'alksjdf;lksfd': Tumblr and the Fandom User Experience

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ABSTRACT

A growing trend is the participation in online fandom communities through the support of the blogging platform Tumblr. While past research has investigated backchannels—chatter related to live entertainment on micro-blogging sites such as Twitter—there is a lack of research on the behaviours and motivations of Tumblr users. In our study, 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 show that users face many user interface challenges when participating in Tumblr fandoms, especially initially; yet, despite this, Tumblr fandom communities thrive with a common sense of social purpose and exclusivity where users feel they can present a more authentic reflection of themselves to those sharing similar experiences and interests. We describe how this suggests design directions for social networking and blogging sites in order to promote communities of users.

Author Keywords

social networking, Tumblr, fandoms, fanfiction, micro-blogging, entertainment, television, backchannels

ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.2 [User Interfaces]: User-Centered Design

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!. 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. Not all fans are member of a show's fandom. Fandom users interested in TV shows write stories about the characters in the show; they also analyze particular scenes in a show (like finales or cliff hanger scenes) and post about them with freeze-frame GIF sets of an episode, or simply by discussing episodes.

After participating in the space for some time, we noticed a unique culture of practice. While Tumblr supports a broad range of social blogging communities and content, we found that fandoms seemed to thrive on the platform. We also found that nobody has studied Tumblr fandoms before. While other studies have looked into online backchannels of live entertainment events by investigating other micro-blogging sites such as Twitter [5,11,14], Tumblr fandom blogging has yet to be explored from a design perspective. This is despite the activity's dominance as one of the main types of Tumblr usage. Fanfiction (fanfic) has been extensively studied since the 1990's; however, it is often studied from a cultural and communication perspective and not a technology 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 created 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 month, 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' (not on Tumblr), 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 activities not on Tumblr, 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.

RELATED WORK

Social Networking Motivations and Usage

As a comparison point to our own research on Tumblr, we first introduce research on other social networking and blogging sites with a focus on Facebook and Twitter. There are, of course, many other relevant social networking and blogging sites that we could include; however, we have chosen to focus on Facebook and Twitter as representative examples of such sites.

Facebook has more than one billion active users, as of 2012. As most people know, Facebook requires users to sign up for an account using their full name, email, birthday and gender (male or female). One can then search for the names of people they know and 'friend' them. This is a simple and straightforward process meaning the barrier to entry is very minimal. A vast amount of research exists on Facebook usage. Most relevant to our work, we see that people tend to present their real-life selves (i.e. the same general identity they present to offline contacts) on Facebook as usage centers around maintaining an awareness of the activities of family and friends through reading and posting status updates [1], coordinating offline activities with friends [1], and building relationships [9,10]. Thus, Facebook usage tends to be with people one already has some form of offline relationship, often focused on peers [10]. More recently, we have seen the emergence of Facebook group pages for companies and non-profit groups. There also exist pages for common interest groups where users will go to discuss particular topics with friends or even strangers. Again, the barrier to entry is low as such groups can be found via a search tool and users can request permission to join 'private' groups.

There are also a number of social networking sites designed specifically for TV fans. For example, leveraging the enormous Facebook user base, GetGlue, has incorporated Facebook apps to garnish traction through the marketing of virtual stickers. Virtual stickers are earned by users and placed on their Facebook wall when they check-in to a television show on Facebook. As far as we are aware, no studies have looked at the usage of sites such as GetGlue.

Twitter is a popular microblogging site and has, again, garnered a significant amount of research given the site's popularity. Users create an account and can then search

and select to 'follow' the tweets of others. Again, the barrier to entry is low and it is easy to search for others and follow them. Posting is done via short text messages, sometimes with embedded URLs. Common Twitter usage includes 'daily chatter' about one's activities, conversing through tweets, sharing information and URLs, and reporting news [1,7]. People tend to use Twitter as an information source or to build and maintain relationships with others through awareness and communication [1,7]. Thus, Twitter users may follow others who they know offline, or they may actively follow strangers who share similar interests [7]. Similarly, Bennett's [2] 2011 study found that Twitter's direct communication channel allows for fan engagement around celebrity driven philanthropic and activists causes. However, unlike Twitter, Tumblr focuses on connecting fans to other fans rather than to celebrities.

Related to fandoms, backchannels of the live blogging of TV shows or media events on Twitter has also been studied. Doughty et al. [5] investigated backchannels on Twitter and found that users are in fact viewing and broadcasting their views and opinions live during the airing of TV shows. They also found that this occurred on both mobile devices and desktop computers, content was structured, and engagement was dependent on the TV broadcast. Other researchers have also investigated the space by looking at conversational trends during live events on twitter [14] and how live backchannel data can help improve the user experience by informing navigation [11]. Fandom discussions on Tumblr appear to be somewhat similar to backchannel discussions, but they occur on a much more varied timeline ranging from 'live' during a broadcast to years later. Moreover, these studies have mostly approached these topics from a quantitative approach. For example, Doughty et al. [5]'s study compared over 2.1 million tweets investigating character length and different devices, such as mobile use. While valuable, we see an obvious gap in in-depth knowledge around the use of Tumblr fandoms and even more so from a descriptive qualitative standpoint.

Fanfic Culture

The study of offline fanfic—"writings in which fans use media narratives and pop culture icons as inspiration for creating their own texts" [2]—has a long history from a cultural and communication perspective. Jenkins [8] brings forth the idea that, in fanfic, fans emerge as co-partners in the creation process and evolve beyond a passive audience. Pugh [12] described fanfic as 'the democratic genre'. From these scholars it is clear that fanfic is an activity where fans feel they can contribute to a body of work that they are passionate about.

Over the years, fanfic has grown to include a variety of different genres. The most notorious of these is Slash fiction, which is a genre of fanfic that focuses on the sexual exploits of same-sex characters, written mostly by women

[4,12]. We note this aspect of fanfic as it is a mainstay both historically and presently within the fanfic community.

There has also been research focused on how the traditional print-based era of fanfic culture has transformed into online fanfic. Studies have looked at websites such as Archieveofourown.org (A03) and Fanfic.net (e.g., [2,15]), both built around the sharing and viewing of fan-created transformative fanworks, to explore a variety of topics. These include jargon (e.g., [6]), canon gatekeeping [15], and how writing fanfic helped users practice English and learn about new cultures [2].

One of the most important concepts within the topic of jargon is the concept of *canon*. Thomas [15] describes this term around the idea that fanfic writers are often peer evaluated to ensure the characters in the fanfic writing always act, talk and behave in such a manner as the community has perceived the characters should. This means that if the fanfic is "on canon" the storyline can further be accepted as such and perhaps referenced to in future fanfic. If this happens the phenomenon is called *fanon* [15]. Fanon and canons are examples of the jargon around fanfic. Tumblr is gradually becoming a more and more prominent hub for fanfiction and other fan activities, and we want to extend the discussion of terminology and related practices in fan culture to reflect this changing landscape. Our work describes the new forms of jargon that have originated within Tumblr fandom communities.

Overall, the above research provides a general background for our study and shows us that while social networking and fanfics have been studied in a variety of ways, there is a lack of research on how fandoms have appropriated Tumblr and what the community is like as a result.

STUDY METHODOLOGY
We conducted an observational and interview study to understand how fandom users use Tumblr and what community practices have emerged as a result.

Observations
We first spent three months searching through Tumblr blogs and observing (e.g., reading, following) various fandoms to understand the communities, generate specific research questions, and form interview questions for later portions of our research. We reviewed and observed activities in a range of different fandom types and categorized images and actual posts into common themes in order to understand the use of different mediums (e.g., images, video, text), communication around being a part of Tumblr, and common discussions around fandoms. Overall, our observations amounted to ~120 hours of searching and reading in total over the three-month period plus detailed analysis.

We purposely selected a range of fandoms to observe that varied in size, focus, and topics. Our targeted fandoms included: Shameless (US), a smaller fandom with some

actor involvement; Orphan Black, a newer (first episode March 2013) obscure TV series which has recently gained in popularity because of online fandoms, Game of Thrones, a newer HBO show which has a large following on Tumblr; Brony, described as fans of My Little Pony and often associated with cosplay (costume play); Orange is the New Black, a new show released on Netflix and available as a full season download; and Dr. Who and Supernatural, both commonly perceived as some of the largest fandoms on Tumblr. To observe and follow these fandoms, we used both branded hashtags (e.g., #drwho) as well as specific hashtags used by fandom members (e.g.,#dw, #whovian, #timelord). We also used the Tumblr hashtag-tracking tool, which allows users to follow identified hashtags.

Interview Participants and Recruitment
After the observational period, we contacted a total of 84 Tumblr users. We picked (somewhat) random times of the day and contacted whoever had posted at that time using any of the hashtags associated with the fandoms listed above. Our goal was to try and find a somewhat random selection of participants to avoid selection bias. That said, our participants would naturally be biased towards those willing to participate in research studies.

We recruited by contacting the fandom users directly on Tumblr and asking them if they would be willing to participate in the study. Seventeen people agreed, two refused, three were too young to meet our ethics board's age requirement (19 or older), and the rest did not respond. Participants' ages ranged from 19 to 31 (median 21). Occupations varied and included student, administrative worker, massage therapist, IT assistant, teacher, video game developer, cashier, and unemployed. Participants were from North America, South America, and Western and Eastern Europe. In total our 17 participants reported that they participated in 34 unique fandoms, with an average of 4.2 fandoms per participant (some participants followed the same fandoms). Only four participants indicated they participate in one fandom. In other cases, some participants told us they could not even recall all the fandoms they were involved in so our count of 34 unique fandoms is a conservative estimate. Participants were not compensated for participation in any way.

Semi-Structured Interviews and Blog Reviews
The interview portion of our research consisted of three stages. First, participants were asked to complete a short, open-ended survey online about how long they had used Tumblr, how long they participated in fandoms, and which fandoms they participated in. Questions helped to contextualize our findings and guide the interview. We also conducted a detailed review of each participant's blog to see how often they posted about fandoms.

Second, we conducted semi-structured interviews over video chat, audio chat, or instant messaging. We allowed users to choose the medium they were most comfortable with and therefore enabled them to maintain complete

anonymity if they desired. Three users chose to use video chat, five users chose audio chat, and nine users chose instant messaging. Interviews lasted between one and three hours. Interview questions covered general Tumblr usage, fandom participation, the Tumblr user experience, and the usage of other social networking websites. For example, we asked questions such as, "What TV shows do you follow on Tumblr and why?, "What types of things do you post about in relation to these shows?", "What do you like most about your Tumblr experiences?", "What do you like least about your Tumblr experiences?", "How do your Tumblr activities compare to other social networking sites?"

Lastly, we asked participants to walk us through their most recent Tumblr posts and explain what they were saying, why they were saying it, and who interacted with them as a result. We used this exercise to analyze their behavior from the perspective of the content they created. This process allowed us to discuss certain points from the interview in even greater depth and has been useful in similar studies on social networking [17].

Data Collection and Analysis

All interviews were audio-recorded when participants chose to use audio, and we kept handwritten notes. We analyzed our interview transcriptions and notes using open, axial, and selective coding [1]. This involved two researchers coding all participant transcripts independently with checks for inter-rater reliability. In cases where discrepancies occurred, we discussed and re-evaluated our coding until we reached a consensus.

Next we present our findings within the major themes we identified. First, we present the ways in which fandom users used Tumblr, and, second, we present the attributes of fandom communities that have emerged. While we cannot draw cause and effect relationships between the two, we suspect that some of the user interface features of Tumblr have certainly influenced the creation of the latter community of practices.

HOW FANDOM USERS USED TUMBLR

Like other blogging and social networking sites, Tumblr users can post small messages in the form of text, photos, quotes, links, audio, and video. These posts can be tagged for key terms, and other users can then search for tagged key terms to find posts to re-blog, like, share, and/or follow the other user. Once users follow an individual, that individual's posts are displayed on the user's dashboard along with all other posts of people the user follows. A certain amount of communication is anonymous, as users can ask other users questions anonymously via the "ask me anything" box, which can then be answered by the askee either privately or publically. Limited information is required to start a Tumblr account, including an email address, username, password and age. Most people do not post their real name and only an account handle is shown (e.g., ficklexcanada, vii.em.zee).

While the above suggests that Tumblr is seemingly simple to use, our observations and interviews revealed the opposite. Fandom users face many challenges and obstacles to participating in fandom communities based on what some may say are usability issues within the site or its mobile app. We describe this by exploring fandom users' usage patterns focusing on how users 'join' fandoms, participate in them, and (possibly) leave them.

Joining Fandoms

Before becoming a part of a fandom, users have to become users of Tumblr itself. First, some participants reported finding Tumblr through a web search for related information on a TV show and thus accidently found a Tumblr blog. Second, some users started using Tumblr not specifically to participate in fandoms, yet as they began following users, they learned about fandoms through their dashboard. Finally, some users who were participating in another fan sharing website noticed that Tumblr did not restrict adult content. As a result, they moved to using Tumblr instead of sites they currently used. The restriction of adult content was mostly associated with websites related to fan artwork (most fanfic sites allow Slash fiction).

We learned that 'belonging' to a fandom was a fuzzy concept. Unlike Facebook, Tumblr users do not get accepted to groups. Instead, they are part of the fandom when they feel they are. Participation entailed following posts with hashtags associated with a TV show, following posts by users who posted about a show, or posting about a show, regardless of whether others read the posts.

There's no actual "formed" groups on Tumblr. There is no one who designates who's in and who's out. As soon as I watched the show, I considered myself a part of the fandom, and just by making posts about it on my blog I automatically become part of the fandom group. – P5

This aspect of 'fuzziness' also made it difficult to find fandoms and know what constituted content within a fandom. New users explained that it was difficult to find fandoms that were of interest to them because they could not just simply search for a TV show name. They had to instead understand what hashtags were associated with a show, or actively search out other Tumblr users who blogged about a show.

This also meant that users often had no idea of the actual size of their fandom. For instance, one participant described the Shameless fandom as a "small knit group," while another felt it had 1000's of users. Participants who were already Tumblr users before becoming part of a fandom expressed that they did not really feel like they were participating in Tumblr correctly until they discovered fandoms:

Yeah so like I was sharing you know photos and things that I thought was interesting and I felt I was using Tumblr all wrong so I was like wait this is not how you are supposed to use Tumblr. - P3

After users were involved in at least one fandom they would almost solely find new fandoms by posts from other users on their dashboard. Some users described this as "cross-pollination." That is, users noticed what other people from their fandom were posting about more generally and would sometimes explore the other fandoms that a user posted about. This became a *de facto* 'recommendation engine.' In some cases, users would also explicitly ask other Tumblr users for recommendations on which fandoms to be 'a part of.' Here users seemed just as interested in the value of joining the fandom as the value of actually watching the TV series. After receiving a recommendation, they investigated the fandom further by searching its hashtags.

Media, Messaging, and Searching

Participants frequently talked about the use of animated GIFs in Tumblr and their integral role in communication. Here Tumblr users extend the use of GIFs well beyond animated icons. Through both our three-month observation and the review of participants' blogs, we found that animated GIFs and GIF sets allowed fandom users to take key scenes of TV shows and post them for discussion, creation, and adaptation. GIF sets were often created for: comparing character development over time, pointing out a specific show detail that might have otherwise been missed by other users, and re-watching key scenes in order to add analysis or express emotion around that scene.

People make GIF sets out of EVERYTHING! Sometimes they are artsy and poetic. Sometimes they are used to display parallels between characters/episodes/relationships etc. Sometimes it's a way to break down a short scene... - P1

Other participants felt that the coupling of GIFS with analysis drove fandoms on Tumblr.

[Fandoms thrive on Tumblr more than other social networking sites] because we can post meta, GIFs, graphics, and analysis all in one place. - P4

Participants talked about several user interface issues with the Tumblr site. Sentiments included: the messaging system "sucks," the tagging system and search is not robust enough, and learning how to 'Tumblr' had a high learning curve.

First, Tumblr users were generally not happy with the Tumblr messaging system. The system does not record sent messages (which is more frustrating than one might imagine), does not let users send messages with special characters, and only permits users to send 10 messages per hour. It was clear when talking to our participants that the Tumblr messaging system was a sore spot for many Tumblr users as they wanted to post more frequently and access messages they had already sent, like a 'regular' messaging system found on other social networks (e.g., Facebook and Twitter).

Second, users were frustrated that they did not have better functionality for searching multiple tags and eliminating a tag from their search. For example, a user could not eliminate the tag "spoiler" to remove posts about spoilers from their search (which was a large participant concern).

I wish that it was possible to search for more than one tag at a time. Sometimes it's hard to search for tags that can mean more than one thing. For example, some people tag their selfies (when people take a picture of themselves with their mobile phone) as "Shameless" so the Shameless tag is hard to look through. - P16

Considering our findings on how users join fandoms, the design of search functionality such as this is very important to the user experience.

Third, a number of participants commented that the largest negative aspect to Tumblr fandoms was *trolling*, where users deliberately or, to a lesser extent, unintentionally created arguments, fights or a general negative atmosphere for the purpose of their entertainment. Most participants felt that 'trolls' were going to exist online and Tumblr was not an exception. As P14 described, while trolls would sometimes make the experience less friendly, participants somewhat expected this conflict:

The old saying used to be – don't feed the trolls – but now that logic has changing to – No! Challenge the trolls, just attack them everywhere; don't think they get away with submitting this and attacking your blog. – P14

Always-on Technology

Most participants described their interactions with a fandom in terms of 'always-on' technology. That is, they described the process of engaging with Tumblr as an experience that continuously occurred, telling us, for example, "I always have a [web browser] tab open." This became clear when we asked participants how many hours a week they participated in Tumblr. Most participants were confused by the question, not knowing what we really meant by 'participate'. Some assumed we meant any type of Tumblr interaction or viewing of their dashboards—in which case users gave us estimates of 60 hours a week—while others just described it as the time they were actively adding content, in which case they indicated it was closer to around 3-4 hours per week. This shows that engagement within Tumblr varies from time to time and migrates between active posting and staying aware of the posts of others.

There was mixed feeling towards the usefulness of the Tumblr mobile app and mobile web experience. This contrasts what one might expect from a community that is 'always on' and aware of community happenings (posts, discussion). One would think that mobile access to Tumblr would be highly valuable. First, participants enjoyed that they could monitor dashboard activity while on-the-go to maintain awareness while not at their computer. However, some of the main functionality associated with Tumblr—creating content and viewing GIFs—was poorly supported within the mobile Tumblr experience. Participants pointed out that it was simply too difficult to create content from the mobile app and almost never used it to for this purpose. They also said it was frustrating that the Tumblr mobile

experience was slow to download images. Since Tumblr dashboards are often loaded with GIFs, the slow download of images resulted in non-viewable posts.

Leaving Fandoms

Few participants reported ever leaving fandoms. Those who did echoed a very similar theme: they did not like the direction of the show and sometimes this involved a direct clash with their beliefs on social issues. P8 explains:

I think Glee is the only [fandom] that I kind of stepped away from. I just hated the direction the show was going, it had nothing to do with the fandom itself, it was more the direction they were taking the show and some of the characters I really just didn't care for it. I thought it went downhill from first two seasons on, so I stopped watching the show and I stopped paying attention to a lot of it online and on Tumblr. - P8

The above participant went on to explain that she did not like the way that Glee portrayed a suicide within the show and socially did not agree with it.

Contrary to what we expected, users did not leave fandoms when a show ended its production of new episodes. As P8 explains, users still felt like they were a part of the fandom even after a series ended.

Some of the shows that I watch have ended, I still consider myself part of the fandom, like Harry Potter and there's a show on Start called Spartacus that has ended that I am still like a huge fan of and I'll watch it again and again and again. - P8

Summary

Overall, we see Tumblr fandom users: struggle to become part of a fandom community, question when and if they are a part of a fandom, are unclear of the size of the community they are a part of, and leave the fandom community if they disagree with the direction of a TV show. They also participate in the community in an 'always on' fashion despite a challenging mobile experience and frustrating search and messaging interfaces. Given these usage patterns and experiences, one might think that Tumblr fandoms struggle with participation, member loyalty, and a sense of community. Yet the remainder of our results show the opposite: fandom users have, perhaps surprisingly, created a close-knit community with common goals, shared interests, and shared experiences. We explore this next.

ATTRIBUTES OF THE FANDOM COMMUNITY

Our analysis found that fandom community members have appropriated the Tumblr site in ways that have allowed them to create a unique community of practice consisting of several main attributes that we describe next.

"I Am More Me Than Me in Real Life"

First, we found that Tumblr fandom users felt they were more 'themselves' on Tumblr than other social media sites and even in the 'real world'. That is, they could talk about what mattered to them, in relation to a TV show, and they need not 'hold back' on saying things that may offend others or be considered boring or unimportant. Participants described their usage within fandom communities as being semi-anonymous where they felt that even though their friends and family did not know about their blogs, they could find them if they really wanted to. This contrasted their experience with other social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter, dominated by friends or family.

The fact is that [Tumblr's] users can be themselves in ways that they would not be able to anywhere else. I participate as "me", and sometimes as how I would like to be in real life. I feel more confident about myself there. – P7

[Tumblr's] kind of like our Facebook, for us to share these things that we really like with each other without that fear of – oh god what is someone going to think if I say this or if I post this or you know, I feel like there's lot less fear of that judgment on Tumblr than on there is on Facebook because most of those people are I know that I see all the time and I've known for years where the people I follow on Tumblr and that follow me are people I feel like I've known for years but…. that I don't have to worry about what I am going to say or who I am like, I can just be who I want on my Tumblr as opposed to my Facebook. – P8

We asked users how their Tumblr activities were different than other social networking they used. Clear themes emerged around how Tumblr was different than blogging (diary) sites like LiveJournal, social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter, as well as fanfic websites like A03. Participants reported that Facebook was the most common social networking site they used besides Tumblr. Of the users we talked to, every Facebook user described the difference between the two platforms in terms of the other users they interacted with. For Facebook, they felt like the site was for people they knew in 'real life' (e.g. friends and family). These participants described Facebook as 'superficial' and a place where they needed to be mindful of their 'real life' personas. For example, P7 told us that she did not have to worry about a future employer finding out about her Tumblr blog.

Facebook is usually limited to family and friends or people I know from work or school. It is not interesting to me because most of the things I like to talk about or read about are not the same as most of these people… it tends to form a bond much stronger than the ones from Facebook... Facebook for instance, in which you send happy birthdays and like pics and send some comments, but it is mainly superficial. Some people do have meaningful interactions on Facebook, but they mostly happen in the inbox. – P7

Facebook is something for friends and you occasionally have to put up this persona of what your life is like… - P14

Unlike Facebook, participants described the Tumblr experience as being built on common interests, which afforded users a sense of support, friendship, and community.

It's more interesting than Facebook. It's engaging because I'm looking at things about my own interests, as opposed to dumb things people I know are saying about their lives. - P1

Participants told us that being a part of a community focused on specific interests allowed them to understand the jokes and the inside conversation—it made them feel like

they were a part of something unique. It also felt selective as only those familiar with these interests could really participate.

It's more selective. You pick and choose what you want to see and you're not forced to tell anyone who you are, nor do you feel obligated to let all your real life friends find you, like on Facebook. – P5

Twitter was the third most used social networking site of our users (behind Tumblr and Facebook). They described interacting on Twitter as more 'professional' than Tumblr, with a mixture of personal contacts and strangers.

Twitter is almost professional in a way; you know you got to put out a public image of yourself. - P14

A number of participants also described how they felt celebrities on Twitter dominated much of its content.

Twitter is so much more celebrity driven...there is not a lot of Average Joe's on there unless it's the people commenting or responding to things different celebrities have posted... whereas Tumblr is more like fans sharing all the things they like about the different shows and movies and celebrities. – P8

Jargon
We also learned that Tumblr fandom communities created their own 'language' or jargon around their activities. This further demonstrates the inclusive nature of Tumblr where users have created or appropriated culturally-specific terms that only Tumblr users may understand.

For example, evolving primarily from Slash fiction is the concept of One True Pairings (OTPs). An *otp* is a set of characters that fans pair together (in a romantic relationship). When capitalized it represents your 'real OTP,' meaning your absolute favorite pairing. If the term is written in lower case, it can be one of many otps you have. In some cases, fans will refer to both their otps and all otp relationships in all fandoms as simply '*ships*'—derived from the word relationship. The term ship is used much more loosely than the term otp. That is, users usually have a few otps, but every otp in a fandom is a *Ship*. Users also frequently discuss the term *endgame*. A user's endgame represents how they would like their otps to end up together at the end of a series.

OTPs and Ships are very important to the Tumblr fandom culture because they often drive what users call '*feels.*' Feels describe when a user has high emotion towards any fandom related event. When a user experiences an overwhelming amount of feels, they can express themselves by typing: alksjdf;lksfd. This text is meant to represent a user pressing random keys in uncontrollable excitement. While the keys are seemingly random, each post showing such excitement in our data analysis contained the same exact key sequence.

There are a number of other terms used within Tumblr and fandoms; however, those described above represent the most prevalent that we found. While some of these terms

might not be exclusive to Tumblr, they are very heavily embedded in the Tumblr fandom community.

Feels and Strong OTPs
We also found that our participants were all motivated by similar mechanisms to participate in Tumblr fandoms. Aside from simply enjoying a TV show, this included several specific aspects.

First, feels and OTPs were strong motivators as they are routed in deep emotional motivation. P16, a Shameless fandom user, described how the OTP has driven him to engage more with the Shameless fandom than his numerous other fandoms:

Well, aside from the fact that I can really relate to the characters on Shameless, I can't deny that the reason I like Shameless more is probably because of the OTP that I ship. I just didn't find a couple that I shipped as strongly on GOT or OITNB. - P16 (GOT = Game of Thrones, OITNB = Orange is the New Black)

Animated GIFs and GIF sets were also added sources for creating feels. We were told that the repetition of specific scenes fed emotional discussions and analysis.

Second, participants were motivated to engage in specific fandoms because of recognition of their fandom peers. This occurred when other fandom users would comment on our participants' posts. Together, this created a sense that users were a part of a community that was much bigger than just themselves.

I feel like I am part of something. I have something in common with these people and I feel more like I'm interacting with them, not to mention that when I post a bit of analysis or an opinion people response. We engage. - P1

Positive peer feedback was so important that users often reported an almost 'sandbox' waiting time before they engaged with a fandom. During this time they told us they would make sure they learned the canon for fear of getting ignored. We found this was true for nearly any type of fandom interaction (i.e., fanfic writing, GIF creation, scene analysis).

Third, while users still felt they were part of a fandom even when a show ended, their involvement was directly relatable to how much new content was being produced. If new TV show episodes were not being created, then postings tended to slow down but not necessarily stop.

What drives fandoms forward is new material, new things to make GIF-sets of and comment on. - P1

These findings, coupled with the findings around why users at times leave fandoms, suggest that when users indicate that new material drives a fandom forward, they in fact mean the 'right' material: material that is in-line with their social beliefs and is emotional (e.g., creates feels).

Lastly, the most powerful motivation described by our participants was the engagement they experienced with the actual actors or TV show officials, although this was very

limited. Our participants were very aware that certain TV shows had actors and even official representation on Tumblr, which ranged from, for example, an actor responding to Tumblr questions via a video in her pajamas, to having official Tumblr blogs and holding 'Q&A' sessions. The mere potential in having actors or show officials engage with a Tumblr user motivated our participants to contribute to fandoms online.

Someone that works for the show runs and the creator does like Q&A's every couple of weeks and I know one of the actors that was on the show has his own Tumbler [sic] and I know some of the actors from Supernatural have made comments on things that they have seen there. I don't know if they specifically seen what I wrote but it seems like they have, they are at least aware of some of the things that we say, we as a collective fandom say and do. – P8

SHARED SOCIAL EXPERIENCES AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

Participants also talked about fandom communities participating in similar shared social experiences, which created a shared sense of purpose and understanding that united fandom users and allowed them to relate to one another.

First, this involved the act of binge TV watching. Here users would download or purchase whole or multiple TV show seasons to study canons and participate in fandoms. This also extended to watching TV show seasons multiple times. This sense of binge watching was even encouraged within fandom communities. It was also seen as a point of pride for most of our participants who would brag about how many hours they spent watching and re-watching their fandom's episodes. For example, users often brag to the Tumblr community about an experience they have had trying to explain to her family why she was binge watching TV shows. It is clear in these examples that the family is not part of this culture. The outsider does not understand why the fandom user would be partaking in such activity, but they know the Tumblr community will understand.

Second, every participant we interviewed described a key component to Tumblr fandoms as being a place for people to "strongly unite over something." Participants talked about many cases of fandom postings related to *social justice*—a term used by our participants to describe the discussion of topics such as abortion, suicide, feminism and sexism. For example, larger fandoms often had entire blogs dedicated to social justice topics such as feminism. P7, one of these bloggers, told us her motivations behind creating a blog dedicated to feminism in Dr. Who:

[Social justice discussions] are important because they show that people do care about representation and social matters. – P7

Other participants who were not directly involved with creating content around social justice still mentioned the component as an important aspect to their Tumblr experience. For example, a participant who was not a creator of social justice content commented on his appreciation for the material:

My Favorite thing about Tumblr is the amount of creativity like the graphics and GIFs are so beautiful, people work really hard and there is a sense of learning there, like I've learned so much about sexism, feminism, and other social issues that I didn't learn anywhere else, people critique media as well as view and discuss it, so it is a really interesting mix of art and discussion in a pretty easy blogging site. - P4

Participants in our study who did not create social justice content said they still heavily re-blogged it. Our data showed that the divide between these two groups was very strong. Meaning, those who did create social justice content were heavily involved (e.g., have a dedicated blog to it), and those who did not create the content actively re-blogged, but never created it.

Participants told us that felt a sense of ownership over the fandoms they were a part of and, therefore, felt a responsibility to critique the social elements in the shows. This also allowed them to comment on their own morals and ethics in relation to the show. Moreover, participants said that by talking about social issues, Tumblr users influenced each other and then 'came together' to present a collective response to a TV show. The hope was that producers and show officials may change the outcome on the show, which would then present their social justice objectives to the mass public.

DISCUSSION

We now summarize our findings, compare them to the related work, and suggest possible design implications.

Interest-Driven Networks and Co-Partnership

The loose way in which Tumblr users join and leave fandoms suggests a kind of social network organized around users' day-to-day interests and activities. Membership in a given fandom is a fuzzy concept determined by each user's personal interest in that fandom. When users become interested in a show, they start to attend to the relevant tags and seek out other invested users. In this way, membership occurs as a gradual, informal process. Similarly, users only cease to belong to a fandom when they consciously decided to ignore that set of content and tags. Compared to Facebook, this presents a much more fluid kind of social network. Researchers have shown that Facebook usage revolves around pre-existing offline relationships [10], and the interface demands static, explicit expressions of interest: when users want to belong to an interest group, they subscribe to it by 'liking' a page. This model leaves little room for the kind of light cross-pollination we found among fandoms on Tumblr. There is a degree of a similarity between Tumblr and Twitter where previous research has found that Twitter users do follow strangers who have similar interests [7].

Our results also show that the content produced in fandom communities on Tumblr does not just celebrate and recycle the fictions and personalities that the fandoms gather around. As Jenkins [8] described in his work, it extends the original content, which means there is room for fandom

participants to add their voices to the canon. On Tumblr, this also means that a scene from a TV show could be edited into a GIF set instead of simply writing about a show, which is found in traditional fanfic. Thus, the use of media provides a new way for fandom communities on Tumblr to feel like they share ownership with the original show creators. In addition to this, we see it offers the potential for new ways to understand TV show viewers. Our findings showed that when users disagreed with the direction of the show, often for moral, ethical or other social justice reasons, they would leave fandoms and no longer continue to watch the show. Their fanfic activities also provided critiques of show plots, which could inform the future directions of shows if producers wanted to maintain viewership.

We are arguably in an age where the act of TV watching is changing from scheduled TV shows to TV-on-demand where people stream shows at their leisure, or record and watch later. Traditional metrics on gauging TV show viewership, such as the Nielsen rating, tend to focus on how many people are currently watching a show compared to previous time periods. In the current age of TV watching, this likely presents a very limited set of data. Yet the activities of Tumblr fandom uses could easily shed additional light on to fan reactions to a show and their desire for future directions. It may also provide show producers with a prime opportunity to gain additional qualitative data that explains why viewers abandoned watching a show.

A Different Kind of Social Network
Issues Strengthen Tumblr. We asked participants to describe what they liked and what they did not like about the Tumblr interface. Many of our interviewees recognized that Tumblr does not follow common usability standards and social networking conventions. Users indicated that the private messaging mechanisms were frustrating because they restricted direct, private communication between two users. On Facebook and Twitter, users are permitted to communicate privately with each other. Yet on Tumblr, users have to ask a question in 500 characters or less, and the question and answer may be published on the other user's blog. This made it so nearly all content was public. Our participants also indicated that tagging was limited because the functionality was not flexible enough to query for a specific kind of content.

We believe these usability issues, whether deliberate or accidental, actually support the unique fanfic culture that we have described. For example, the restrictive messaging system may actually support fandom communities, rather than deter them. This is because private, user-to-user communications add little to the greater community given their inaccessibility by the broader audience. On Facebook, many communications revolve around coordinating and sharing personal real-life events with family and friends [1] and building individual relationships [9,10]. In this context,

unrestricted private messaging allows users to maintain different levels of privacy and interact simultaneously with multiple social circles. An ask-box submission on Tumblr acts as a private message, but because it can be answered publicly, it also prompts the creation of new, visible content for the community. In this way, Tumblr's more restrictive approach to private messaging privileges content generation and communities of shared interest over the ability to focus on one-to-one relationships.

A steep learning curve may be one of the tradeoffs of Tumblr's departure from usability standards and social networking conventions. We asked participants about how and when they started using Tumblr, and many stated that they took time to learn both the interface and the fandom culture on Tumblr. They described going through a learning period where they were simply trying to figure out how to use the site. Some of them even quit using it and only returned at a later date when they discovered an interesting fandom community. We believe this learning curve indicates that it can take time to build a mental model for using a significantly different social networking platform like Tumblr. Fandom communities are open to all users, but users have to invest time and effort to participate. This means fandom communities on Tumblr tend to consist of serious users who are challenged, rather than masses of newbies likely to lose interest over a short period of time. We believe this sweet-spot might be compromised if a simpler interface was adopted, or even a dynamic interface designed specifically for newcomers.

Of course, it should stand to reason that we are not suggesting that some identified usability issues should not be addressed. For example, the speed of loading images on in the mobile app and the ability to do negative searches and multi-tag searches would greatly benefit Tumblr users.

Social Network Value. We found that the participants valued Tumblr because it allowed them to build a social network based on shared interests rather than location or real-life associations. There was a sense that inclusion and enthusiasm were built-in to the experience because you choose to interact only with people who like what you like. Sharing an interest in a subject on Tumblr is not exactly the same as claiming interest on Facebook. Tumblr offers no explicit way to 'like' a general subject in order to build a personal profile. On Tumblr, users share interests by posting to their blogs and, eventually, following users who consistently produce interesting content. In a sense, Tumblr requires users to show rather than tell what their interests are. We suggest that this approach has value and that more social networks should employ it and not just those associated with image sharing. The proof of this success is very visible in our findings as our participants described the inclusive nature and incredibly engaged community they are a part of. As our findings showed, participants felt everyone had a place both to contribute and feel support.

Learning from Tumblr

Overall, we feel that by defying standards, going beyond the Facebook 'like,' and providing a show instead of tell community that Tumblr has been able to create a dedicated and engaged set of online fandom communities. This is, of course, not to say that all social networking sites should follow the design practices of Tumblr, nor that Tumblr is a 'perfect' social networking site. There are likely many people who have tried to use Tumblr to participate in fandoms and become discouraged to the point where they gave up on participating. Our participants were those who *did* manage to understand the workings of Tumblr and become deeply embedded in fandoms. We suggest that for those sites that *do* want to create a restrictive, somewhat inclusive group or community, where users feel they can come together around shared interests and 'be themselves,' then some of the design attributes that Tumblr has utilized may be very important design directions.

Limitations

As with all work there are limitations in our study. As mentioned, our participants were comprised of Tumblr users who were deeply integrated in to the community rather than those who struggled and perhaps gave up on using the site. Studies of these individuals would certainly yield additional valuable results. We also did not interview teens yet they represent a portion of the Tumblr user group. That being said, of the 84 potential participants we contacted, only three were teenagers. While the low number surprised us, we feel this might have been because the fandoms we targeted tended to have viewership demographics of 20+ years of age. This suggests that future work could investigate fandoms with younger demographics to compare results to our own. Finally, during the study our fandom users displayed harmonious interactions; however outside of the study we have seen trolling and negative fandom user interactions occur. This interaction could be further investigated in future work.

CONCLUSION

In this paper we have presented a detailed understanding of the fandom Tumblr culture by exploring how Tumblr users participate on Tumblr and create a distinct set of community practices. This is despite the fact that many Tumblr users felt there were hurdles in participating in fandoms online, often stemming from user interface challenges within the Tumblr site. Rather than detracting from usage however, these challenges meant that a distinct community emerged based on shared interests, shared experiences, and a common sense of purpose. This suggests potential directions for social networking sites that want to create similar aspects of community.

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