Tumblr Fandoms, Community & Culture

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Abstract

A growing trend is the participation in online fandom communities through the support of the blogging platform Tumblr. We investigated Tumblr fandom users' motivations behind participating in fandoms, and how they interacted within the Tumblr community. Our results show that fandom users feel their Tumblr experience is 'always-on' where they participate at nearly any point in the day. They have also adopted a unique set of jargon and use of animated GIFs to match their desired fandom activities. Overall, our results show that Tumblr fandom users present a unique culture, much different from other social networking sites.

Author Keywords

tumblr; social networking; fanfiction; fandoms; culture

ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous.

Introduction

In recent years, Tumblr has increased dramatically in popularity and has become one of the fastest growing social networking sites. Recently, Tumblr hit mainstream attention when it was purchased by Yahoo! (May 2013). At this time, Tumblr contained 108.4

million blogs and reported 75.8 million posts were being created every day.

Tumblr is described as a blogging site where 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, their posts are displayed on their dashboard. Within the Tumblr site, fandoms (the community that surrounds a television show, movie or book) have become key contributors. These users write stories about the characters in the show; they also analyze particular scenes in a show through posts.

While other studies have looked into online backchannels of live entertainment events by investigating other micro-blogging sites such as Twitter [e.g., 3], Tumblr blogging has not yet been studied.

Related Work

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 [5] brings forth the idea that, in fanfic, fans emerge as co-partners in the creation process and evolve beyond a passive audience. Pugh [7] 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. Past studies have looked at a variety of topics within fanfic, such as: how writing fanfic on online websites helped users practice English, learn cultures [2], fanfic jargon [4], and canon gatekeeping [8].

There also exists a body of literature that explores social networking sites. Within the largest social networking site, Facebook, user motivations include maintaining awareness of friends' activities [1], coordinate offline socialization [1], and building relationships [6]. Perhaps the most notable use of social networking and fan use in academic studies is the notion of backchannels. Backchannels are the live blogging of television shows or media events [e.g., 3]. Studies have mostly approached these topics from a quantitative approach. While valuable, we see an obvious gap in in-depth knowledge around the use of fandoms and even more so from a descriptive qualitative standpoint.

The above related work provides a general background for our study and shows us that while fanfic and social networking sites have been studied in a variety of ways and objectives, there is a lack of research on Tumblr and, specifically, fandoms within the site.

Study Methodology

Our study consisted of three qualitative stages. First, for three months prior to selecting and contacting participants, we observed a number of Tumblr fandoms. During this time we became familiar with common practices and categorized images and actual posts into common themes. Second, participants completed a short, open-ended survey online to contextualize our findings and interview. Third, we conducted semi-structured interviews. For this stage we recruited seventeen participants by contacting them directly on Tumblr. Users were found randomly through the study duration by searching tags of popular fandoms for user's contributions. The fandoms we selected include a range of different types (e.g.,

day off: tumblr
need to study: tumblr
shitty weather: tumblr
wonderful and sunny weather: tumblr
plans with other people: tumblr
in class: tumblr
supposed to be sleeping: tumblr
on the bus: tumblr
the apocalypse: tumblr
during my own funeral: tumblr
tumblr: tumblr
tumblr isn't working: stare at tumblr until it does

308,559 notes (via ayoungrat & alecbaned)

Figure 1. Tumblr post on the always on nature of Tumblr

popular, indie, different TV networks, etc.). These participants' ages ranged from 19 to 31. Occupations of these participants varied and users resided in North America, South America, Western and Eastern Europe. At the end of the interview, we asked the participant to walk us through their most recent posts.

We analyzed our interview transcriptions and notes using open, axial, and selective coding. The data collected revealed a complex and unique social networking experience. Our associated video describes this experience through visuals to further describe the fanfic activities of Tumblr users.

Findings

Tumblr Love. Every participant we interviewed described a key component to Tumblr as being a place for people to "strongly unite over something". While the social networking site was built primarily as a blogging platform, it is flexible and has been appropriated by the Tumblr community to be much more. The sentiment of most of our participants was 'absolute' love for the Tumblr community. They appreciated that they have common interests with other Tumblr users and that other people are willing to analyze, and generally obsess over the same things that they do.

The GIF. Another key characteristic of Tumblr compared to other social networking sites is the heavy use of images. This visual component arose time and time again in our interviews and was also very noticeable during the initial monitoring period of our study. The majority of these images come in the form of animated GIFs or GIF sets. We have learned through our study that understanding the role GIFs play is important in understanding the Tumblr culture.

Jargon. While observing and analyzing posts, we learned that users have appropriated and created terminology that fits the types of activities they participate in. Below we introduce some of these terms.

One True Pairings (*OTPs*) is a set of characters that fans pair together (in a romantic relationship). Fans will refer to all OTPs relationships in all fandoms as simply '*ships*'—derived from the word relationship. 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 there are a number of other terms used within Tumblr and fandoms, those described represent the most prevalent.

Discovery. The concept of belonging to a fandom in Tumblr is fuzzy. Unlike Facebook, you do not get accepted to groups. You are part of the fandom when you think you are. Users reported finding Tumblr through a web search for related information on the television show and thus accidently found a Tumblr blog. Second, some users joined Tumblr not specifically to participate in fandoms, yet as they began following users, they learned about fandoms through their dashboard. Besides cross-pollination, in some cases users will ask for recommendations for a new fandom to be part of. It should be noted that when asking for recommendations, users seem just as interested in the

I would say it's me. It's the "real me" I don't get to be in my everyday life. – P2

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

Figure 2: The Real Me. P2 and P7 explains how they represent themselves on Tumblr

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

Figure 3: Social Justice. P4 explains how the Tumblr Community's focus on Social Justice has impacted them

value of joining the fandom as the value of the actual watching of the television series.

Always on. Most participants described their interactions 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 tab open." This being said, engagement within Tumblr varies from time to time and migrates between active posting and staying aware of the posts of others.

Motivations. Our findings indicated that there were a number of mechanisms that motivated users to what extent they engaged with Tumblr fandoms. These included: strong feels around OTPs, recognition by peers and show officials, being able to be more "real" because of the anonymity, and the ability to participate in social justice.

As Tumblr is known for the ability to remain semi-anonymous, some of our questions focused on understanding the level of anonymity users were employing. We use the word semi-anonymous because, 1) some participants used this term, and 2) most users said while their friends and family did not know about their blogs, they felt they could find them if they really wanted to. A key finding in this area was that users felt they were more themselves on Tumblr then in the 'real world' (see figure 2). That is they felt the anonymity allowed them to be more themselves.

Another underlying tone around motivation to use amongst participants was the presence of "social justice" within the different fandom communities. Our participants used the word "social justice" to describe

the discussion of topics such as abortion, suicide, feminism and sexism.

Discussion & Conclusion

In this paper we described the motivations behind participating in fandoms, and how they interact within the Tumblr community. This has allowed us to better understand a broader set of social networking sites by learning about motivations, practices, and social interactions of Tumblr users. In future work, we hope to explore these findings to inform new alternative methods to create successful social networking sites.

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