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'Comments in Tags, Please!': Tagging practices on Tumblr

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ABSTRACT

Tumblr is one of the most popular content sharing websites, where the use of keyword tags that enhance the searchability and visibility of posts is prominent. However, this resource has been creatively exploited by some users beyond its folksonomic use: Since Tumblr does not have a separate comment section for posts, the tag section may also be used for tags with discourse functions such as expressing an opinion, a reaction, or including asides. This article explores the practice of including comments in tags, taking into account the specific technological features of Tumblr's tagging system, as well as the role of the communities within the website.

The corpus analyzed in the study comprises two datasets collected from the general 'Trending' page of Tumblr and 60 fan communities ('fandoms'). Comment tags and their identified discourse functions (opinion, reaction, aside) are analyzed quantitatively for differences regarding use, structure, and sentiment. The analysis shows significant differences between the comment tags and traditional keyword tags, as well as among comment tags with the three different discourse functions. The results suggest that social tagging practices on Tumblr are influenced both by the technological specifications of the platform and the social structure of the website.

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1. Introduction

Tagging is defined as the practice of creating and adding user-generated labels for the purposes of annotating an online resource, for example a post, an image, or a website (Marlow et al., 2006). In the past few years, social tagging has attracted considerable attention from the research community. With the emergence of Web 2.0, user generated taxonomies, also referred to as *folksonomies* (Vander Wal, 2005), have become increasingly more popular on websites such as Delicious, Flickr, Twitter, Tumblr, and Instagram. The majority of studies have approached the subject from a Web Design and Information Science perspective; more recently, research has explored social tagging from a linguistic perspective on Flickr and Twitter (Lee, this issue).

Despite the important role of tags on Tumblr, there is very little research on its tagging practices, or on the social network website in general. Chang et al., (2014) provide a statistical overview of Tumblr and its communication practices; however, they do not address social tagging. Even though Bourlai and Herring (2014) include Tumblr tags in the data they analyze as an important part of the posts, they focus on the semantic and pragmatic differences between text and image use. Hillman et al., (2014) only mention the importance of keyword tags regarding their use in finding and joining the online fan communities on Tumblr called 'fan-

doms'. The only study exploring Tumblr tags at the time of writing is the work of Xu et al., (2014), who analyze user behavioral patterns in a dataset of 10.2 billion posts and 23.2 million users. They provide a statistical analysis of tag use in their dataset, focusing on the number of tags per post, the most popular topics on the website according to tags, as well as popularity patterns of tags. Thus, there is very little information about the discourse function of tags on Tumblr.

The present article attempts to fill in the gap described above by exploring social tagging practices on Tumblr from a discourse perspective. More specifically, the study focuses on the practice of including comments in the tag section and the discourse functions of such comment tags. In order to better understand the nature of the comment tags, they are analyzed and compared with traditional keyword tags with regard to their use, their linguistic structure, and sentiment presence. Moreover, comment tags are further analyzed for the three discourse functions identified: opinion, reaction, and asides. The results suggest that social tagging practices on Tumblr are influenced by both the technological specifications of the platform and the social structure of the website.

2. Social tagging on Tumblr

Tumblr was founded in 2007 by David Karp and was acquired by Yahoo in June 2013 due to its popularity. As of August 2017, Tumblr has 363 million blogs and 152.3 billion posts (Tumblr,

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2017). A user may sign up in order to create a blog (or multiple blogs) where they have the option of seven different types of posts based on the kind of content shared: *text*, *photo*, *link*, *chat*, *quote*, *audio*, *video*. Another type of post, *answer*, is created when a blog owner replies publicly to a private message received by another user. Users may visit blogs individually to view all their posts, or follow them in order to view their most recent posts in a central feed page called *Dashboard* (similar to Twitter's Timeline). Users also have the option of searching for individual posts including specific keywords, or explore trending posts and tags in the *Explore* page.

A Tumblr post has three distinct writing spaces: a title section (optional), a body section, and a tag section. The appearance of these sections may differ on individual blogs when a post is published, because users have the option of customizing their blogs using 'themes'. Based on the theme of a blog, the tag section may appear smaller or even not appear at all. Fig. 1 is an example of a post on a blog where the theme requires hovering over the tags individually with the cursor in order to make them appear.

However, all posts that appear in the Dashboard of a user have a uniform look, regardless of the theme of the blog they belong to. Fig. 2 is an example of a post as it appears on the Dashboard. It should be noted that tags always include the hash sign (#) on the Dashboard, but may or may not include it on an individual blog based on its theme.

Tumblr is predominantly a platform for sharing multimedia content. Based on a dataset of 586.4 million posts analyzed by Yahoo Labs (Chang et al., 2014), the most popular post type is photo (78.11%). Tags play a salient role for enhancing the searchability and visibility of such content. According to Tumblr's help page, there is no limit to the number of tags per post; however, only the first 20 show up in searches. Tags are separated by hitting the 'Enter' key, and, similarly to Flickr tags (but unlike Twitter and Instagram¹), they may include spaces and other special characters, such as punctuation marks, asterisks, and other symbols.

As seen at the bottom right of Fig. 2, users have the options of sharing a post outside Tumblr, 'reblogging' (similar to the retweet option in Twitter), or liking; the number of shares, reblogs and likes that a post receives are called *notes*. Tumblr posts do not have a comment section². If a user wishes to comment on a post, they may do so by reblogging the post: The original post will be indented as quoted content, and the content added by the user will appear above or below. As a result, posts that are reblogged multiple times can become lengthy and the original content may get lost in the background. However, when reblogging a post, the tags of the original post are not included with the rest of the content and users may add their own. These technological limitations and affordances in the design of Tumblr seem to have prompted users to become more creative with their tagging practices on Tumblr: Instead of "cluttering" the original post content with comments, they started adding their comments in the tag section. Consequently, the tag section on Tumblr, originally designed to include keyword tags that enhance the visibility and searchability of a post, is now also used as a writing space for adding comments without changing the content or appearance of the original post.

Keyword tags are defined in this study as descriptive labels that enhance the visibility and searchability of a post. If a post were to be archived, these tags would comprise its metadata, since they describe and provide information about the content of the post.

Keyword tags on Tumblr may range from generic topics (*photography*) to specific TV show names (*ouat* for *Once Upon A Time*). There are different tags or variations of tags that refer to the same subject, and users often include as many as possible to reach a wider audience. Several online articles include guides for successfully using keyword tags on Tumblr to be discovered and "drive maximum engagement" (Ray, 2015). A lot of these online guides also suggest using popular tags from "across categories" to receive more notes (Mason, 2013), and include lists of the most popular tags (Moreau, 2016; Parker, 2015). They also emphasize the importance of using only relevant popular tags to avoid creating spam (Mason, 2013; Ray, 2015; Parker, 2015). Another use of keyword tags is for organization purposes. Some users include tags with symbols such as asterisks to help them organize content in their blog for personal use, or tags such as *answered* to help users find publicly answered private messages (Answer posts) on their blog. Since the focus of this article is the practice of including comments in the tag section, keyword tags are not further analyzed for possible discourse functions. Rather, they are included in this study as a traditional use of tags to be compared with the less conventional use for commenting.

Comment tags play no role in enhancing the visibility and searchability of a post and would not be considered metadata labels like keyword tags. They are part of the content and would normally be included in the body section of a post. By placing part of the content in the tag section, users indicate a logical or structural division in the post. In the following example (Fig. 3), the user has reblogged content from another user and added their own content in the tag section; this way, the original post and the comments are separated, as they would be in platforms that feature comment sections for posts. Thus, the post may be reblogged further by other users, without being "cluttered" with the content of previous reblogs. The post includes two comment tags (#im laughing so much, #omg) and 18 keyword tags that refer not only to the characters depicted in the pictures and the shows they belong to, but also to other related shows and characters.

Additionally, users may engage in this practice to express their membership in a specific community within Tumblr. The following post³ (Fig. 4) circulated around 2013 in the online fan communities (*fandoms*) that thrive on the website, as the 'proper etiquette' of commenting on posts:

This excerpt from comments of users on a reblogged version⁴ of the original post seems to imply that the practice was indeed followed by many members of the fandoms where it became popular, resulting in 'hiding comments in tags' instead of including them in the body section of the post:

"Reblogging because I'VE BEEN GRUMPY GROANING ABOUT THIS VERY THING WITH MY FRIEND FOR AGES. About how nobody seems to comment on anything anymore and just hides everything in tags, making artists have to check every single fucking reblog separately to see if there's EVEN A TINY BIT OF FEEDBACK."

The social structure of Tumblr is an important factor to take into account when analyzing user behavior on the website. Users on Tumblr interact around shared interests, creating what Porter (2004) would characterize 'virtual communities'. The most active and famous virtual communities on Tumblr are the *fandoms*. Tumblr even has an official blog that provides information about the popularity of fandoms on the website (Tumblr Fandometrics (2016); Hillman et al., 2014) who studied fandoms on Tumblr emphasize the importance of tags and jargon in fandom membership. Herring (2004) suggests that jargon is a discourse

¹ Twitter and Instagram only allow alphanumeric characters and underscores (.) in their hashtags; since April 2015, emojis may also be used in hashtags on Instagram.

² In May 2016, Tumblr added a comment feature that may be activated by blog owners, so that other users may leave comments without reblogging the original post. At the time of writing this paper, this feature does not seem to be widespread or uniformly used.

³ <http://aoidaich.tumblr.com/post/50082613362/this-has-been-a-psa>

⁴ <http://hisako87.tumblr.com/post/50185902395/nutfound-muura-tgweaver-kawomaeda-this>

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