

"It's More the Real Me": The Appropriations of Tumblr by Fandoms

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ABSTRACT

We present a qualitative study of fandom communities on the social blogging platform Tumblr. We investigate why fandom users chose Tumblr over other social networking sites, their motivations behind participating in fandoms, and how they interact within the Tumblr community. Our findings highlight unique attributes and challenges of Tumblr fandom communities, and we discuss how these things might inform the design of existing or future social networking and blogging sites.

AUDIENCE

This is a technical talk targeted at those who work or study social media or fan culture. It is appropriate for beginners who are unfamiliar with Tumblr and who want to learn more about its fandom communities.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the blogging site Tumblr has increased dramatically in popularity and has become one of the fastest growing social networking sites. In May of 2013, Tumblr hit mainstream attention when it was purchased by Yahoo! [2]. At this time, Tumblr contained 108.4 million blogs and a reported 75.8 million posts were being created every day. Within Tumblr, fandoms—the community that surrounds a television show, movie or book—have become key contributors. Fandom users interested in TV shows write stories about the characters in the show; they also analyze discuss important scenes and share freeze-frame GIF sets. While other studies have looked into online backchannels of live entertainment events by investigating other micro-blogging sites such as Twitter [1,3,4], Tumblr fandom blogging has yet to be explored from a design perspective.

Given this background, our goal was to explore the usage patterns of Tumblr fandom users who blog about TV shows to better understand the community practices that they have emerged within Tumblr as a result of their activities. We wanted to use this knowledge to inform the design of existing and future social blogging sites. To address this objective, we investigated fandom users belonging to over 34 different fandoms. For three months, we observed, analyzed, and categorized the posts of Tumblr fandom users and then conducted detailed semi-structured interviews with 17 fandom users. We analyzed our data and documented characteristics of the Tumblr community, the participants' usage patterns, and their self-representation and motivations for fandom participation.

Our results show that Tumblr fandom users experience many challenges when using the Tumblr web site and its mobile application. This includes issues in finding and joining fandoms, not recognizing the size or scope of the fandom, understanding how to participate in fandoms, and using limited messaging and search facilities. Yet despite these issues, which may conceivably be thought as detriments to the formation and longevity of a community, fandoms thrive on Tumblr. In fact, our participants reported being more themselves on Tumblr than real life, feeling like they were part of something bigger than themselves, sharing a common sense of motivation and purpose for participating in the community, and sharing social experiences related to real life activities as well as the participation in online "social justice." Our participants described these practices as being largely different than communities of users (e.g., friends or followers) on other social networking or social blogging tools like Facebook and Twitter.

Overall we feel this suggests interesting directions for the design of social networking and blogging sites. Certainly one does not want to design for poor usability or the likely detriment of a community; however, we feel there may be value for the creation of more exclusive online groups in order to drive loyalty and community participation. We discuss this as well as the ways in which Tumblr fandoms could be used to gain a 'pulse' from TV show audiences and hopefully improve the user experience of their fans.

OUTCOMES/CONCLUSION

First, we will present attendees with a portrait of Tumblr fandoms by sharing the findings of our investigation. We will explain how users find, join, participate in, and leave fandoms, how they construct and perceive their identities on Tumblr, and how their culture relies on jargon and animated GIFs. Second, we will compare these findings to related work and draw out design implications for existing and future social blogging sites. Finally, we will present the design of a Fandom Hub tool for Hootsuite that applies this knowledge. The application provides an analytics toolset that enables companies to track real-time and legacy TV show feedback based on user participation in fandoms on Tumblr.

BIO

Dr. Serena Hillman has extensive professional and academic experience in the electronic commerce field. Since 2003, Serena has worked at major organizations developing eCommerce websites that are user-friendly and

socially engaging. She earned her PhD in Human-Computer Interaction from Simon Fraser University in March of 2014, which focused on ubiquitous types of commerce (social commerce, mobile commerce and mobile payment systems).

Jason Procyk is a master's student in the School of Interactive Arts and Technology at Simon Fraser University. His research interests include communication and content creation in social networks, locative media, and video communication.

Dr. Carman Neustaedter is an Assistant Professor in the School of Interactive Arts and Technology at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver, Canada. His research is in the areas of Human-Computer Interaction and Interaction Design, where he studies social culture, user behaviors, group collaboration, and ubiquitous and mobile technology design.

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