From #selfie to #edgy. Hashtag networks and images associated with the hashtag #jews on Instagram

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on an analysis of networked representations of Jews and Jewishness on social media. It builds on prior research on the usage of Twitter hashtags for issue framing (Meraz, 2017; Meraz and Papacharissi, 2013), and extends it to the leading photo-sharing platform Instagram. We collected a dataset of 1500 Instagram posts marked with the hashtags #jew, #jewish, and #jews, and combine qualitative content analysis and co-occurrence network analysis to explore themes and representational practices in Instagram content about Jews and Jewishness. Besides a range of representations of private lives, Jewish culture, and history, that are shaped by Instagram’s platform affordances, it identifies alternative practices, including meme annotation and sharing political content, notably about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This work contributes to the understanding of how hashtags and visuals are used in the construction of collective representations on social media.

1. Introduction

On October 27, 2018, a far-right shooter killed eleven people in a Pittsburgh synagogue. When it emerged that he left footprints on social media, questions arose about the role of social networking sites (SNS) in his radicalization, and about the abundance of antisemitic content on social media (Baumgartner, 2018). A recent study reports an increase in antisemitic language use in fringe online communities (Finkelstein et al., 2018), and, according to the World Jewish Congress (2017), more than 1000 anti-Jewish posts were published daily on mainstream SNS in 2016.

It is apparent why social media scholars have mainly studied Jews as targets of online hatred (e.g., Finkelstein et al., 2018; Holtz and Wagner, 2009). Much of our knowledge of media portrayals of Jews is provided by the literature on antisemitism. These studies document in detail how social representations are constructed to delegitimize Jews, through stereotyping, dehumanization, victim-perpetrator role reversal, and evoking conspiracy theories (Jaspal, 2014; Wodak, 2015). Antisemitic media discourse stands as a paradigmatic example of how media contribute to the ideological construction of ‘otherness’. They are crucial in the definition of collective identities, and of the boundaries between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ (Hall, 1997): the process of self-definition is concurrently one of definition of the ‘other’, and vice versa.

These processes do not only take place in traditional media, but also occur on social media platforms (Nakamura and Chow-White, 2012), where ‘social and group identities may [be] primed by the context of the social media environment itself, the use of nonverbal and visual cues by users, and even linguistic cues denoting group identity’ (Carr, 2017: 8), and where users are both consumers and
produces of representations. Furthermore, the technical and social properties of SNS produce representations that are increasingly networked. Through practices of social tagging and hashtagging, individual representations of a given issue become connected (Highfield and Leaver, 2015). Platforms’ tagging affordances then become powerful vehicles for the collective production of meaning (Meraz, 2017; Meraz and Papacharissi, 2013).

This study explores networked representations of Jews and Jewishness on the leading photo-sharing platform Instagram. Visuals play a well-documented role in the construction of online identities (e.g., Ibrahim, 2015; Zhao et al., 2008), and in the communication and reproduction of prejudice (e.g., Richardson and Wodak, 2009; Volpato et al., 2011). We collected a dataset of 1500 Instagram posts marked with the hashtags #jew, #jewish, and #jews, and combine manual content analysis of images and co-occurrence network analysis of hashtags to explore how hashtags are used to shape networked representations.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. SNS and ethno-cultural identities

Representations of ethnic and cultural identities increasingly occur online (Grasmuck et al., 2009; Nakamura and Chow-White, 2012). While SNS are prime spaces for self-(re)presentation, they are also sites for representation of the ‘other’. Social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1986) puts that perceived group memberships are crucial to the definition of the self and the other. An individual’s personal identity is closely connected to the attributes of the social groups they associate themselves with. These ingroup attributes are distinguished from the attributes ascribed to outgroups. From this perspective, the process of self-(re)presentation is concurrently one of representation of the ‘other’. Group processes can be activated in self-presentations online, through, for example, profile pictures revealing a religious affiliation, or the use of ‘us/them’ language in self-disclosures (Carr, 2017). In addition, more deliberate portrayals of ‘others’ may be found, for example in travel photography. The present work is concerned with collective representations of Jews as ‘self’ and ‘other’.

The literature on ‘digital religion’ (Campbell, 2013) and ‘digital race’ (Nakamura, 2008; Nakamura and Chow-White, 2012) deals with the processes whereby these core components of individual and collective identities interact with online affordances for self-presentation and social interaction. As SNS offer users multiple tools for identity performance, including narrative self-description in status updates and ‘about me’ sections, profile pictures, and photo galleries (Carr, 2017; Zhao et al., 2008), they have been studied as instruments for ethnic and cultural identity construction. This research has focused on how ethnic minority youth use SNS to articulate racial consciousness and negotiate dominant discourse on ethnic minorities (Grasmuck et al., 2009; Mainsah, 2011). Specific research on Jewish uses of social media has focused on how different religious subgroups and communities respond to and use SNS (see Campbell, 2015, for an overview). There are other dimensions to Jewish identity, including culture, ethnicity, and nationality (Boyarin and Boyarin, 1993), that have not received much scholarly attention in this context.

2.2. Instagram

Instagram stands as the embodiment of the ‘visual turn’ (Mirzoeff, 2009) in social media. It is a platform that enables users to share images and videos with an approved audience. It allows them to upload and edit photographs from mobile phone cameras, publish images on their profile page, follow and tag other users, and like and comment on other users’ postings. Launched in 2010 as a mobile phone photo-editing app, Instagram has evolved into one of the largest SNS globally, reaching one billion monthly active users in 2018 (Statista, 2018). Uses and gratifications research has identified motivations for people to turn to online image sharing, including self-presentation, self-chronicling, social interaction, entertainment and escapism (Alhabash and Ma, 2017; Lee et al., 2015).

As an essentially mobile application, Instagram affords the instantaneous capturing and sharing of everyday practices. Its visual grammar, then, is experience-based (Gibbs et al., 2015; Manovich, 2017). ‘Platform vernacular’ (Gibbs et al., 2015: 257) are the genres of communication which ‘emerge from the ongoing interactions between platforms and users’. They are dynamic, shared sets of communicative conventions shaped by the platform’s specific affordances and by users’ appropriation of these affordances. They apply to both content (what we capture and share) and form (how we capture and share given subjects). Manovich (2017: 53) writes that Instagram images ‘are more likely […] to show some subjects rather than others, and are also more likely to show these subjects in particular ways in terms of composition, point of view, focus, lighting, etc.’ People, for example, are likely to be the focal point of the photo, food to be shown from certain angles, landmarks and sunsets are more likely to be photographed than other subjects. Prior research has shown that typical Instagram content includes selfies, and photographs of food, pets, sports, fashion, etc. (Hu et al., 2014). While Instagram favours instant photo sharing, its affordances for photo editing (notably through filters) encourage the publication of images that differ from the original (Highfield and Leaver, 2016): carefully constructed and highly customized.

2.3. Hashtags and networked representations

Like Twitter users (Wang et al., 2011), Instagram users annotate posts with keywords to categorize, contextualize, or highlight topics, using the hash sign as a prefix to a chosen keyword or phrase (e.g., #photooftheday). These are organically transformed into hyperlinks redirecting to all other content on the platform labelled with given hashtag. As hashtags allow users to ‘self-curate’ thematic content (Meraz, 2017), the practice of hashtagging produces a dynamic, user-driven taxonomy of online content (Highfield and Leaver, 2015). In this process ‘ad hoc publics’ (Bruns and Burgess, 2015) are called into being when hashtags (e.g., #ows [Occupy...
Wall Street], #egypt) are used to articulate individual and social identities and engage in social movements (Meraz, 2017; Meraz and Papacharissi, 2013). In a less deliberate manner, ‘ad hoc communities’ can emerge around hashtags marking a shared interest (e.g., #coffee, Zappavigna, 2014). Research on ‘Black Twitter’ has shown that racialized hashtags can be used as markers of racial identity online (Florini, 2014).

A growing body of literature has begun to examine the narrative properties of hashtags. Meraz (2017) and Meraz and Papacharissi (2013) conceptualize hashtags as framing vehicles. Framing, as defined by Entman (2007), is a process of discursive construction in which specific elements of issues are selected and presented in a way that suggests coherence and proposes an interpretation. Networked framing occurs when ‘particular problem definitions, causal interpretations, moral evaluations, and/or treatment recommendations attain prominence through crowdsourcing practices’ (Meraz and Papacharissi, 2013: 159). It is an organic and iterative process in which issues acquire salience and meaning through collective hashtag usage (Meraz, 2017; Meraz and Papacharissi, 2013). Other authors have studied hashtags as vehicles for communicating affect (Wang et al., 2011), and as meta-communicative devices. Daer et al. (2014) distinguish five rhetorical functions of hashtags: emphasis (description, e.g., #evidenceofspring), critique (#whatishethinking), identification (#ihatemyself), iteration (humour or irony, e.g., #hashtag), and rallying (#blacklivesmatter). Giaxoglou (2017) describes how the hashtag #JeSuisCharlie emerged as a vehicle for narrative stance-taking after the 2015 terrorist attacks at the Charlie Hebdo magazine offices. Zappavigna (2015) distinguishes three principal functions of hashtags: construing experience (such as content labelling), enacting relationships (such as indicating a stance), and marking metadiscourse. Taken together, these studies indicate that hashtags are potentially powerful agents for the collective production of meaning.

Much of our knowledge in this field is provided by studies of Twitter hashtags. Research on Instagram hashtags is only emerging. Although architectural parallels exist between Twitter and Instagram (Highfield and Leaver, 2015), Instagram’s affordances for content tagging and captioning are different: while a tweet is limited to 280 characters, an Instagram caption can contain up to 2200 characters and 30 hashtags. It is possible that Instagram users engage in different, perhaps more nuanced or elaborate, self-curating processes than Twitter users. Furthermore, both platforms appeal to different user needs. As Twitter is mainly used for sharing and following information and news, and participating in conversations (Alhabash and Ma, 2017; Java et al., 2007), Twitter hashtags can mark the ebb and flow of public discussions and events (Meraz and Papacharissi, 2013). Instagram, on the other hand, is oriented toward self-expression and entertainment (Alhabash and Ma, 2017; Lee et al., 2015). Taken together, these considerations indicate a need to expand our understanding of hashtag usage on Instagram.

2.4. Scope

Its properties and affordances make Instagram a powerful platform for image-driven, networked storytelling. Image-sharing SNS function as self-chronicles and ‘emotional archives’ (Palmer, 2010) where users construct narratives of the self. While the sequence of a user’s postings can be read as an ongoing account of their experiences, feelings, and thoughts, a hashtag feed—a thread of postings marked with a given hashtag—can be regarded as a collection of thematically connected postings by all involved users in the network, offering multiple perspectives on a topic, issue or event.

This study explores how hashtags are used to shape networked representations of Jews and Jewishness on Instagram. Research has shown that semantic representations can be derived from hashtag co-occurrence (Türker and Sulak, 2018; Wang et al., 2011), and that hashtag co-occurrence is an indicator for the presence of networked frames and representations (Meraz, 2017; Meraz and Papacharissi, 2013; Wang et al., 2011). Prior research has combined network analysis with qualitative techniques to detect and subsequently describe networked frames (Meraz and Papacharissi, 2013). The current work combines both techniques for empirical validation. We begin by conducting an inductive exploration of Instagram imagery associated with the term ‘Jews’, in order to gain insight in characteristic themes and representational practices. Next, we use co-occurrence network analysis to examine patterns in the hashtags used to annotate this content. Third, we compare the findings of both analyses, to assess to what extent hashtag co-occurrence can predict inductively identified categories in the data.

3. Materials and methods

3.1. Materials

To collect Instagram content about Jews and Jewishness, we began by identifying the three most used relevant hashtags on Instagram, by conducting an Instagram search query using the root word ‘#jew’. This produced a list of all hashtags containing the string ‘jew’, along with the number of posts per hashtag. Among the top results were #jewellery, #jewelrydesign and #jewelryaddict. The three most frequent relevant results for this study were #jewish (labelling 1,170,775 Instagram posts at the start of the data collection), #jew (821,552 posts), and #jews (660,561 posts). Instagram hashtags are not case-sensitive: a search query using the hashtag #jew will show all postings marked with #Jew and #jew. These three hashtags, #jew, #jewish, and #jews, were used as seeds for data harvest. Following the procedure described by Scherr et al. (2019), we scraped the 10,000 most recent Instagram posts from each query hashtag feed in reversed chronological order, starting on June 13, 2018, 07:00 GMT, using the Selenium (Selenium Project, 2018) and BeautifulSoup (Richardson, 2018) libraries in Python (version 3.5.2 for Linux) for data harvest and parsing respectively. Through this procedure we collected a dataset of 30,000 Instagram posts (10,000 per query hashtag). Per post, we retrieved the image file and the available metadata using Instagram’s public API: (1) caption, (2) hashtags, (3) medium type (image or video), (4) date and timestamp, (5) number of likes, and (6) number of comments.
Pre-processing of the data consisted of three steps (see Fig. 1). First, as posts containing more than one of the query hashtags were extracted more than once, the dataset contained duplicates. 6744 double URLs were identified and removed using the .drop_duplicates() function from the Pandas library (McKinney et al., 2010) in Python, and its default keep = first argument, which preserves only the first observation. While this method may have produced an apparent overrepresentation of one of the three query hashtags in the data, it had no impact on the analysis, as the data were later aggregated on hashtag level (see section 3.3). Second, to avoid a distortion of the data, we deleted all duplicate hashtag sequences following the same procedure. The rationale behind this decision was that some Instagram accounts upload multiple images at once, repeating the same hashtag sequence in every post. Data cleaning resulted in a dataset of 11,587 unique posts.

Third, using Python’s built-in ‘random’ module, we drew a simple random sample of 1500 observations (84.73% images, 15.27% videos) for analysis. The average number of hashtags per post was 17.8 (SD = 9.3, min = 1, max = 38). The average number of likes was 67.8 (SD = 248.5, median = 30, min = 0, max = 6773); the average number of comments 3 (M = 2.9, SD = 14.4, min = 0, max = 456).

Fig. 2 visualizes the number of posts in the sample on a timeline, along with possibly relevant international events, identified using LexisNexis2, that preceded or overlapped with the data collection timespan. 1.53% of 1500 posts were from before May 21; for 1.87% no timestamp was extracted. The lower counts before June 4-5 are explained by the higher overall usage of the hashtag #jewish: the script had to go further back in time to retrieve the same total amount of posts from the #jew and #jews feeds. It should be noted that the three query hashtags were merely seeds for data retrieval. This study is not concerned with the query hashtag feeds, but with the terms associated with the query hashtags, based on hashtag co-occurrences (see Section 3.3).

All protocols of this study conform to the ethical guidelines outlined by the Association of Internet Researchers (Markham and Buchanan, 2012). Specifically, to protect the anonymity of individual Instagram users, we have not included user profile information in the study. For illustration purposes, examples of users’ postings are reproduced in the findings section of this paper. All identifying information has been obfuscated or removed from these images. Finally, we warn the reader that these examples include distasteful and offensive content.

[Fig. 1. Data harvest and processing.]

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2 We searched for news content using the search terms ‘Jews’ and ‘Israel’, and the following criteria: (1) date range: May 22, 2018 to June 13, 2018; (2) publication type: newspapers; (3) sources: The New York Times, The Guardian, The Jerusalem Post. From the search results we selected events either covered by at least two out of three sources, or covered in at least three news articles.
3.2. Manual content analysis

To explore themes and representational practices, we started by conducting a manual content analysis. While our focus was on the image, textual components (hashtags and captions) of Instagram content were included in the analysis. We considered both content (themes, subjects) and visual aesthetics. As we were interested in exploring patterns in the data, we adopted a combined inductive-deductive approach. A first step was designing a classification scheme to code the content of the posts, through a grounded theory-informed process of open and axial coding (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1998). According to grounded theory, categories and patterns emerge from the data through close reading and constant comparison. Initially the data are read ‘line-by-line’ and coded in as many categories as possible (open coding). Through the iterative and reflexive processes of constant comparison of the coded categories, and of ‘new’ material with already coded categories, patterns in the data—core categories—are identified (axial coding).

Using this approach, we analysed a subsample of 300 randomly selected posts. To observe the principle of theoretical sensitivity, the ‘ability to see relevant data and to reflect upon empirical data material with the help of theoretical terms’ (Kelle, 2007: 193), this review was conducted by a team of four researchers from different relevant sub-disciplines. It included close reading and re-reading of the data, and resulted in the identification of 39 content categories. A second step was a review of these categories. Categories that were highly similar or closely connected were merged; very small categories were merged into a ‘miscellaneous’ category. The final classification consisted of sixteen mutually exclusive categories, outlined in Table 1.

Next, these categories were used as preliminary codes and applied to all items (n = 1500). A coding scheme was constructed, detailing inclusion criteria for every category (Table 1). All categories were set up as dichotomous variables (0 = no, 1 = yes); a single category was assigned to every Instagram post. One author coded the full sample; a second coder double-coded 10% of items. Coding was preceded by several training sessions, in which test codings were compared, coding disagreements discussed, and coding category descriptions refined. Cohen’s kappa values for inter-coder agreement were satisfactory for all variables, varying between 0.63 and 1 (M = 0.87, SD = 0.13).

3.3. Co-occurrence network analysis

The second step was a co-occurrence network analysis of hashtags to explore how hashtags are used to frame Jews and Jewishness on Instagram. Co-occurrence network analysis aims to identify and visualize patterns of co-occurring words in a corpus. It has been used to identify topics (Weng and Menczer, 2015) and networked frames on Twitter (Meraz, 2017; Meraz and Papacharissi, 2013). We began by constructing a corpus consisting of the hashtag sequences (n = 1500) only: a text file where every sentence represents a hashtag sequence. Using the Scikit-Learn library in Python (Scikit-learn Developers, 2017) and its CountVectorizer function, 10,626 unique hashtags were identified in this corpus, and transformed into a term-term co-occurrence matrix of dimensions 10,626 × 10,626, where every cell represents the frequency of co-occurrence of two hashtags within a sentence (in other words, the number of sentences in the corpus containing both hashtags). This matrix was used as input for Gephi (version 0.9.2 for Linux), an open-source software package for network analysis. Gephi transforms network data into actors (‘nodes’) and ties between the actors (‘edges’) that can be plotted in a network graph (Jacomy et al., 2014). Every hashtag becomes a node, and every co-occurrence of two hashtags becomes an edge. The weights of the edges represent the frequency of co-occurrence of two hashtags: the more often two given hashtags co-occur, the stronger their interconnectedness, and the stronger the edge. Gephi laid out a network consisting of
Table 1
Content categories in Instagram posts (n = 1500).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Sensitizing concepts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>People and private lives</strong></td>
<td><strong>(24.67%)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People and private lives</td>
<td>Visualization and aestheticization of the self and ordinary life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Self-portraits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Photographs portraying social relationships (family, friends,...),</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>everyday activities (eating, sports,...) and special occasions (weddings,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>everyday artefacts (food, clothing,...), everyday settings (home,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>...)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture and history</td>
<td><strong>Art and architecture (8.93%)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Visualization of Jewish material and symbolic culture around the world</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>'Insta'-hashtags: #instagood, #likeforlike,...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Self-referential hashtags: #happy, #jewishboy, #motivation,...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Content-related hashtags: #breakfast, #friends,...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hashtags indicating locations: #telaviv,...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Content-related: #synagogue, #jewishart,...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hashtags indicating locations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Content-related hashtags: #prayer, #jewishculture, ...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Commemorative hashtags: #memorial, #neverforget,...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Emotive hashtags: #sad, #impressed,...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Content-related hashtags: #wwii, #auschwitz,...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural production</td>
<td><strong>Memetic content (16.8%)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bricolage of visual and textual content from different pop-cultural sources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Antisemitic memes (2.07%)</td>
<td>Memes depicting Jewish stereotypes; Holocaust denial, approval, replacing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ridiculing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Jews as hook-nosed, money-grubbing, evil,...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nazi memes (0.8%)</td>
<td>Memes referring to Nazism, without being unequivocally antisemitic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conspiracy theories (0.87%)</td>
<td>Memes expressing conspiracy theories (about Jews seeking world</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>dominance or controlling the media)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jewish memes (0.73%)</td>
<td>Memes about Jewish tradition and practices, from a Jewish perspective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Other) memes (12.33%)</td>
<td>Other memes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inspirational and religious</td>
<td>Inspirational and motivational quotes, life advice, holy scripture verses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>quotes (5.93%)</td>
<td>from different religions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pop-cultural references (4.93%)</td>
<td>Non-memetic content referring to popular culture (music, literature,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>television,...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Images of non-religious books, pop stars; movie screenshots; album covers;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Politics and ideology</td>
<td><strong>Israeli-Palestinian conflict (4.53%)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Content about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Israeli and Palestinian flags</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Maps of Israel, Palestinian territories</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Photographs of the conflict zone, soldiers, victims</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cartoons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alternative voices (3%)</td>
<td>Content about or from other social and activist movements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peripheral content</td>
<td><strong>Advertising (5.87%)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>References to activist movements: #gaypride, #feminism,...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hashtags expressing a stance: #prayforisrael, #freepalestine, #coexist,...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Calls for action ('Order now',...)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jewellery (4.4%)</td>
<td>Photographs of jewellery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miscellaneous (9.33%)</td>
<td>Miscellaneous</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

10,626 nodes and 201,906 edges. For interpretative purposes, the ten percent most connected hashtags were retained for the analysis, resulting in a network (density = 0.153) of 504 nodes and 19,373 edges. Network density is the proportion of the actual number of edges within the maximum number of edges possible within a network. It takes a value between 0 and 1, 1 indicating maximal interconnectedness between all nodes. Larger networks tend to have a lower network density, because of a lower probability for every node to be connected to every other node (Bruggeman, 2008).
We used the lay-out algorithm ForceAtlas2 to plot the network graph, and the LinLog mode for visual enhancement. As a force-directed algorithm, ForceAtlas2 constructs an organic system in which interconnected nodes gravitate to one another. It also aims to avoid overlapping edges. The LinLog mode plots nodes in a more easily readable format (Jacomy et al., 2014). In a final step, we adjusted the size of the nodes according to their degree centrality (DC), and defined communities (clusters) based on Gephi’s default modularity algorithm (see Section 4.2). DC is a measure of connectedness: the more edges a node possesses, the higher its centrality in the network, and the stronger its DC. The average DC was 76.9, meaning that on average each hashtag co-occurred with approximately 77 other hashtags.

4. Findings

4.1. Content categories

The first objective was to examine themes and representational practices associated with the hashtags #jew, #jewish, and #jews. Sixteen content categories emerged from the content analysis. They can be roughly categorised into five groups: people and private lives, culture and history, cultural production, politics and ideology, and peripheral content, and are outlined in Table 1. ‘Peripheral’ content were advertisements (posts mentioning prices or including a call for action [‘Order now’]), posts in the ‘miscellaneous’ category, and images of jewellery. The latter category emerged due to lexical conflation: on Instagram, the word ‘jew’ is used as an abbreviation for ‘jewellery’. Rather than discard these categories, we consider their presence an observation in its own right.

While we identified a range of themes and representational practices, the analysis also revealed that the hashtags #jew, #jewish, and #jew, are used to caption internet memes, the second category in order of magnitude. Apart from these hashtags, the majority of memes bore no references to Jews or Jewishness. Memes that were antisemitic, contained references to Nazism or conspiracy theories, and Jewish memes, are reported as separate categories.

4.2. Hashtag networks

The second aim was to identify networked representations based on co-occurring hashtags. Fig. 3 shows the network graph. Four communities, or clusters, emerged from the analysis. Referring to each cluster’s most central nodes, we distinguish (1) a ‘#jewish-love-art cluster’ (53.8% of all nodes, the green cluster in the graph), (2) a ‘#jew-memes-meme cluster’ (19.1%, yellow), (3) a ‘#jews-israel-jerusalem cluster’ (16.3%, blue), and (4) a ‘#christian-religion-jesus-muslim cluster’ (10.9%, red).

Modularity is a measure of network structure. It represents connectedness within clusters compared to connectedness between clusters (Jacomy et al., 2014). Pairs of strongly interconnected nodes are assigned to the same cluster; pairs of weakly interconnected nodes to different clusters. Values range from 0 to 1. High-modularity networks have strongly defined communities (Blondel et al., 2008; Bruggeman, 2008). With a network modularity of 0.355, the four clusters are significantly disparate, while sharing a substantial amount of nodes. Fig. 3 shows they overlap considerably, particularly the #jewish-love-art, #jews-israel-jerusalem, and #christian-religion-jesus-muslim clusters. Despite its apparent attachment to the other clusters—some edges between nodes from the #jew-memes-meme cluster and either #jewish-love-art, #jews-israel-jerusalem, or #christian-religion-jesus-muslim clusters can be observed—the #jew-memes-meme community seems to be fundamentally separate, suggesting its hashtags might carry different meanings from the hashtags in the other communities.

4.3. Clusters and contents

In this section we examine to what extent hashtag clusters correspond with the inductively identified categories in the data. Prior to exploring this relationship, every Instagram post in the sample was assigned to a cluster, based on hashtag prevalence. For example, a post annotated with seven hashtags from the #jewish-love-art cluster, five from the #jews-israel-jerusalem cluster, none from the #christian-religion-jesus-muslim, and three from the #jew-memes-meme cluster, was assigned to the #jewish-love-art cluster. In case of an equal number of dominant hashtags (11.6% of cases), the post was marked as belonging to multiple clusters and discarded for further analysis. Table 2 shows the breakdown of clusters by content category. The larger categories (private lives, art and architecture, tradition and culture, history, inspirational quotes, pop-cultural references, Israeli-Palestinian conflict, memes, and advertisements) were retained for a chi-square test of independence, which showed a significant association between categories and clusters (χ² = 1489.3, n = 1326, df = 27, p < .0001). Inspection of the Pearson residuals revealed strong positive associations between private lives, art and architecture, history, and advertisements, and the #jewish-love-art cluster; internet memes and the #jew-memes-meme cluster; tradition and culture, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the #jews-israel-jerusalem cluster; and inspirational quotes and the #christian-religion-jesus-muslim cluster.

4.3.1. #jewish-love-art cluster

The algorithm assigned a majority of nodes (53.7%) to the #jewish-love-art cluster. The more connections a node has, the more central its position in the network, and the bigger its size in the graph. #jewish (DC = 479) is the most connected node in this cluster, followed by #love (373), #art (251), #instagood (239), #travel (219), and #history (217). Hashtags that share more occurrences are placed closer to each other, whereas the distance between less frequently co-occurring hashtags will be larger.

In the upper half of the cluster we find generic Instagram hashtags (#instagram, #photooftheday,…), and references to social relationships (#love, #friendship,…), positive sentiment (#happy, #amazing,…), and aesthetics (#beautiful, #art,…). While these
are scattered over the cluster, some ‘local’ themes can be discerned: jewellery/fashion (#jewellery, #style, #fashion,…); gastronomy (#foodporn, #deli,…); celebrations (#party, #jewishwedding,…), cultural products and practices (#challah, #barmitzvah,…). Table 2 shows that most posts depicting jewellery were indeed assigned to this cluster. The other hashtag themes are associated with content visualizing people and private lives, the most prominent category in this cluster (33.24%). These were selfies, and snapshots of daily lives, taken and uploaded by (Jewish) Instagram users. While a range of relationships, activities and objects were visualized, what these posts had in common was an aestheticization of the self, social relationships, and ordinary life. In terms of content, they

Fig. 3. Co-occurrence network graph of hashtags, showing the four communities: #jewish-#love-#art cluster (green), #jew-#memes-#meme cluster (yellow), #jews-#israel-#jerusalem cluster (blue), #christian-#religion-#jesus-#muslim cluster (red). Resolution = 1. (For interpretation of the references to colour in this figure legend, the reader is referred to the web version of this article.)
Table 2: Distribution of themes across clusters (n = 1326).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>n(%)</th>
<th>#jew-memes #meme</th>
<th>#jewish-love #art</th>
<th>#jews-israel #jerusalem</th>
<th>#christian-religion-jesus #muslim</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Private lives</td>
<td>14 (6.11)</td>
<td>240 (33.24)</td>
<td>63 (22.03)</td>
<td>4 (4.49)</td>
<td>321 (24.21)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Art and architecture</td>
<td>1 (0.44)</td>
<td>103 (14.27)</td>
<td>11 (3.85)</td>
<td>7 (7.87)</td>
<td>122 (9.2)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tradition and culture</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>40 (5.54)</td>
<td>39 (13.64)</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>79 (5.96)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>62 (8.59)</td>
<td>7 (2.45)</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>69 (5.2)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pop-cultural references</td>
<td>7 (3.06)</td>
<td>47 (6.51)</td>
<td>12 (4.2)</td>
<td>2 (2.25)</td>
<td>68 (5.13)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inspirational and religious quotes</td>
<td>1 (0.44)</td>
<td>24 (3.32)</td>
<td>11 (3.85)</td>
<td>45 (50.56)</td>
<td>81 (6.11)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alternative voices</td>
<td>2 (0.87)</td>
<td>9 (1.25)</td>
<td>16 (5.59)</td>
<td>9 (10.11)</td>
<td>36 (2.71)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Israeli-Palestinian conflict</td>
<td>2 (0.87)</td>
<td>1 (0.14)</td>
<td>60 (20.98)</td>
<td>1 (1.12)</td>
<td>64 (4.83)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Memes</td>
<td>165 (72.05)</td>
<td>4 (0.55)</td>
<td>8 (2.8)</td>
<td>2 (2.25)</td>
<td>179 (13.5)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Antisemitic memes</td>
<td>13 (5.68)</td>
<td>1 (0.14)</td>
<td>8 (2.8)</td>
<td>1 (1.12)</td>
<td>23 (1.73)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conspiracy theories</td>
<td>1 (0.44)</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>8 (2.8)</td>
<td>2 (2.25)</td>
<td>11 (0.83)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nazi memes</td>
<td>7 (3.06)</td>
<td>1 (0.14)</td>
<td>3 (1.05)</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>11 (0.83)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jewish memes</td>
<td>2 (0.87)</td>
<td>8 (1.11)</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>10 (0.75)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advertising</td>
<td>2 (0.87)</td>
<td>71 (9.83)</td>
<td>5 (1.75)</td>
<td>1 (1.12)</td>
<td>79 (5.96)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jewellery</td>
<td>1 (0.44)</td>
<td>54 (7.48)</td>
<td>1 (0.35)</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>56 (4.22)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miscellaneous</td>
<td>11 (4.8)</td>
<td>57 (7.89)</td>
<td>34 (11.89)</td>
<td>15 (16.85)</td>
<td>117 (8.82)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>229 (100)</td>
<td>722 (100)</td>
<td>286 (100)</td>
<td>89 (100)</td>
<td>1326 (100)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Themes marked in bold were retained for a chi-square test of independence. Values marked in bold represent a positive association between cluster and theme (Pearson residual ≥ 3).

captured both everyday practices and special occasions. In terms of visuals, they displayed different levels of sophistication: while some photos were carefully composed and edited, others appeared to have been taken and uploaded ‘on the go’. Besides generic (#instagood, #likeforlike,…), and very common thematic (#fashion, #motivation,…) hashtags, many of these posts were annotated with hashtags claiming Jewishness as a cultural identity (#jewishlife, #jewishboy,…). One user, for example, captioned her workout selfie, taken on a sunny beach, with ‘#israel #lifestyle #sun #summervibes #sportygirl #fit #motivation #fitnessmotivation #jogging #running #happiness #jewish #мocкa [Moscow]’. In terms of subject (self-portrait, exercise) and visual aesthetics (the user as the focal point of the photograph, a colour-brightening filter) this post followed Instagram’s linguistic conventions. The user associates herself with a healthy, urban lifestyle, while pointing out her Jewish identity. This is an example of how Instagram users can use the platform to construct multifaceted identities.

Another example, drawn from a post by a Chabad (an ultra-orthodox Jewish subgroup) community member, depicted three ultra-orthodox Jewish men painting a wall, and was captioned as follows:

> This is community spirit! Last night, [name of community omitted] Chabad men got together to paint [name of business omitted], a new business opened by two incredible [name of community omitted] Chabad women. The paint came from another [name of community omitted] Chabad family—because a real community lifts and encourages its members every day! #communityspirit #happy #photooftheday #paint #israel #jewish #work #smallbusiness #coworkingspace

Here the hashtag #jewish is used to highlight a religious affiliation, and celebrate community spirit.

Another category associated with this cluster are Jewish memes, often annotated with hashtags like #jewishlife. Memes by format (see below), these posts take a humorous take on traditional practices, such as Shidduch, the orthodox-Jewish tradition of matchmaking.

The hashtags surrounding the #history and #holocaust nodes (#war, #wwii, #poland,…)) appear to be indicative of a Second World War theme. Inspection of Table 2 shows that 8.59% of items assigned to this cluster were indeed posts about Jewish history. Examples include photographs of artefacts, portraits, and structures, taken at concentration camps (deportation train wagons, the ‘Arbeit macht frei’ plaque,…), and of memorial monuments, posted by Instagram users visiting these sites. Monochromatic colour palettes further made up the dominant aesthetic of these posts. In the network, hashtags like #memorial and #neveragain are plotted close to travel- and photography-related hashtags, like #instatravel and #blackandwhite, suggesting an interconnection between practices of remembrance and of self-presentation. Although sometimes people were the focal point of the picture, the infamous ‘Yolocaust’ posts (Gunter, 2017) were scarce. Holocaust remembrance posts were usually solemn, expressing respect and emotion. In one example, a close-up shot of a ‘Halt!’ sign in Auschwitz was captioned as follows:

> “For ever let this place be a cry of despair and a warning to humanity, where the Nazis murdered about one and a half million men, women, and children, mainly Jews from various countries of Europe.” Monument at Birkenau @auschwitzmemorial @unesco @bbc.travel @cntraveler @500px @natgeo @polandsights @polandgrams @auschwitz @holocaust #history #unesco #museum #nazi #genocide #poland #worldheritagelist #igerspoland #neverforget #instatravel #globetrotter #travelgram #instatravel #wanderlust #travellife #worldcaptures #exploringtheglobe #worldwide #moodygrams #agameoftones #ourplantedaily #thevisualscollective #createcommune #visualsoflife #jewish #jewishmemorial #illgrammers #blackandwhite #bw
This caption is exemplary of expressions of overwhelmedness and shock that characterize these posts. The hashtags however, including #instatravel, #globetrotter, and #gamerofthones, refer to the users themselves, and to the aesthetics of the photograph. The latter was further highlighted by the careful composition of the photo, and the black-and-white filter applied to it. Often hashtags like #neverforget and #sad were paired with tags like #followme and #traveladdict, showing that practices of remembrance and self-presentation and self-promotion are intertwined.

Similarly, the #synagogue node is surrounded by tags like #travelblogger, #nikon, #city, explaining the presence of posts about art and architecture (14.27%) in this cluster. This content category consists of photographs of mostly religious artefacts and monumental buildings, again uploaded by Instagram users visiting these places. Besides content-related hashtags (#jewishart, ...), these posts were often annotated with hashtags indicating the geographical location (#telaviv, #prague, ...). Taken together, the bottom half of the #jewish-#love-#art cluster consists of travel- and photography-related hashtags, indicating a presence of content viewing Jewish history and material culture through the lens of the traveller-photographer.

4.3.2. ‘#jew-#memes-#meme cluster’

The second largest cluster is the #jew-#memes-#meme community, accounting for one fifth (19.1%) of hashtags. Its most connected node is #jew (DC = 472), followed by #memes (188), #meme (187), #gay (181), #funny (177), and #dankmemes3 (154). Other prominent hashtags in this cluster include #trump (139), #hitler (135), #nazi (127), and #autism (109). In terms of proximity statistics, #jew is plotted at a distance from the other hashtags in this cluster, and gravitates strongly towards #jews, indicating that a single Instagram post can contain both. Nevertheless, the modularity algorithm assigned #jew and #jews to different clusters, suggesting that, on a semantic level, this hashtag lexicon (#memes, #gay, #hitler, ...) is more strongly connected to #jew than to #jews.

While nodes like #trump and #nazi might suggest a presence of political content, the hashtags #memes, and derivatives like #dankmemes are the most central nodes in this cluster. Table 2 shows that hashtags in the #jew-#memes-#meme cluster were predominantly used to label internet memes (72.05%). Internet memes are images and videos that are a ‘bricolage’ of elements—pictures, words, slogans—from different pop-cultural sources. They are considered subversive in nature, aiming to criticise, challenge, counteract or ridicule dominant media discourse by means of deconstruction, rearticulation, and parody (Huntington, 2013; Kuipers, 2005). While Instagram affords forms of image manipulation, it does not allow for meme creation. This content is merely shared on the platform, unlike regular photographs taken with embedded cameras. Covering a variety of themes and topics, what these posts had in common was a rejection of conventional aesthetics and narrative logic. More than half (60.89%) had hashtags referencing 4chan (#4chan, #edgy, ...), an image-oriented discussion board known for its provocative and derogatory discursive styles, and birthplace of multiple widespread internet memes (Knuttila, 2011; Zannettou et al., 2018). Discussions on the forum often revolve around challenging political correctness and ‘good taste’ (Ludemann, 2018). The example provided in Fig. 4 illustrates this deliberate offensiveness. Memes that did not refer to 4chan were equally heterogeneous in terms of visuals and captions, albeit less consistently aimed at provocation (Fig. 5).

Memes pair the hashtag #jew with a set of unrelated terms referring to meme culture (#dank, #offensivememes, ...), politics and social movements (#trump, #blacklivesmatter), physical and mental conditions (#cancer, #autism), gaming culture (#fortnite), racial slurs (#nigga), or fascism (#hitler, #kkk), whose function appears to be provocation and attracting attention, rather than accurately marking topics. With the exception of a small portion of antisemitic content, these memes were not about Jews or Jewishness, nor about cancer, the Black Lives Matter movement, or other topics referenced in the hashtags.

Antisemitic content (5.68% of posts in the cluster) included stereotypical images of Jews as hook-nosed and money-hungry, and posts that approved or ridiculed the Holocaust. The cartoon character in Fig. 6, known as the ‘happy merchant’, is a popular ingredient of antisemitic internet memes (Caldwell, 2018), and displays a number of negative Jewish stereotypes. Furthermore, the post ridicules Holocaust victims with a comedic reference to the cremation ovens in the death camps. It is noteworthy that antisemitic memes share the deliberate offensiveness of other memes, often differing only in terms of targets. While the hashtag #jew is, to some extent, content-related, these posts also contain other hashtags from the cluster, like #dankmemes or #cancer.

A handful of posts contained references to Nazi Germany without being unequivocally antisemitic, often picturing Adolf Hitler as the object of wordplay or jokes. One post, for example, featured an image of a vigorously gesticulating Hitler giving a speech, drawn from Leni Riefenstahl’s well-known 1935 propaganda film Triumph of the Will, and the line ‘When they curtail your dream of being an artist.’ Nein... Nein... Nein.’

4.3.3. ‘#jews-#israel-#jerusalem cluster’

The #jews-#israel-#jerusalem cluster is the third largest community, accounting for 16.3% of nodes. Its five most central nodes, besides #jews (DC = 419), are #israel (377), #jerusalem (298), #judaism (251), #hebrew (179), and #usa (178). This lexical focus on Israel and Palestine is reflected in the content associated with this cluster: its hashtags were primarily used to label posts about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (20.98%), visualizations of private lives (22.03%), and Jewish culture and tradition (13.64%). Inspection of the network graph suggests nodes in this cluster can be roughly divided into two themes: (1) a geo-political theme and (2) a cultural representation theme. The ‘cultural representation’ theme is reflected in hashtags like #jerusalemothesday, #holylan, #jerusalemcity. The #jerusalem node is surrounded by hashtags in Hebrew, like #ירושלים (#Israel) and #ירושלים (#Jerusalem). The

3 Dank memes’ is an ironic term for trivial, overused memes.
4 Translated from Spanish.
The first Trap contest will take place in Mexico

① 12 marzo, 2018  Bross:

The graph also shows that the hashtags #traveler and #traveling are connected to the Cyrillic alphabet tags #Израиль (‘Israel’) and #еўрей (‘Hebrew’). These hashtags explain the presence of the ‘private lives’ and ‘tradition and culture’ category content in this cluster. They were used by people visiting Israel in the context of travel, but also by Israelis sharing local culture. These posts capture and aestheticize Jewish cultural products and practices, notably Jewish orthodoxy and Judaic ritual, often from an outsider’s perspective. They are annotated with hashtags referring to geographical locations (#telaviv, #jerusalem). In the network graph the Israel-related hashtags are plotted close to hashtags from the #jewish-love-art cluster referencing photography and travel. One caption, for
example, reads ‘Took a photo of orthodox (hasidic) Jewish boys near the jaffagate in @jerusalem city—Love the hats! #interesting #culture #jerusalem #jewish #religion #israel #cultureclash #vaca’.

Examples of strongly interconnected geo-political hashtags include #palestine, #gaza, #hamas, and #genocide. Most content about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was indeed associated with this cluster. About a third (29.69%) of these posts expressed support for Israel or Zionism; nearly two thirds (57.81%) expressed support for Palestine, or an anti-Israel stance (Fig. 7). The rest called for peace or did not express a stance. Covering a range of visual genres, common ingredients of these posts were Israeli and Palestinian national symbols (flags, the Star of David,...), and hashtags expressing a stance (#freepalestine, #prayforisrael,...).

Similarly, the data show a subcluster of hashtags evoking conspiracy theories, including #illuminati and #zionist, alongside #usa and #america. Memes voicing conspiracy theories were mainly associated with this cluster, usually depicting a presumed Jewish global power. One post, for example, showed an image of a giant’s arm with a star of David printed on the sleeve, hovering over a crowd, and a quote, ‘to learn who rules over you, simply find out who you are not allowed to criticize’. The quote, supposedly drawn from an essay by an American white supremacist (see Hunt, 2015), is wrongfully attributed to Voltaire. The juxtaposition of these elements suggests it is Jews or Israel ‘who rule over you’. In the caption the authors align themselves with revisionism and flat earth theory: ‘On the intellectual side we have David Irving and Eric Dubay... Keep in mind history is written by winners. #voltaire #jews #history #truth #fightback #antizion #knowledge #indoctrination’.

The proximity of the conflict and conspiracy themes in the network indicates they share a lexicon, suggesting conspiracy theories are referenced as part of an antizionist discourse. One caption, for example, reads ‘I was on the plane looking at the map they had and couldn’t find #Palestine on the map.] Same for #google maps #history #illuminati #genocide #israel #jew #nwo #unitedstates #evil #zionism #solomon #jerusalem #babylon’. While #illuminati and #nwo [New World Order] directly reference conspiracy theories, the juxtaposition of the remaining hashtags suggests an association between Jews or Zionists and the United States, a recurrent motif in theories about a Jewish global dominance. Finally, the proximity of the green nodes #auschwitz, #germany, and #holocaust, to Israel- and conspiracy-related nodes, suggests (1) parallels between Israel and Nazi Germany, and (2) a Jewish responsibility for the Second World War or the Holocaust. These are two common arguments in antisemitic discourse (Jaspal, 2014; Wodak, 2015).

4.3.4. ‘#christian-#religion-#jesus-#muslim cluster’

The fourth cluster is the ‘#christian-#religion-#jesus-#muslim’ community (10.9% of nodes), with #christian (DC = 221) as a central node, followed by #religion (215), #jesus (204), #muslim (179), #peace (168), and #god (167). Not including any of the query keywords (#jew, #jews, #jewish), this cluster consists of hashtags that are not specifically related to Jews or Jewishness. Often co-occurring within an Instagram post, we find, for example, #muslim #christian, #interfaith, and #humanity. The co-occurrences between #bible, #jesuchrist, #christianity, #catholic, and #church also point to a ‘family’ of Christian-inspired content. Similarly, there is a group of hashtags referring to religious scriptures or quotes: #quran, #bible, #scripture, #wisdom, and #quotes.

Hashtags in this cluster were most likely to mark inspirational and religious quotes (50.56%). Other categories associated with it are ‘alternative voices’ (10.11%) from activist movements, and images of art and architecture (7.87%), often depicting sites of worship. By coupling references to multiple religions, these users aim to craft a universal appeal for their postings.

Fig. 6. Example of an antisemitic meme. Original caption: ‘#jewjokes#jew#rascistmemes #funny#memes#lmao#lmfao#%XD#dark #darkhumor #darkmemes #offensive#offensivememes #lol’

5 Translated from Dutch.
Discussion and conclusion

The literature has shown that hashtags on Twitter can function as vehicles for networked framing of topics and issues (Meraz, 2017; Meraz and Papacharissi, 2013). The aim of the current study was to explore how hashtags are used to shape networked representations of Jews and Jewishness on Instagram. It extends the literature on hashtag usage, which has put a strong focus on Twitter hashtags. Furthermore, by providing empirical data on Instagram content about Jews, it contributes to understanding representations and self-presentations of Jews and Jewishness on SNS.

Hashtag usage on Instagram differs from hashtag usage on Twitter in multiple ways. Instagram users have more characters at their disposal, and Instagram appeals to different user needs. Furthermore, while hashtags on Twitter are an integral part of the main content, hashtags on Instagram are part of an image caption. This has led to the emergence of Instagram-specific hashtags (#instagood, #instadaily) and ‘performative’ hashtags that include an explicit (#followme) or implicit (upload the best #photooftheday) call for action (Dorsch, 2018). Ubiquitously used, these tags co-occur with a large portion of other hashtags, producing representations that are, at first sight, less straightforward. In our data, we identified four main, thematically heterogeneous clusters of frequently co-occurring hashtags associated with #jew, #jewish, and #jew, and multiple semantically meaningful subclusters. There were many correspondences between those subclusters and inductively identified thematic categories, showing that hashtags on Instagram can shape networked representations. They create meaningful connections between thousands of individual images across the platform. Overlaps in the network also show how hashtags on Instagram are used to establish connections between different themes and subjects, such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and conspiracy theories, and thus construct complex narratives.

The findings show that, while the hashtag #jewish is associated with imagery of individual, personal experiences, #jews is connected to more political content, often about Israel, and #jew to rather unrelated and offensive content. The most prominent image category were selfies and photographs visualizing (Jewish) users’ day-to-day lives, largely corresponding with Hu et al.’s (2014) typology of Instagram content (friends, food, pets, activity, selfie, fashion). Jewish users, like all users, use Instagram to present multifaceted selves, where Jewishness intersects with other identities such as gender and cultural preferences. In this regard Jewishness is one dimension of a performed ‘networked self’ (Papacharissi, 2010). From a ‘digital religion’ and ‘digital race’ perspective (Campbell, 2013; Nakamura and Chow-White, 2012), the use of Instagram to represent Jewishness illustrates how SNS’ affordances shape components of individual and collective identities online.

As a mobile-based SNS for photo sharing, Instagram encourages self-centred practices of representation. In other frequent content categories Jewish culture, tradition, art, and history were presented through the lens of a, possibly non-Jewish, outsider or spectator, but still embedded in practices of self-presentation and self-promotion.

The analysis also revealed a presence of imagery that surpasses Instagram’s envisioned affordances. The hashtag #jews is

Fig. 7. Example of an image coded as ‘Israeli-Palestinian conflict’. Original caption: ‘Fuck israel #stopkillingchildren #freedom #freepalestine #savegaza #JERUSALEMISCAPITALOFPALESTINE #heroes #israelisawarcriminal #zionist #jews #israel #coward #boneless #wakeupworld #usa #boycottisrael #bds’
associated with geo-politically charged content, notably about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This finding indicates that, like their Twitter counterparts (Meraz, 2017; Meraz and Papacharissi, 2013), Instagram hashtags can be used for political issue framing. Furthermore, on Instagram, the term ‘Jew’ is part of a lexicon used to caption unrelated internet memes. The practice of hashtag repurposing stands as a strategic act to advance a political agenda, and has been associated with online activism and the formation of counterpublics (Jackson and Foucault Welles, 2015; Meraz, 2017). It has not systematically been studied with regard to online humour or memes. However, as a cut-and-paste of elements (pictures, words, slogans, …) from popular culture, internet memes draw on repurposing (Huntington, 2013; Kuipers, 2005). The use of the word ‘Jew’ as an insult in certain languages (Jikeli, 2009) might explain its appearance as a meme ingredient, as they tend to rely on inappropriateness (Kuipers, 2005).

Many memes in our data bear references to 4chan—an image-based discussion board, and birthplace of many widely used internet memes—and its '/pol/' sub-board, known for provocative discursive styles and deliberate political incorrectness. While discussions on /pol/ revolve around challenging political correctness and ‘good taste’, ‘the majority of posters subscribe to the “alt-right” movement, exhibiting characteristics of xenophobia, social conservatism, racism, and, generally speaking, hate’ (Hine et al., 2017: 2). 4chan memes have been analysed as markers of subcultural identity (Ludemann, 2018; Nissenbaum and Shifman, 2017), and as products for digital insurgency and mainstreaming alt-right ideology (Davey and Ebner, 2017; Hine et al., 2017). Our findings suggest that Instagram users use a specific hashtag lexicon to associate themselves with '/pol/' culture. While the ideological leanings of the board advance an easy interpretation for the use of the word ‘Jew’ in this context, the question of its meaning when used to annotate memes remains. This indicates a need for follow-up research to focus on the processes of selecting, creating, and captioning images by users, and uncover the logic behind a non-content-related use of hashtags. Additionally, the embeddedness of antisemitic posts in this stream of generally offensive and absurdist content throws up further questions about context and intent: are they genuine expressions of anti-Jewish prejudice, or ‘plain’ ingredients of provocative conversation styles? Finally, it is not unthinkable that the use of #jew(ish) to caption memes and other seemingly irrelevant content, like advertisements, could simply indicate attempts at audience maximization—again highlighting a need for future research to focus on the perspective of users.

5.1. Limitations and suggestions for future research

This study is not without limitations. First, the selection of query hashtags may limit the generalizability of the findings. While the most-used relevant hashtags were used as entry points for data collection, many other relevant hashtags (#judaism, #jewishlife,…) exist on Instagram. The study was also limited by the selection of English-language hashtags as seeds for data retrieval. More comprehensive work including Hebrew-language Instagram content might significantly expand our understanding of Jewish self-presentations online. Second, because of Instagram’s policies concerning controversial or offensive material (Instagram, 2018), relevant content may have been censored before we were able to retrieve it.

Third, considering the complex interactions between social media activity and the international news media context (e.g., Zannettou et al., 2017), one could argue against studying a single platform in isolation. We acknowledge the interconnectedness and interdependence of different media institutions within today’s media ecology, and the limitations they constitute to the current research approach. However, this study did not have the ambition to capture the complete social media puzzle, but rather focuses on one piece: Instagram content and the images and meanings associated with the words ‘Jew’, ‘Jews’ and ‘Jewish’. To provide insight in the general news media context, we have performed an exploration of the news coverage of events occurring in the data collection timespan (Fig. 2). Some of these events can help contextualize the findings. Notably border protests in Gaza on May 22 and 25, in which dozens of people were injured, may have introduced an overrepresentation of geo-politically charged content in the data. This study did not aim to take a full representative sample for the given Instagram hashtags over time. As such, we do acknowledge that our results are only relevant for the timeframe of the data collection (late May and early June 2018).

While a more rigorous parallel analysis lies beyond the scope of this study, we encourage future studies to address the question of interactions of Instagram content with the wider news media context more systematically, for example by using open-source intelligence techniques to structurally monitor a set of hashtags on multiple social media platforms (e.g., Instagram and Twitter) over a course of time, along with the international news coverage of topics related to, for example, Jews, Israel, or antisemitism. Such an approach could shed light on the interplay between Instagram content, international events, and the wider online media context.

Another question that remains unanswered is to what extent the posts in our sample are the work of ‘real’ Instagram users. Social media bots, automated accounts generating content, are notoriously active around controversial topics and public debates (e.g., Kollanyi et al., 2016). A preliminary screening of our data suggested some content in our sample may have been produced by automated accounts. Considering the spread of misinformation and disinformation through SNS, the question of bot activity in this context deserves a study of its own. Finally, this study did not consider user profiles. Future research needs to include user profile information and incorporate the perspective of users. Overall, more systematic and longitudinal research is needed to deepen our understanding of representational practices of Jews and Jewishness on SNS.

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Declaration of Interests

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