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Environmental Activism in The Digital Age: Exploring Environmental Hashtags Through Ecolinguistics And Critical Discourse Analysis



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Abstract

This study explores how environmental hashtags on social media function as tools of digital activism and examines whether they contribute to meaningful environmental action or primarily serve symbolic and ideological purposes. Drawing on the theoretical perspectives of Ecolinguistics, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), Frame Theory, and Metaphor Theory, the research analyses environmental hashtags such as **#GreenLanguage**, **#EcoJustice**, **#PeopleNotProfit**, **#EcoFriendly**, and **#FridaysForFuture** on Instagram. Using a qualitative research design, the study investigates how these hashtags construct ecological narratives, shape environmental awareness, and influence public engagement. The analysis suggests that environmental discourse on social media frequently promotes symbolic engagement rather than substantial environmental action, reflecting the phenomenon of slacktivism. Furthermore, environmental hashtags are often employed to advance broader political and ideological agendas, linking ecological concerns to issues of justice, power, and governance. The study argues that the continued popularity of environmental hashtags is driven not only by environmental advocacy but also by their ability to generate visibility, social recognition, and ideological alignment.

Key words: Ecolinguistics, digital activism, environmental hashtags, social media, Critical Discourse Analysis, slacktivism, environmental communication, ecological narratives.

1. Introduction

Social media platforms, especially Instagram and Facebook, play a crucial role in environmental campaigns. Different platforms have their own ways of communication. For example, Twitter (X) mainly uses short and brief messages while Instagram focuses on sharing images along with captions. Tik Tok is based on short videos to express ideas and Facebook allows a mix of content such as videos, pictures, text posts, and links. Every platform therefore shapes how people express themselves and share information in creative ways. They create awareness in people about serious environmental issues such as deforestation, climate change, global warming, fossil fuel use and air pollution. Language serves social purposes. People not only describe the world with language, but they also construct meaning about their world through particular words and patterns. The same social issues that are often supported through traditional activism are also common in online activism. Online activism is a form of activism that tries to influence people's beliefs, opinions and attitudes. It includes activities such as sharing posts, signing online petitions and making an important issue a trend by posting and reposting it on social media. The goal is to convince other people that a specific social or environmental problem exists and that it must change. Some movements began on social media and later led to real-world action, such as the Arab Spring, **#MeToo**, and **#BlackLivesMatter movements**. Other movements started offline and later used social media to spread their message and gain support. Environmental activism mostly belongs to this second group, as environmental campaigns often begin through organizations and community actions and then use social media to increase awareness and encourage participation. An important example

is the #FridaysforFuture movement initiated by Greta Thunberg. This Movement aimed to mobilize the youth around the globe to advocate for climate change. However, regarding environmental problems, different ways of talking can normalize harmful practices and frame nature as “resources” rather than living systems. (Halliday, 1990). In countries like China and Europe social media usually presents environmental problems in a negative or economic way. For instance, it will focus on disasters or financial losses instead of focusing on environmental protection and sustainability. Similarly, social media activism focuses more on money, conflicts or social problems rather than public participation and protecting nature. This shifts people’s attention to short term or sensational news while the environmental problems and their consequences are kept in the background. Therefore, this Ecolinguistics analysis will critically assess whether online activism generally contributes to the protection of the environment or whether it is influenced by other hidden motivations, interests and agendas that may limit its overall impact. It will also address the concept of slacktivism that is examining whether online forms of activism represent meaningful environmental action or merely symbolic participation that does not produce any substantial real-world change.

Problem Statement

Ecolinguistics is a growing field that studies the connection between language and the environment. However, there is still not enough research on how environmental messages and storytelling are used in online campaigns, especially on social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram. Most earlier studies focus on environmental language in books, newspapers, or official reports. Very little attention has been paid to how language, storytelling and persuasive expression on social media are used to raise environmental awareness and how they influence people's behavior. In particular, it still remains vague whether online hashtags such as #SaveThePlanet and #SaveTheAmazon truly have a persuasive impact strong enough to make people believe that the planet is in crisis and urgently needs protection. It is also not clear whether such digital messages lead to real and practical environmental action, or they just remain symbolic expressions that are continuously reposted. Therefore, the study aims to address the gap of slacktivism which refers to minimal and low effort online actions such as posting hashtags, liking or sharing without leading to meaningful and practical environmental change.

Research Questions

This creates a gap that if these hashtags are not directly saving the planet, then what purpose do they serve?

Why are they repeatedly being used and reinforced across social media platforms?

Research Methodology

This study has been done through a qualitative research design grounded in equal linguistics and critical discourse analysis (CDA). The purpose of the study is to examine how environmental hashtags on social media construct ecological narratives and contribute to environmental activism. For this a qualitative approach is appropriate because the study focuses on rhetorical strategies and interpreting meanings embedded in digital discourse rather than simply measuring numerical data. The primary data for this study consists of social media posts, hashtags, captions and user comments from Instagram. The selected data was gathered from environmental activism pages and campaigns that commonly used in my mental hashtags such as #GreenLanguage, #PeopleNotProfit, #EcoFriendly, and #FridaysForFuture. A purposive sampling

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technique was used to select posts that contained environmental hashtags and generated a significant amount of user interaction through likes and comments. Special attention was given to posts that addressed environmental protection, ecological justice, climate change and environmental responsibility as well as sustainability. The data collected has been analyzed through an equal linguistic discourse analysis framework informed by CDA, Frame Theory and Metaphor Theory. The study analyzes publicly available social media content and usernames, and personal information is excluded to protect user privacy. The research focuses on the linguistic and discursive features of posts, comments and hashtags that are publicly accessible.

Literature Review

Language activism is a social effort that brings people, ideas and actions together to solve language related problems. This includes activities like promotion, campaigns, policy reforms and protests. The main goal is to create equal language rights for everyone. It is not just about language itself but it is also connected to other social issues like poverty, economy gender inequality, racial discrimination and political and cultural rights. This means language activism is part of a bigger fight for social justice. However, language becomes a problem when it is used to promote hidden ideologies and to exclude or marginalize certain groups of people. (De Korne, 2021)

The Hallidayan tradition Explains the connection between language and environmental problems. Michael Halliday argues that issues like pollution, destruction of nature, inequality and overuse of resources are not only scientific or environmental problems but also problems that linguists should pay attention to. He says that language reflects an anthropocentric view which means that it focuses mainly on humans and ignores nature. Because of this language sometimes encourages harmful behavior towards the environment. (Halliday, 2001)

Researchers working in the Hallidayan Tradition follow two main directions. The first direction is critical eco discourse analysis that studies environmental texts in news, advertisements and speeches. This examines how language shapes people's understanding of environmental issues. Scholars like Stibbe argue that media promotes economic growth and consumerism which harms the environment. The second direction is towards grammar itself, showing that even language structure influences thinking. For example, English grammar treats natural resources like water, oil and air as if they are unlimited. This creates the false impression that these resources will never run out. Therefore, it can be argued that grammar shapes how people understand and act in the world. (Stibbe,2015)

Dawson (2020) explores how hashtags work as a form of digital storytelling on social media. According to his study, hashtags are not simply labels used to organize posts but they help create shared stories and meanings among large groups of people online. Through repeated use, hashtags bring together individual posts, opinions, and experiences into a collective narrative that many people can identify with. Dawson introduces the concept of “**emergent storytelling**,” which refers to stories that develop gradually through the interactions of users and the algorithms of social media platforms. A single person does not control the story. Instead, it emerges as thousands of users repeatedly share, comment on, and engage with the same hashtag. This idea is particularly relevant to environmental hashtags such as **#SaveTheAmazon**, **#SaveThePlanet**, and **#FridaysForFuture**. These hashtags continue to be used not only because they encourage environmental action but also because they create a sense of belonging and shared identity among users. People participate in these online

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Online ISSN: 3006-5895

narratives because they feel emotionally connected to the cause and to others who support it. At the same time, social media algorithms reinforce these narratives by promoting popular and highly engaging content, making the hashtags more visible and encouraging further participation. So, the continued use of environmental hashtags may be explained not only by their potential to create change but also by their ability to build emotional connections, shared identities, and collective stories in digital spaces. The concept of Slacktivism was introduced by Evgeny Morozov to warn that people often underestimate the impact of online actions. Many people believe that simply joining a Facebook group, sharing the hashtag or liking a post is enough to show real support for an environmental cause. Most of the time this small online action becomes the end of their participation instead of the beginning. People feel that they have contributed enough so they don't take any real-world action. Campaigns like #SaveThePlanet can sometimes become examples of performative solidarity where people show support by sharing hashtags but there is no meaningful change in their behavior. They continue to damage the environment like they used to before. (Morozov, 2011)

Sanford et al. (2023) Studied how environmental messages spread on social media. He analyzed 510,000 tweets from 50 environmental activists and found that it's about environmental issues are shared more when they contain negative emotions like fear and urgency rather than positive emotions. This shows that people on social media are more likely to engage with alarming or crisis-based content.

Greenwashing is the practice where companies use environmental words like “green” and “sustainable” to appear responsible without changing their harmful behavior. Studies have found that people are largely skeptical of these claims with 35.54% of tweets expressing negative sentiments. Real examples include Toyota being fined one \$180 million for false emission claims and fast fashion brands like H&M promoting “sustainable collections” when in reality they are continuing mass production. This connects directly to the argument of this study. Just like corporate greenwashing, environmental hashtags use the same powerful language of crisis and urgency but fail to produce any behavioral change. The language performs environmentalism without practicing it and millions of people.

Theoretical Framework

Hashtags are not merely simple labels; they are discursive tools that are multilayered. They not only help in organizing meaning but also shape political interpretations and position speakers. From a broader linguistics perspective, Hashtags are Rhetorical devices, which users use for grabbing public attention to certain narrative. The hashtags that I have found through my research through Instagram includes #GreenLanguage, #EcoJustice #PeopleNotProfit #Ecofriendly do not only describe certain events, but are framed and connected to political, moral and environmental debates. This multilayered function of hashtags makes them a site for examining how language constructs and reflects social reality.

From a Critical Discourse Analysis perspective, hashtags are never neutral in linguistics, they are deeply embedded in power relations and ideologies. For example, #Green Language operates as an act of resistance by challenging dominant industrial and capitalist causes that normalize ecological destruction by demanding sustainable use of natural resources. This resistance can be shown from this caption of a post: OUR PLANET IS NOT A COMMODITY PROTECT IT

NOW #GreenLanguage

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Similarly, #EcoJustice shows a discourse that is globally accepted as a framework, allowing the environmental cause not only as a political issue but a question of ethical responsibility. In doing so, it legitimizes certain interpretations of environmental issues while delegitimizing others through corporate industrialization, showing discourse is a site where power is exercised through meaning making that is basically CDA's claim. Hashtags function as interpretive packages that structure how audiences understand events, this is Central to Frame theory. As Frame Theory explains, each hashtag activates a distinct cognitive and moral frame. #Greenlanguage constructs a discourse that can either support or harm ecology. Another hashtag that is #PeopleNotProfit introduces an economic justice frame that critiques systems that prioritize profits over Human life. These frames are shown as viral Hashtags under posts as captions like:

Week 317 Global climate strike with @fridaysforfutureupsala!

##ClimateJusticeNow #PeopleNotProfit #FridaysForFuture #ClimateStrike

This #PeopleNotProfit is used for social justice as post has a continuous caption that says March with us tomorrow for decolonization, climate and social justice, gender equality, antiracism and antifascism.

But below in comment section there is a comment that says
Will you soon be demonstrating for the Taliban or ISIS too?

This shows how this comment is used to attack the issue, it is used to dismiss political stance by exaggerating it to an extreme. The comment is an example of silencing strategy where instead of bringing environmental message to practice, the commenter uses such language that shows disagreement. This shows some hashtags are not neutral, they carry threat by those who oppose it. It is basically a political dimension of environmental language that Metaphor theory helps us to understand further.

Together, these frames expand the interpretation of the discourse. Frame theory explains how hashtags show political and moral interpretation of environmental issues, Metaphor theory reveals how these frames are constructed for environmental discourse in linguistics.

Metaphor theory reveals hashtags shape and influence environmental issues. Hashtags often combine metaphors that make complex ecological concerns easier to understand. Through these metaphors in hashtags, concepts such as environmental responsibility, justice and sustainability become accessible to online audiences.

The hashtag #Ecojustice extends the concept and combines human relationships with ecosystems. This hashtag metaphorically frames the environment as a key actor deserving protection.

However, an important observation emerging from this study is that the use of these metaphors does not necessarily translate into real world environmental action. While users frequently engage with hashtags such as #GreenLanguage, #Ecojustice, and #Ecofriendly, mostly these hashtags remain confined to online spaces through posting, sharing, liking, and commenting. For example, a social media campaign employing the hashtag #EcoJustice framed environmental protection as a matter of fairness and responsibility toward both people and the planet. In response, one user agreed with the campaign's environmental concerns but argued that meaningful change begins with individual behavior rather than large scale political or economic reforms. The commenter highlighted everyday practices such as waste segregation, reducing energy consumption, and avoiding unnecessary resource use. This response partially supports the metaphorical framing of environmental responsibility promoted by #EcoJustice, yet simultaneously shifts attention away from broader structural issues such as corporate

practices, governmental policies, and global inequalities.

The comment demonstrates how environmental hashtags can stimulate discussion and awareness, rather than advocating direct participation in environmental initiatives, the user redirects the conversation toward personal responsibility. Such responses suggest that environmental discourse on social media may encourage symbolic engagement and debate more than focusing on practical environmental action. Consequently, although metaphorical hashtags successfully frame environmental issues in accessible and emotionally compelling ways, their influence often remains discursive, shaping opinions and debates rather than producing measurable environmental outcomes.

This raises an important question: if these hashtags are not directly producing measurable environmental change, why do they continue to be used and reinforced across social media platforms?

Ideological function and Slacktivism

The discursive strategies employed in social media climate campaigns reveal broader ideological patterns that extend beyond the simple communication of environmental information. Through the repeated use of metaphors, emotive language, slogans, and hashtag driven content, these campaigns actively shape environmental consciousness and encourage audiences to adopt particular views about climate responsibility. This process aligns with Gyawali's (2020) ideological interaction theory, which argues that continuous engagement with texts influences beliefs, attitudes, and subsequent actions. In this context, language functions as a bridge between humans and the natural world. Social media posts do more than present ecological facts, they construct narratives that define responsible environmental behavior, highlight urgent environmental challenges, and suggest specific forms of action. The ideologies embedded within these discourses often encourage individuals' responses to climate change while giving comparatively less attention to structural or systemic solutions. Furthermore, the combination of metaphors, emotional appeals, and symbolic hashtags bring people together to eco ideological identity, encouraging audiences to internalize and reproduce the environmental values promoted by these campaigns.

However, the ideological influence of social media campaigns is not always translated into meaningful environmental action. The findings suggest that online engagement can sometimes take the form of self-aggrandizing **slacktivism**, which refers to low effort forms of online participation such as posting hashtags, liking content, or sharing messages without engaging in real offline action. Where individuals participate in environmental discourse primarily to appear socially aware and responsible rather than to create real change. For example, a person may share a hashtag such as **#SaveThePlanet** to signal environmental concern while continuing unsustainable practices such as excessive consumption, fast fashion purchases, or energy waste. This creates a significant challenge because it becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish genuine activism from symbolic online participation. Traditionally, activism involved collective organization, public demonstrations, and personal commitment, whereas digital platforms allow users to express support through simple actions such as liking, sharing, or reposting content. As a result, online participation is often mistaken for genuine environmental engagement. Campaigns such as **#FridaysForFuture**, associated with Greta Thunberg, successfully mobilized millions of young people and generated widespread awareness, yet evidence suggests that many participants did not follow this engagement with sustained behavioral or lifestyle changes. Consequently, while social media discourse plays an important role in shaping environmental

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ideologies and raising awareness, it may also encourage superficial forms of participation that create the illusion of action without necessarily producing long term environmental commitment.

While previous studies on environmental hashtags often focus on slacktivism and question whether the online use of hashtags lead to meaningful environmental actions, the findings of this study suggest a different concern. The analysis indicates that hashtags such as **#GreenLanguage**, **#Ecojustice** and **#Ecofriendly** are not used only to promote environmental awareness, instead they frequently serve broader political and ideological purposes. Environmental language is often connected to social conflicts, power, justice, and governance, allowing ecological concerns linked to political narratives.

This study addresses an important gap in existing research. Many studies assume that environmental hashtags function primarily as tools for ecological advocacy. However, the present study demonstrates that these hashtags can also be used with purpose to political positions, build certain group identities and make certain perspectives seem valid. In many cases, Environmental discourse becomes a tool through which users express political values and show competing ideologies.

Discussion: The Performative Nature of Climate Hashtags

The research gap that is Centre of this study asks a pointed question: if hashtags like **#BreathePakistan** are not directly saving the planet, what purpose do they serve, and why do they continue to be emphasized across social media platforms? The evidence suggests that the focus is not on environmental action but on the politics of appearance, a phenomenon where the performance of concern replaces genuine commitment to change.

The Dawn Media Breathe Pakistan International Climate Change Conference (2nd edition, April 2026, Jinnah Convention Centre, Islamabad) offers a textbook illustration of this contradiction. The event was promoted with urgency "The time to act is now" and accompanied by a cluster of hashtags including **#BreathePakistan**, **#ClimateChange**, and **#ClimateConference**. These hashtags signal environmental concern and civic responsibility. These hashtags spread widely on social media, attract public attention, and create the perception of collective action against climate change. However, the event responsible for promoting them was itself linked to activities that contributed to environmental degradation. Attendees traveled to Islamabad in private vehicles, worsening air quality conditions in the city. Single use plastic water bottles were distributed inside the venue. Breathe encouraged environmental awareness, the consequences of the conference remained largely unexamined. This contradiction highlights the gap between environmental discourse and environmental practice.

This is not a coincidence; it is a pattern that answers the research gap directly. Hashtags like **#BreathePakistan** serve a political and reputational function far more than an environmental one. For media organizations like Dawn, the adoption of climate change hashtags enables organizations to construct a discourse of environmental responsibility while enhancing institutional legitimacy. For political figures and sponsors who attend, appear on panels, or share the hashtag, it signals alignment with globally respected values sustainability, climate justice, and future generations without any commitment or behavioral change. The hashtag becomes a form of symbolic capital: easy to produce, widely visible, and largely free.

This also explains why these hashtags are repeatedly used across different platforms.

Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review

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Every time they are shared, they strengthen the connection between users and environmental awareness. Social media algorithms reward engagement, so climate content, especially from well-known institutions, continues to spread. Audiences participate by liking, sharing, and reposting, each interaction further creating the hashtag appears more effective than it actually is. People feel they are part of the solution simply by engaging with the content, a psychological mechanism known as slacktivism the substitution of low effort digital actions for meaningful real-world change.

What the #BreathePakistan example ultimately reveals is a structural contradiction embedded in elite climate advocacy. The conference format with its flights, vehicles, printed materials, catered food, and bottled water reproduces the very consumption patterns that drive environmental degradation, while the hashtag wraps this activity in the language of resistance. The gap, therefore, is not merely rhetorical. It reflects a deeper failure: the prioritization of narrative over action, of branding over accountability. Until climate advocacy measures its success by the popularity of hashtags rather than real practical environmental changes, the gap between what is said online and what is done on the ground will increase.

Therefore, the significance of these hashtags may not lie in their ability to generate immediate environmental actions but in their role in how political ideas are formed through public discussion that is going through the media platforms. By examining how environmental language is mobilized within broader political agendas, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the complex relationship between Eco linguistic discourse, digital activism and ideological discussion through social media platforms.

Conclusion

This study has critically examined the role of environmental hashtags in online activism through the lens of Eco linguistics under theories such as Critical Discourse analysis, Frame theory and Metaphor theory. The Study examines that hashtags such as #GreenLanguage #EcoJustice #BreathePakistan are not only environmental labels but are ideological tools that construct ecological narratives and shape public perception of environmental responsibility.

However, the findings strongly suggest that these hashtags serve political and institutional purposes rather than practical environmental action. They allow corporations and organizations to perform environmental action without showing any behavioural change. The #BreathePakistan conference exemplifies this contradiction

most clearly, where climate language was promoted but it also contributed to environmental degradation.

The concept of slacktivism remains central to understanding of this study. Digital participation through sharing, liking and reposting shows participation without any real change. This cycle continues because social media content prioritize engagement over accountability.

Ultimately, this study concludes that environmental hashtags are not meaningless, but their significance mostly lies in political discourse than producing ecological outcomes. For online activism to move beyond just slacktivism it must be accompanied by behavioral changes and measureable environmental action. The gap between what is said online and what is done in real remains the most urgent challenge for digital environmental advocacy today.

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