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HYPERTEXT IN DIGITAL LITERATURE AND SOCIAL MEDIA: HYPERLINKS VS HASHTAGS

Summary. The digital transformation of communication, which began in the late XXth century and intensified with the emergence of Web 2.0, has led to the development of new principles of textual organisation, among which hypertext occupies a central position. Originally introduced by Ted Nelson in 1965, hypertext denotes a non-linear system of interconnected textual fragments. The present article focuses on two specific manifestations of hypertextuality: hyperlinks functioning in digital fiction and hashtags used in social media discourse. Although these phenomena originate from different communicative environments and serve distinct functions, they demonstrate a number of shared structural, semantic, and pragmatic features that allow them to be analysed within a unified theoretical framework. The relevance of the research lies in the insufficient attention to the comparative analysis of these elements in linguistics, despite extensive studies of hypertext theory and social media linguistics. The **aim** of this paper is to identify both common and distinctive characteristics of hyperlinks and hashtags and to propose a model of their correlation as forms of hypertextual connectivity. The research is based on a corpus of digital literary works, including canonical hypertexts, as well as contemporary interactive narratives and Instagram posts by popular influencers. The methodology combines linguistic analysis, contextual interpretation, and elements of quantitative analysis. The findings demonstrate that both hyperlinks and hashtags function as metatextual devices enabling non-linear navigation and user interaction. However, they differ significantly in their structural role, semantic specificity, and degree of authorial control. While hyperlinks are constitutive elements of digital narratives, shaping their architecture and enabling ergodic reading, hashtags serve as indexing tools facilitating thematic aggregation within platform-driven environments. The study concludes with an idea that hyperlinks and hashtags represent two divergent evolutionary paths of hypertext: one oriented towards narrative complexity and authorial design, the other towards communicative efficiency and collective meaning-making.

Keywords: hypertext, hyperlink, hashtag, social media, discourse, fiction, narrative.

Problem-setting. The digital transformation of communication, which began in the final third of the 20th century and accelerated sharply with the spread of Web 2.0, has led to the emergence of fundamentally new principles of text organisation. One of the key concepts in this context has been that of hypertext – a non-linearly organised system of textual fragments linked by a network of connections [23 Pozharytska, Morozova 2025]. The term was introduced by Ted Nelson in 1965 and originally described computerised document management systems [21]. Subsequently, it found widespread application in literary theory, media linguistics and semiotics.

Within the scope of this study, a comparison of two specific forms of hypertextual connectivity is of particular interest: hyperlinks used in digital fiction and hashtags functioning within the social media space. At first glance, these phenomena belong to different communicative spheres and perform different functions. However, in reality, despite operating within different types of discourse, they share a number of common characteristics, allowing them to be considered within a unified analytical framework of hypertext theory.

Task-setting and recent papers survey. The relevance of this study stems from the fact that, despite numerous works on hypertext theory and digital literature (G. Landow, 1992 [16], 2006 [15]; J.D. Bolter, 1991[5]; E. Aarseth, 1997 [3], O. Pozharytska, 2016 [22]; O. Pozharytska & I. Morozova 2021 [19] etc.) as well as on the linguistics of social media (M.Zappavigna, 2012 [27]; S.C. Herring, 2007 [11]; A.R.Daer, R. Hoffman & S. Goodman, 2014 [9]), a comparative analysis of hashtags and hyperlinks within a single theoretical framework has been presented only in a highly fragmentary manner in the academic literature. This study aims to fill this gap by proposing a comprehensive comparative model that takes into account the structural, semantic and pragmatic parameters of both phenomena.

The aim of this study is to conduct a comparative analysis of hashtags and hyperlinks as forms of hypertextuality, to identify their common and specific characteristics, and to propose a theoretical model of their correlation. To achieve this aim, the following **tasks** are addressed: to examine the theoretical foundations of the concept of hypertext; to describe the structural and functional characteristics of hyperlinks in digital literature; to analyse the structural and functional characteristics of hashtags in social media; and to conduct a comparative analysis of both linguistic phenomena.

Thus, **the object** of this paper is hyperlinks and hashtags in modern English-language digital fiction and Instagram blogs, respectively. **The subject** is their communicative, structural and functional peculiarities.

The research **material** consisted, on the one hand, of 15 works of digital literature containing hyperlinks (including the now ‘classic’ “Victory Garden” (1992) by S. Moulthrop [20], “My Body — a Wunderkammer” (1997) by Sh. Jackson [12], “The Virtual Disappearance of Miriam” (2000) by Martin Bedford [4], as well as more recent works such as R. Kendall’s “Clues” (2001–2008) [14], and A. Corfman’s “Open Sorcery” (2017) [7], narrative games such as “The Case of the Solitary Resident” (2024–2025) [25], works from the Romance Club platform and in the CYOA genre, and literary pieces by the participants of the Spring Thing 2025 interactive literature festival). On the other hand, we analysed 10 popular Instagram blogs by contemporary influencers (including @selenagomez, @christiano, @victoriabeckham, @oljaryz, @emmamiller, @tay_renae and others) and a list of the 100 top popular hashtags on the internet according to Influencer Marketing Hub.

The research process presupposed using both general scientific **methods** and methodologies, and purely linguistic ones, including: methods of induction and deduction, synthesis and analysis, contextual-interpretative method, modelling method, elements of statistical calculation method, and others.

Practical research. To begin with, the question of whether hashtags and hyperlinks can be compared requires a separate theoretical justification, as these phenomena arose in different technical and discursive contexts. Whilst hyperlinks have been an integral element of hypertext systems since their inception and were conceptualised as early as in the pioneering works in the field of information technology, the hashtag, by contrast, emerged much later, within the realm of microblogging, and was initially perceived as a purely pragmatic tool for organising user-generated content.

Nevertheless, today both phenomena embody the fundamental principle of hypertext formulated by Ted Nelson, namely the principle of non-linear connectivity of textual elements [21], which assumes that any text is not a closed and linearly organised structure, but is embedded in a broader network of connections with other texts.

The very concept of hypertext has a rich theoretical history. Vannevar Bush is often cited as the precursor to the modern concept, with his essay “As We May Think” (1945) [6], in which he described the hypothetical Memex system – a device for the associative storage and retrieval of information. V. Bush wrote that the human mind works on the principle of association, jumping from one subject to another – and it is precisely this principle that formed the basis of the concept of hypertext.

For the purposes of this study, we define the hyperlink as a structural element of digital text that enables narrative variability and non-linearity through a clickable transition to another textual node. This definition takes into account both the technical aspect (clickability) and the narrative aspect (variability). The hashtag, in turn, is defined as an indexing marker in the format #word or #phrase, which enables the thematic aggregation of user-generated content on social media platforms. It’s noteworthy that the hashtag itself was originally proposed by Chris Messina in 2007 as a tool for grouping messages on Twitter [18] and subsequently spread to Instagram, Facebook, TikTok and other platforms.

At the same time, Michelle Zappavigna suggests viewing hashtags through the lens of M. Halliday’s metafunctions of language since in addition to the ideational function (conveying content), they perform an interpersonal function (constructing social relationships) and a textual function (organisation of discourse) [27]. This three-level description allows us to integrate hashtags into a broader linguistic theory and compare them with hyperlinks, which also perform structuring and semantic functions in narrative discourse.

It should be noted that both hashtags and hyperlinks currently function as markers of transition between information nodes. For example, the hashtag #travel brings together a multitude of disparate posts into a single thematic stream: a user who clicks on this tag gains access to aggregated content that would otherwise remain unconnected. Similarly, a hyperlink in a work of digital fiction – for example, in Michael Joyce’s novel “afternoon, a story” [13] – connects various fragments of the narrative, creating a non-linear textual architecture.

Furthermore, both hyperlinks and hashtags essentially possess a metatextual status. They do not merely form part of the text, but indicate its connection to other texts, thereby realising intertextuality in the sense of Gérard Genette (1982) [10]. Here a hashtag functions as an indexical sign referring to a broad thematic field. A hyperlink functions as a direct link to a specific fragment.

While analysing hashtags and hyperlinks, it is also important to consider the role of the user, whether a blog reader or a reader of digital literary texts. Both hashtags and hyperlinks are

activated by the user: without a click or a deliberate search, they remain potential rather than actual connections, which brings them close to Espen Aarseth's concept of the ergodic text (1997), where meaning arises through the reader's non-trivial interaction with the text [3].

Thus, the difference between a hyperlink and a hashtag, is in fact, not that fundamental, but purely functional and discursive in nature. To prove it, we will analyse the linguistic features of these relatively new linguistic phenomena of the modern digital world in more detail.

The main domain of hyperlinks is digital literature. It is here that the hyperlink takes on a special significance that goes beyond its navigational function. The first hypertext works appeared in the 1980s. Michael Joyce's "afternoon, a story" (written in 1987, published in 1990 by Eastgate Systems) [13] is generally regarded as the first significant work of hypertext literature. The novel consists of a branched structure made up of a large number of textual fragments – nodes – linked by various transition routes. The reader cannot follow a linear path from beginning to end: each choice of hyperlink creates a new, unique reading trajectory, and no single reading encompasses the work in its entirety. Researchers, notably J.D. Bolter (2001), describe this as the fundamental 'topography' of a text, in which the map of routes is more important than any specific path [5].

Another telling example of the functional importance of hyperlinks for digital fiction is Stuart Moulthrop's "Victory Garden" (1991) [20], which deals with the events of the Gulf War. The work is structured as a branched narrative network with numerous intersecting fragments. Here, hyperlinks do not merely offer the reader a choice of route, but simulate the experience of informational chaos and uncertainty characteristic of media coverage of military events. The reader finds themselves in a situation analogous to that of a news consumer: the abundance of links and the impossibility of taking in the entire text reproduce the effect of an overloaded media space. As G.P. Landow notes, in such works the hyperlink ceases to be a neutral technical tool and becomes a vehicle for ideological and aesthetic meaning [15].

In her work "My Body – A Wunderkammer" (1997) [12], Shelley Jackson uses hyperlinks in a fundamentally different way: the entry point is a schematic representation of the body, every part of which serves as a hyperlink leading to an autobiographical fragment. Here, the hyperlink performs a semantically generative function as it does not merely organise navigation, but constitutes the very structure of the narrative as a bodily-spatial map of identity. The connection between a body part and the corresponding text is not arbitrary: it is built on metaphorical, associative and biographical grounds, which transforms the body into a kind of hypertextual interface of memory and experience.

In more modern works of digital fiction, hyperlinks mostly provide the reader with a choice of their next steps.

Thus, from a linguistic perspective, hyperlinks in digital literature function as elements of the text's deictic system, pointing to and referring to other parts of the narrative. The semantic content of the anchor text – the word or phrase to which the link is attached – shapes the reader's expectations and creates narrative tension in the transition. For instance, in the work "Victory Garden" [20], such transitions often deliberately disorient the reader: the reader discovers that they have ended up somewhere quite different from where they expected to go, which in itself is a literary device that replicates the disorientation of the information flow.

The results of our analysis show that there exist the following types of hyperlinks: verbal, audio, graphic and mixed. It is undeniable that verbal hyperlinks are the most frequent across all the types of digital literary works examined. It should be noted that over 50% of verbal links are represented by non-predicative nominative constructions (such as: *Miriam, My village*) or simple elliptical constructions of an imperative nature (*Look here! Find it out*). Single-word hyperlinks occur less frequently than two- and multi-component ones (only 24% in total, according to our observations). Hyperlinks realised as non-elliptical simple sentences occur with a frequency of 12.5%, whilst more complex constructions very rarely function as hyperlinks (around 3%).

As mentioned above, the hashtag as a phenomenon originated on Twitter in August 2007, when technologist Chris Messina suggested using the # symbol to group messages by topic [18]. The hashtag #sandiegofire is generally considered to be the first widely used hashtag. It was used to coordinate information about the wildfires in San Diego in October 2007. Since then, the hashtag has evolved from a technical tool into a cultural phenomenon, spreading across all major social media platforms – Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, LinkedIn and others.

From a morphological point of view, hashtags are predominantly single-word constructions: #love, #art, #travel, #picoftheday [2]. According to the results of our analysis, 71% of hashtags are single-word constructions, and 84% are nouns or substantivised forms. In our view, this trend reflects the tendency of hashtags towards categorisation and classification rather than predication, which is consistent with the observations of M. Zappavigna [28] and A.R. Daer, R. Hoffman & S. Goodman [9]. Phrasal constructions in which several words are written as a single unit

(#throwbackthursday, #followforfollow) account, according to our data, for 22%, whilst abbreviations (#tbt – throwback Thursday, #ootd – outfit of the day) make up only 7%, although some of them have become widely used online.

Functionally, hashtags can be divided into several types. Topic-based hashtags (#politics, #sports, #technology) indicate the subject matter of a post. Event hashtags (#oscars, #worldcup) mark a connection to a specific real-time event and often become a tool for creating a ‘live’ media event – a collective discussion in real time. Emotional hashtags (#mood, #blessed, #grateful) serve an interpersonal rather than an informational function, expressing the author’s emotional stance. Finally, commercial and brand hashtags (#nike, #justdoit) are used for marketing purposes.

As our analysis of the blogosphere shows, 51% of posts do not use hashtags at all, whilst 37% contain hashtags as the sole text element of the caption – without any accompanying text. This fact indicates a polarisation of practices: some authors completely refrain from tagging, whilst others use hashtags as an independent linguistic act. It is worth noting that this trend is, to a certain extent, consistent with the observations of L. Yang et al. [26] regarding the platform-specific nature of hashtag usage, since their role and frequency differ fundamentally depending on the communicative norms of a particular platform.

It is worth noting that an excessive use of hashtags – the so-called ‘hashtag stuffing’ – is viewed negatively by the community and reduces the perceived quality of a post. This fact alone indicates that established norms for the use of hashtags have emerged in social media practice, and any breach of these norms is regarded as a sign of dishonest communication. Moreover, the phenomenon of ‘algorithmic optimisation’ of hashtags, whereby users select tags not on the basis of thematic relevance but according to search popularity, indicates that the hashtag has acquired a distinct pragmatic dimension, which often diverges from its original indexing function.

At the next stage of work, we compared hashtags and hyperlinks across five key parameters: structural impact on the text; nature of user interaction; semantic density and specificity; degree of author control; and contextual dependence.

So, a fundamental difference is observed in terms of the structural impact of hashtags and hyperlinks on the text involved. Whilst a hashtag is embedded within the text of a post but has virtually no effect on its content structure (the post ‘Beautiful sunset (+ picture) #sunset #beach #summer’ remains exactly the same message with and without the hashtags), a hyperlink, on the contrary, is constitutive of a hypertextual work and its removal destroys the very structure of the text. E.g., in R.Kendall’s “Clues”, the removal of hyperlinks would mean transforming the work into a disjointed collection of fragments. In other words, a hashtag is an additional element, whereas a hyperlink is an immanent feature of a digital literary text.

In terms of user interaction, both elements require active participation, though the nature of this participation differs. Interaction with a hashtag involves navigating to aggregated content, that is, to a collection of independent documents linked by a common tag. Interaction with a hyperlink involves navigation within a single work (or, in the case of an external link, to a specific document). E. Aarseth describes three types of user functions in an ergodic text: exploration, configuration and textonymy (recording) [3]. From this viewpoint, a hashtag corresponds primarily to the function of exploration, whereas a hyperlink in a literary work corresponds to the function of configuration: the reader does not merely explore, but co-constructs the narrative.

As to semantic density, hashtags tend to be more general in nature (#love or #art cover a vast semantic field), and this generality makes them versatile aggregation tools but reduces their accuracy. Both E. Cunha et al. [8] and D.Liu et al. [17] note a significant thematic diffuseness in hashtagged content since the same tag often unites posts that are only indirectly related to its literal meaning. This feature undoubtedly indicates a divergence between the formal and pragmatic semantics of a hashtag. Hyperlinks, by contrast, are highly context-dependent: their semantic weight is determined by a specific narrative context, and the same anchor phrase carries fundamentally different semantic weight in different works.

The nature of author’s control over hashtags and hyperlinks is also quite specific, for we can find a significant asymmetry at play here. The author of a hypertext work has complete control over the linking system: they determine where each link leads, what alternatives are offered to the reader, and which paths are fundamentally inaccessible. In this way they are close to the options given to video game players [1;24]. A social media user employing a hashtag does not control what content will be aggregated under that tag: they merely mark their post as part of a certain thematic stream formed collectively. Thus, we believe that this fundamental difference in the degree of authorial control reflects a broader tension between individual authorship and collective production of meaning within the two types of digital discourse as a whole.

Whilst hyperlinks in digital literature are created and controlled by the author, hashtags exist within the institutional space of a platform that determines the algorithms for aggregating,

displaying and ranking content. For instance, the Twitter/X platform has, at various times, imposed restrictions on the use of certain hashtags, blocked trends or, conversely, artificially promoted them. This means that the hashtag, as a hypertextual element, is fundamentally mediated by institutional and algorithmic factors, which distinguishes it significantly from a hyperlink, which functions within the relatively autonomous space of the author's text and can have greater creative potential.

Conclusions and perspectives of the research. To sum up, this study confirms that hashtags and hyperlinks can and should be viewed as different manifestations of one and the same hypertextual principle. Despite the difference in discursive contexts – mass communication in the case of hashtags and artistic narrative in the case of hyperlinks – both phenomena share key characteristics: metatextual status, the principle of non-linear connectivity, and dependence on user activation. At the same time, our comparison reveals fundamental differences between them. The hashtag functions as a reduced hypertext index, oriented towards a mass audience and characterised by a high degree of standardisation, low semantic specificity and collective production of meaning. The hyperlink, in its turn, constitutes an immanent narrative element that shapes the architecture of the text, ensures its variability, and presupposes individual author-reader interaction. We see perspectives for further research in a comparative diachronic analysis of the frequency of use and basic characteristics of hashtags and hyperlinks, which will provide an opportunity to understand their contemporary essence and role in shaping digital information environment within media and artistic discourse.

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ГІПЕРТЕКСТ У ЦИФРОВІЙ ЛІТЕРАТУРІ ТА СОЦІАЛЬНИХ МЕДІА: ГІПЕРПОСИЛАННЯ ПРОТИ ХЕШТЕГІВ

Анотація. Цифрова трансформація комунікації, яка розпочалася наприкінці ХХ століття та посилилася з появою Web 2.0, призвела до розвитку нових принципів текстової організації, серед яких гіпертекст займає центральне місце. Вперше запропонований Тедом Нельсоном у 1965 році, гіпертекст позначає нелінійну систему взаємопов'язаних текстових фрагментів. Подана стаття зосереджується на двох конкретних проявах гіпертекстуальності: гіперпосиланнях, що функціонують у цифровій художній літературі, та хештегах, що використовуються в дискурсі соціальних мереж. Хоча ці явища походять з різних комунікативних середовищ і виконують різні функції, вони демонструють низку спільних структурних, семантичних та прагматичних особливостей, що дозволяє аналізувати їх в рамках єдиної теоретичної бази. **Актуальність** дослідження полягає в недостатній увазі до порівняльного аналізу цих елементів у лінгвістиці, незважаючи на широкі дослідження теорії гіпертексту та лінгвістики соціальних мереж. Метою цієї статті є виявлення як спільних, так і відмінних характеристик гіперпосилань та хештегів, а також пропонування моделі їхньої кореляції як форм гіпертекстової зв'язності. Дослідження базується на аналізі корпусу цифрових літературних творів, що включає канонічні гіпертексти, а також сучасні інтерактивні наративи, та корпусу публікацій з Instagram популярних інфлюенсерів. Методи дослідження охоплюють лінгвістичний аналіз, контекстуальну інтерпретацію та елементи кількісного аналізу. Результати роботи демонструють, що гіперпосилання та хештеги функціонують як метатекстуальні засоби, що забезпечують нелінійну навігацію та взаємодію з користувачем. Однак вони суттєво відрізняються своєю структурною роллю, семантичною специфічністю та ступенем авторського контролю. Хоча гіперпосилання є конститутивними елементами цифрового наративу, формуючи його архітектуру та уможливаючи ергодичне читання, хештеги служать інструментами індексування, що сприяють тематичній агрегації в середовищах, керованих платформами. Зроблено висновок про те, що гіперпосилання та хештеги представляють два різні еволюційні шляхи гіпертексту: один орієнтований на складність наративу та авторський дизайн, інший — на комунікативну ефективність та колективне творення сенсу.

Ключові слова: гіпертекст, гіперпосилання, хештег, соціальні мережі, дискурс, художня література, наратив.

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FANFICTION TERMINOLOGY AS A MANIFESTATION OF PARTICIPATORY CULTURE IN DIGITAL DISCOURSE

Summary. The article explores fanfiction terminology as a manifestation of participatory culture in digital discourse. The study is grounded in contemporary approaches to terminology theory and discourse analysis, which interpret terminological systems as dynamic, context-dependent, and socially constructed phenomena rather than strictly regulated and standardized structures. Within this framework, fanfiction communities are viewed as interactive