashtag and its use in social networks, we must first emphasize the importance of the latter in the online community. Social networks have become a part of daily life for a large segment of the population. The number of people using social media worldwide has skyrocketed in recent years, with over 4.26 billion users reported in 2021 and projections indicating that this figure will reach nearly six billion by 2027 (Dixon, 2023). As of January 2020, almost half of the world's population was found to be using social media platforms, and this figure is set to rise as internet infrastructure and affordable mobile devices become more accessible in less developed regions. It is worth noting that much of social media's global growth can be attributed to the proliferation of smartphones and other mobile devices (Bruns & Burgess, 2012). Indeed, over half of the world's population now owns a smartphone, and an overwhelming majority – about 91% – access social networks through these handheld devices (Lerman & Ghosh, 2010). “The hashtag was initially developed from the programming language C and was initially written as two separate words, hash and tag” (La Rocca & Artieri, 2022, 1). With continued use, this simple instrument has transformed from a thematic collector to a pervasive symbol that has repercussions and impacts both inside and outside of digital contexts (La Rocca & Artieri, 2022). “Hashtags have become a crucial social media tool. The categorization of posts in a simple and informal way helps to spread the content through the web. At the same time, it enables users to easily find messages within a specific topic” (Figueroa & Jorge 2019, 65). According to Bruns (2007), every social network has its preferred way of interaction. Hashtags have been used in social media for more than 15 years now. The first hashtag was used back in 2007 on Twitter. (Zhan, et al, 2020). Omena asserts that the most popular site for hashtag-led studies is Twitter, where there is a wealth of theoretical and empirical literature that discusses the connection between hashtags and social formations. Even on Instagram, the use of the hashtag is quite common. In this platform, the use of hashtag started in 2011 (Omena, Rabello, & Mintz, 2020) and primarily focuses on posting photographs and videos with a hashtag so that other users can find the photo (Zhan, et al, 2020). Instagram emphasizes image-sharing while Twitter is more focused on text-based messages (Zappavigna, 2012). These hashtags are user-generated, and when they are adopted by significant individuals within a social network, they help attract more people to the content it references (Castillo et al., 2011). Hashtags are also used in social research, in different areas (La Rocca & Artieri, 2022). According to Jackson et al (2020) Twitter users could use hashtags to bring attention to specific topics or events. Holmberg, et al., (2014) have noted also that Twitter users use

the hashtag feature not only to retrieve or mention a tweet, but also to classify, systematize, and retrieve tweets. This means that hashtags function as metadata, enriching the explanation and retrieval of documents. With such an understanding, we conclude that Twitter hashtags provide equivalently valuable data as author keywords in scientific publications. Therefore, since users can categorize tweets using hashtags, researchers can use this feature to organize their findings on a particular subject or topic in an accessible way for future reference. It is important to note that the usefulness of hashtags on Twitter goes beyond social media interactions; it has important implications for academic research as well. In fact, the use of hashtags by different researchers is a growing phenomenon. As Poghosyan & Ifrim (2016) assert, the use of hashtags has spread to various fields such as news, activism, brand promotion, event-based information sharing, politics, and debates, among others.

On various platforms, hashtags can be used for a variety of purposes. A common type of hashtag is used to identify the type of content being shared. For instance, many Instagram users use hashtags like #photooftheday, #foodporn, #motivationmonday, #travel, and #fashion to categorize their posts thematically. Companies frequently utilize hashtags to promote goods or services they provide. For instance, Nike may use the hashtag #justdoit to promote their motivational and dedicated messages. This hashtag strategy helps create brand awareness and connect with potential consumers #foodfestivals (Celuch, 2021). Companies can also create personalized hashtags to identify and promote their brand in addition to using hashtags for specific products like 'official' event hashtags, #eurovision, #esc, and #sbseurovision. (Highfield, T., Harrington, S., & Bruns, A. 2013). An example of this is the #google, #tesla, #microsoft, #ShareACoke hashtag created by Coca-Cola for their soft drink products. Users who post photos consuming the product and use this hashtag help to create a community and promote the brand identity (Myers, 2023). Event organizers can utilize hashtags to promote and disseminate information about their events. For instance, at a technology conference, they may create the hashtag #CannesFilmFestival, #TechConference2023 to encourage people's participation in sharing experiences and information related to the event. Simultaneously, the use of this hashtag creates a stream of posts and conversations linked to the event on social media networks (Comprehensive Glossary of Social Media Terms, n.d). Hashtags can be used also for general topics and social trends. These hashtags are popular for creating emotional connections and sharing pleasant experiences (Reinwald, 2021).

Hashtags can also serve for grouping and discovering content related to a specific topic. In this way, hashtags can help online learners find topics that interest them, and connect individuals interested in related topics in an online learning community (Raman et al.2020). The use of hashtags enables users also to connect with a broad audience who share the same interest. If you use hashtags in your social media posts, more people will see it and have opinions on it. It is a fantastic way to get your voice out there and start conversations with others who care about the same things as you do. Using hashtags can really affect what people think and talk about on social media. In this way hashtag usage can also have a significant impact on public opinion and social debate because posts that have hashtags get more views and interaction compared to those without any hashtags.

According to Zarrella (2010), a hashtag needs to be simple and easy to use if you want it to be successful. It needs to be unique and distinguishable from other hashtags (Luke Sloan, 2018) and it should have a clear meaning that is easy to understand (Jones, 2019).

3. Methodology

In this study both primary and secondary data sources were utilized. A survey was used to collect primary data, which included unique information created especially for this research, and a review of worldwide literature was used to acquire secondary data. This study is the first of its kind in Albania. The researchers aimed to gain deeper insights into the patterns and trends of hashtag usage among university students. The survey was conducted in Albania, where two of the authors serve as academics at an Albanian University. The questionnaires were filled out in class by 230 students from

November until December 2022. The students belong to three academic profiles. The question format was multiple choice and closed ended.

The questionnaire is divided into two parts where the first part contains demographic data such as gender and study profile. The second part of it includes 8 questions on the use of the hashtag as follows:

- How many hours a day do you spend using social networks?
- What social media platforms do you use most often?
- Have you ever used hashtags in your social network's posts?
- Why do you use hashtags in social networks?
- Do you hashtags with other students for the same interest?
- Have you searched for hashtags for important social, political, or cultural issues?
- Do you promote your works, projects, with a hashtag?
- Do you think using hashtags helps you grow your social networks presence?

All data from the questionnaires were processed using Excel and will be presented in the next paragraph. Each question will be accompanied by the corresponding graph and a short comment.

This approach allowed for a comprehensive investigation into hashtag use on social networks platforms. It also provided researchers with more information necessary for drawing meaningful conclusions about user behavior regarding hashtags on social networks.

4. Analysis of the Results

In the survey were included 230 students of three interconnected academic fields:

- Management and Marketing studies (MM);
- Finance and Banking studies (FB);
- Hotel and Tourism studies (HT).

The first part of the questionnaire gathers demographic data like gender, study profile and employment. The survey respondents were all young adults, approximately 20 years old, with a negligible age gap of only two years. The questionnaire does not delve into age-related factors as it is expected that all participants have similar life experiences and cultural backgrounds. Data on gender of respondents by field of study are presented in figure 1. In this part of the questionnaire, students were asked if they were employed too. Data on employment of respondents are presented in figure 2.

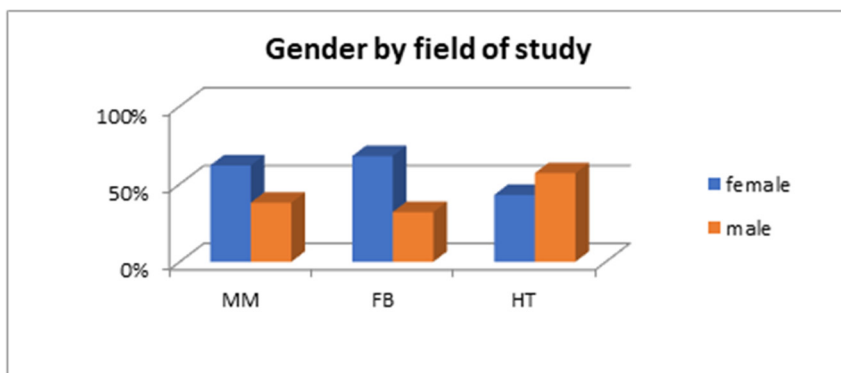


Figure 1. Difference by gender in three fields of academic study

In the field of MM and in the field of BF, the presence of women is over 60%. In these fields the ratio of female to male participants is nearly 3 to 1. Whereas in the field of HT 57% are men and 43% are women. In the service sector, men in Albania are more active in terms of jobs.

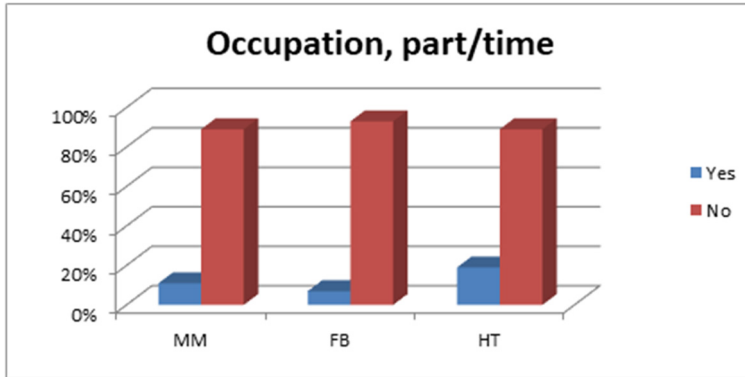


Figure 2. Occupation, part/time

Students were asked how they spend their free time. The purpose of this question is to analyze how much free time they have. Many students have part-time jobs during their leisure time. In the HT sector, 19% of students are employed part-time. Similarly, in the MM sector 11% of students work part-time, too. Meanwhile, in the FB sector only 7% of students spend half of their time engaged in paid internships provided by financial institutions. Those who work have less free time to dedicate to social networks.

The second part of the questionnaire contains questions about the use of the hashtag by students. The data are presented through figures 3-10.

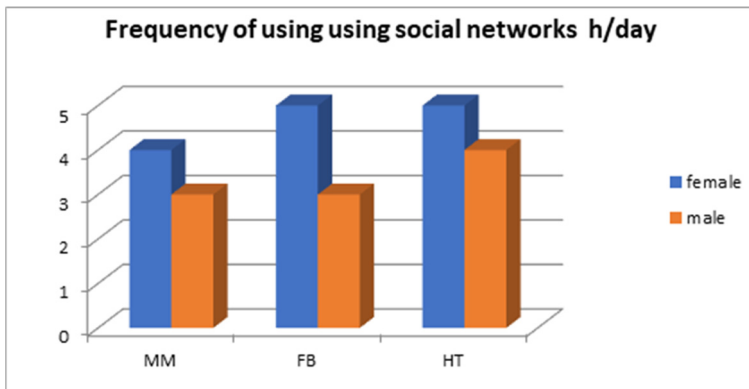


Figure 3. Frequency of using social networks (Hour/day)

The first question of the second part of the questionnaire aims to analyze the usage of social networks (SN) among male and female students. Female MM students spend 4 hours per day on SN while male students spend 3 hours per day on SN. Female FB students spend 5 hours per day on SN while male students spend around 3 hours per day on SN. Female HT students spend 5 hours per day on SN while male students spend around 4 hours per day on SN. The data indicates high use of social networks by all students. Both genders are actively involved with different social networks platforms, but female students spend more time on them.

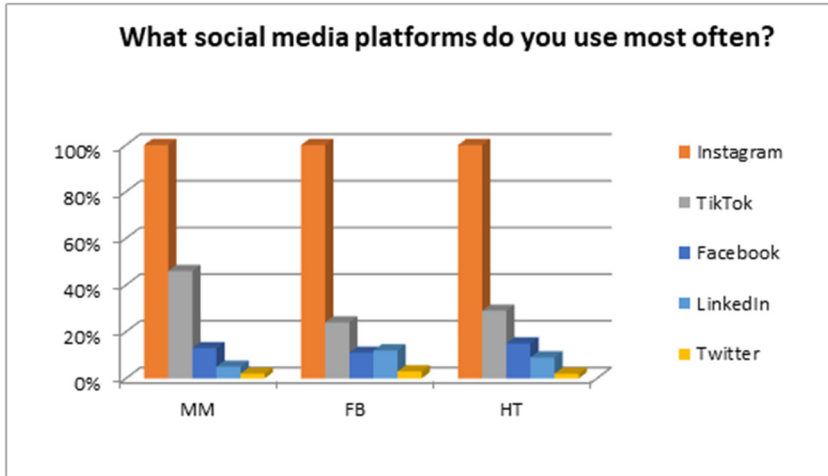


Figure 4. What social media platforms do you use more often?

The second question aims to analyze the trends of students' use of social platforms. 100% of responders are present on Instagram. In second place is Tiktok. 46% of MM students use Tiktok. 29% of HT students use TikTok while only 24% of FB students use this platform. TikTok is still a new platform in Albania. Facebook is in third place. 13% of MM students use Facebook. 15% of HT students use Facebook while only 11% of FB students use Facebook. In fourth place is LinkedIn. 5% of MM students use LinkedIn. 9% of HT students use LinkedIn and 12% of FB students use this platform. The least used platform in Albania is Twitter. Although Twitter is not a new platform in the Albanian market, it has not managed to be widely used. 2% of MM students and HT students use Twitter while 3% of FB students use this platform. The most used platform is Instagram, while the least used is Twitter, with an extremely low percentage of use.

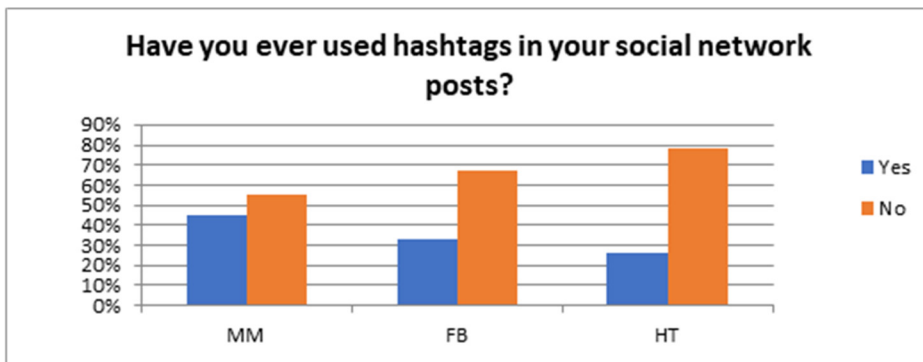


Figure 5. Hashtags uses in social networks posts

This question was created with the aim of analyzing the percentage of students who can create and use hashtags in their posts on social networks. 45% of MM students, 33% of FB students and 26% of HT students responded they use hashtags. There is a positive trend in the use of the hashtag. Students are aware of its use on social media platforms.

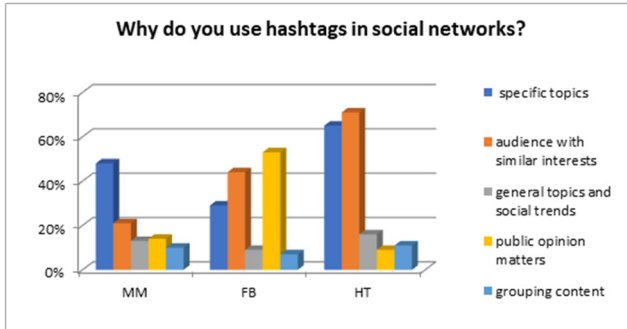


Figure 6. Why do you use hashtags in social networks? I'm looking for ...

This question aims to analyze if students are aware of the uses of hashtags in social platforms. The question is focused on the five basic typologies of hashtag use on these platforms. The respondents were asked to check 1 or more answers drafted by the authors. Regarding MM students, 48% of them responded they use hashtag to search on specific topics; 21% of them use hashtag to check for audience who share similar interests; 13% of them use hashtags to search the general topics and social trends on social platforms; 14% of them use hashtags to search for public opinion matters and 10% of them use hashtags to search for grouping content. MM students use the hashtag largely to search on specific topics and less to search for grouping content.

Regarding FB students, 29% of them responded they use hashtag to search on specific topics; 44% of them use hashtag to check for audience with similar interests; 9% of them use hashtags to search for general topics and social trends; 53% of them use hashtags to search for public opinion matters and 7% of them use hashtags to search for grouping content. FB students have the highest interest in using hashtags to search for public opinion matters and audience with similar interests. FB students are less interested in searching for grouping content.

Regarding HT students 65% of them responded they use hashtag to search on specific topics; 71% of them use hashtag to check for audience who share similar interests; 16% of them use hashtags to search for general topics and social trends; 9% of them use hashtags to search for public opinion matters and 11% of them use hashtags to search for grouping content. HT students are more interested in using hashtags to search on specific topics and to check for audience with similar interests. They are less focused on using hashtags to search for public opinion matters. Students' interests vary according to their fields of study.

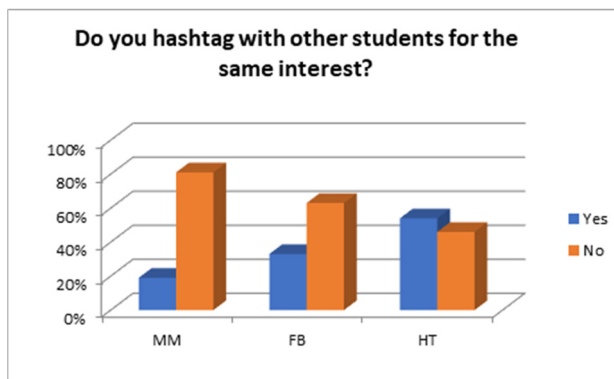


Figure 7: Do you hashtag with other students/colleagues for the same interest?

The purpose of this question is to analyze whether students share knowledge about similar interest hashtags such as #studentconferences. Only 54% of HT students, 33% of FB students and 19% of MM students responded they use hashtags for this purpose.

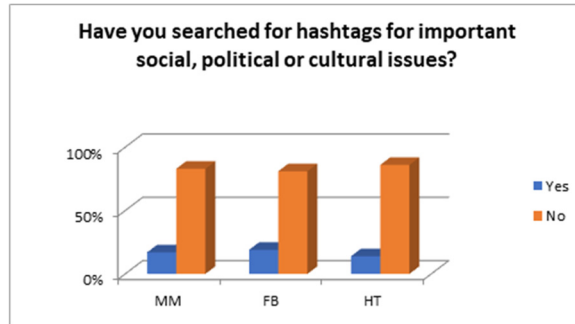


Figure 8. Have you searched for hashtags for important social, political, or cultural issues?

This question was intended to analyze the interest of students in the use of the hashtag for important social, political, or cultural issues. Most of participants (83% of MM students, 81% of FB students and 86% of HT students) responded they do not use hashtags for important social, political, or cultural issues.

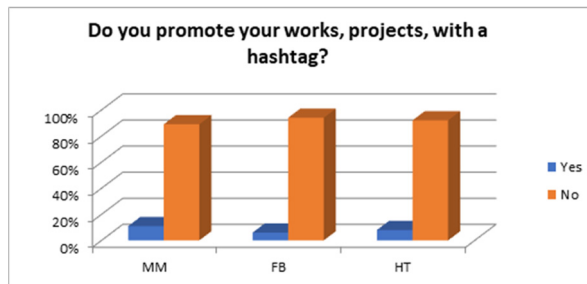


Figure 9. Do you promote your works, projects, with a hashtag?

The purpose of this question was related to the use of hashtags to promote students' work or personal projects. Only 6% of FB students, 8% of HT students and 11% of MM students use hashtags for this purpose. We have an incredibly low use of hashtags for promotion of students' personal works.

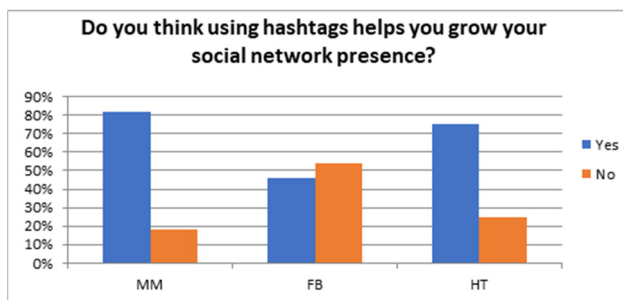


Figure 10. Do you think using hashtags helps you grow your social networks presence?

The last question aims to analyze the students' perception of the advantage of using hashtags in

social networks. 82% of MM students responded that they think hashtags help them grow their social networks presence. The high percentage can be related to the fact that these students have all studied digital marketing tools. In second place are HT students with a 75% positive response. In the last place stand the FB students with a 46% positive response. We have an incredibly positive perception of the hashtag's usage by MM and HT students.

5. Conclusions

The main results of the study:

- 230 students participated in this questionnaire, divided into three fields of study. In the field of MM and in the field of BF, the presence of women is over 60%. Whereas in the field of HT 57% are men and 43% are women. In the service sector, men in Albania are more active in terms of jobs.
- Many students have part-time jobs during their leisure time and less time to dedicate to social media.
- There is a high use of social networks for all three groups of students. Both genders are actively involved with different social media platforms, but female students spend more time on social networks.
- The most widely used social platform by Albanian students is Instagram. In second place is Tiktok. Facebook is in third place. LinkedIn stands at the fourth place and the least used is Twitter.
- There is a positive trend in the usage of the hashtag among Albanian students. The students are aware of its use on social networks.
- Regarding the purpose of the usage of hashtags in social networks, the interests of students according to the fields of study are different. Not all students are aware of the different uses of hashtags in social networks. The most often used hashtags are: 1) hashtag to identify specific topics (48% of MM and 65 % of HT students); 2) hashtags to identify audience who share the same interests (44% of FB and 71% of HT students) and 3) hashtags which search for public opinion matters (53% of FB students). For all three groups of students, the lowest use of hashtags are the ones which search for grouping content.
- Students are not interested in using hashtags to share knowledge about similar interest hashtags. The percentages of its use are different depending on the field of study. In first place stand HT students with a 54% positive response.
- The use of hashtags for important social, political, or cultural issues is incredibly low.
- The use of hashtags to promote students' works or personal projects is extremely low.
- The perception of the hashtag as a tool that can contribute to increasing the visibility of posts on social networks by MM and HT students is incredibly positive. The perception is not equally positive in the case of FB students (with only a 46% positive response).

Through the analysis of the collected data a wide use of the hashtag by Albanian students has been observed. The results show that the use of the hashtag is more frequent in social networks such as Instagram and Tiktok, while it is used less in social networks such as Facebook. The use of hashtags by Albanian students is focused primarily on hashtags to identify specific topics; hashtags to identify audiences who share the same interests, and hashtags for public opinion matters. The extremely low use of hashtags to search for grouping content; hashtags to search for general topics and social trends; hashtags to search for important social, political, or cultural and hashtags to promote students' works or personal projects, suggests that students do not have adequate knowledge about these uses of hashtags and their potential benefits. Even the perception of Hashtags phenomenon by students is not at the right level. Only a part of them perceives it as a tool that can contribute to increasing the visibility of posts on social networks. Also, in this direction, we suggest that it is necessary for students to get more information and become familiar with the different uses of hashtags to be able to perceive the power of hashtags in the new era of social media dominance.

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