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HG2052 Assignment One
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"It's very different behavior. People come [on Tumblr] for same reason they turn their TV on when they come home at the end of the day ... It's something to do before checking your email, it's a chance to go and see stuff you enjoy, let's you escape from the real world..." - David Karp, founder and CEO of Tumblr (Indvik, 2013).

Tumblr, a social media and microblogging site, was founded by David Karp in 2007 (Tumblr, n.d.) and is currently owned by Yahoo! Inc. (Schroeder, 2013). Tumblr is a relatively new communication medium but it has become a popular network among youths and young adults, as 45% of their users are under 35-years-old (Papageorgiou, 2013). This paper aims to:

- Discuss Tumblr's functions as a social networking platform
- Summarise literature on Tumblr as a communication medium in the following aspects: Tumblr's functions as a microblogging platform; a platform where fandoms congregate online; a platform that promotes sharing of ideas
- Discuss Tumblr's functions with regards to Crystal's (2006) seven features and comparing to speech and text.

Since its inception, Tumblr has seen the creation of 202.9 million tumblelogs and 91.1 billion posts (Tumblr, n.d.). Mashable, an online news website, conducted a study in 2012 to investigate the average time spent on social networking sites in the US. The study found that the average American user spends 6.75 hours on Facebook, compared to 1.5 hours on Tumblr and Pinterest, both tied in second place (Fox, 2012). Whereas in Singapore, Tumblr is the 18th most popular website based on a combination of page views and average daily visitors (Tumblr Usage Per Country, 2014).

Firstly, users are required to create a Tumblr account to start posting on their 'tumblelog', which is Tumblr's version of a blog. Once an account is made, users can either create or use third party material for text posts, photos, quotes, audio or videos. Tumblr also allows following functions, and users can also choose to 'like' and/or 'reblog' (i.e. re-share) posts from tumblelogs they follow (i.e. subscribe to). Afterwards, users are able to view posts from tumblelogs they subscribe to on their Tumblr dashboard (which is similar to Facebook's News Feed).

Tumblr's format is largely graphic-centred, with 42% of original posts being photo posts (Gaille, 2013). Majority of posts that become popular or 'viral' are usually photo post, accompanied by brief captions. Additionally, unlike most social networking websites, Tumblr's platform is supportive of GIFs (Graphic Interchange Format), which are animated images captured from video. Despite this popularity of photo posts, there are also a number of tumblelogs dedicated to text posts, but ultimately, the usage of Tumblr is dependant on users' preferences and as such, the ratio of photo posts to text posts varies with each tumblelog. Nevertheless, the act of posting on Tumblr is "broadcast in nature and... lets users share brief blasts of information" (DeVoe, 2009) makes Tumblr a microblogging application.

These brief blasts of information (usually less than 200 words) ranges from random thoughts to daily minutia. This brevity makes microblogging applications like Tumblr and Twitter have an appeal over traditional blogging, as the latter usually features lengthy prose (DeVoe, 2009). Updates made by the user will appear on Tumblr's dashboard and followers can choose to reply or comment on the posts. Microblogging promotes community building because by posting on Tumblr, the user is promoting his/her online presence to others and also invites interaction from other users, unless the user remains passive.

Apart from conventional social sharing functions such as 'like', 'reblog' (i.e. re-share) or 'reply', Tumblr is also a platform where fans to "congregate as communities of shared interest" (Newman, 2014), albeit they are informal communities. Fandom, or fan culture, is a term used to describe fans "of a particular person, team, fictional series, etc." (Fandom, n.d.). These fans are referred to collectively and they are regarded as part of a subculture. Contemporary fandom, according to Newman (2014), can be centred on characters, narratives or franchises. Online fandom can even translate to an offline fan culture, where fans dress as their favourite characters. For example, during Halloween, several young women dressed as Mia, a seductive, dangerous female character from the cult classic film, Pulp Fiction (Figure 1) (Newman, 2014).



Figure 1: A female young adult dressed as Mia for Halloween

GIF is also another reason that attributes to the proliferation of Fandoms on Tumblr. Fans are able to post GIFs of, for e.g., their favourite film or football team scoring a goal. These images are often “recirculated appropriations from media texts, frequently transformed or remixed” (Newman, 2014). In the same article, Newman studied several GIFs on Tumblr that were “transformed or remixed”, in particular, GIFs that were made by fans of Pulp Fiction. He searched posts tagged that are associated with the film such as ‘#Tarantino’ and ‘#Mia Wallace’. Given that Pulp Fiction is a widely popular film, there are a number of fan remixes of the film (Figure 2), and Tumblr’s search function simplifies this search, as long as those posts are tagged.



Figure 2: Tumblr posts tagged with #Mia Wallace

The mass fan contributions on Tumblr signify that people in the various online communities are proactively sharing ideas with one another. This increases “sociality”, and one of the definitions as stipulated by Fuchs (2014) includes “humans form[ing] and maintain[ing] communities”. Thus, by contributing and sharing ideas as well as validating others’ work by ‘liking’, ‘commenting’ or ‘reblogging’, online communities on Tumblr are constructed and also constantly maintained.

Since Tumblr is an online social networking website, the fan contributions on Tumblr cannot take place face-to-face and as such, they are more visually decontextualized. Fans utilise GIFs, photos, audio posts etc. to express their appreciation of something. As a medium of communication, Tumblr has features that are either text-like or speech like, according to Crystal (2006) (Figure 3).

SPEECH LIKE	TEXT LIKE
Time bound	Space bound
Spontaneous	Contrived
Face-to-face	Visually decontextualized
Loosely structured	Elaborately structured
Socially interactive	Factually communicative
Immediately revisable	Repeatedly revisable
Prosodically rich	Graphically rich

Figure 3: Crystal's Seven Features

At first glance, Tumblr has a more text-like structure, but upon closer inspection, Tumblr and the way users communicate to one another contains a few elements of speech as well. The following characteristics will be used to explain how Tumblr is text-like, with a number of speech-like features:

Text-Like: Space Bound

Posts on Tumblr are not restricted by time but rather, by space. For the company's perspective, the amount of data that Tumblr can contain is only limited by the server storage that it has. Or, in a user's perspective, the amount of data is essentially the number of posts that are viewable on one page on the screen. Tumblr also introduced the 'infinite scroll' option, in which users can continue scrolling down on their device to view more posts, instead of proceeding to a next page. This function minimises the space used for posts and in this way,

Text-Like: Contrived

While speech is spontaneous, Tumblr is more contrived. Posts made by users or 'reblogged' posts can be reread or analysed multiple times because of Tumblr's static nature; posts are permanent unless the author chooses to delete it. Speech, on the other hand, cannot be analysed because there might be no repetitions of the conversation.

Additionally, since Tumblr is an online social media and microblogging website, time is needed to upload the data from one's computer to the servers and onto the dashboard, and as such, there is a considerable lag between production of the posts to the reception of them, although the lag is also dependant on the user's connection speed. The refresh rate on one's dashboard is also not automatic, meaning the user has to manually click on the home button to refresh the page to load newer posts.

Text-Like: Visually decontextualized

In speech, especially during a conversation, it is more feasible to use deictic expressions that are applicable for that moment such as ‘now’, ‘over there’ or ‘that one’. Extralinguistic cues (i.e. facial expressions and gestures) are also used when a speaker is trying to express something.

On Tumblr though, facial expressions or gestures can be conveyed through GIFs or other forms of pictures that appropriately describe the situation. For example, in Figure 4, a fandom tumblelog, *victoriasecre-t*, ‘reblogs’ or creates posts related to Victoria’s Secret models, also known as VS Angels. In a gratitude post, the user thanks her followers because she has reached a milestone (i.e. having 17,000 followers). The text is also accompanied with a GIF of Candice Swanepoel (a popular VS Angel) blowing a kiss to the camera, which implies appreciation.



Figure 4: Gratitude post

Speech-Like: Loosely structured

Although Tumblr functions like a blog, there are no strict guidelines for the language structure used. Users are able to use short forms (i.e. text language) for e.g., ‘LOL’, which stands for ‘Laugh Out Loud’ or ‘wtv’ for ‘whatever’, or they may even use emoticons, which are textual portrayals of the writer’s emotions.

Likewise, contractions of words are common, such as ‘is not’ to ‘isn’t’ and ‘watching’ to ‘watchin’’. And because Tumblr is such a popular informal medium among young adults, obscenities and informal vocabulary can also be seen quite regularly. For example, in the image below (Figure 5), the words “slick” and “hookup” are used derogatorily. And in this context given, the post is largely informal because the user, *lindsaycolemann*, is trying to insult an unnamed person in the post for mistreating her and other females. The expletive “fuck you”

followed by an obscene middle-finger gesture in the GIF (taken from another cult classic film, *The Breakfast Club*) which is used to further demonstrate her anger towards the person.

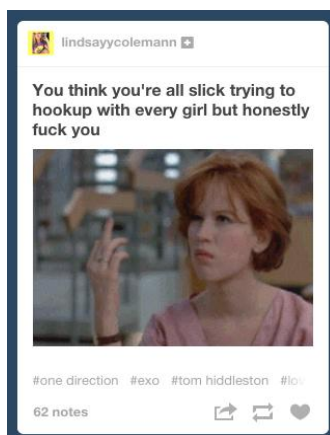


Figure 5: Expletives and Obscenities in a Tumblr post

Speech-Like: Socially interactive

Due to the fact that Tumblr is effectively a social media site, users do interact with one another. The ‘Ask’ function, if enabled, allows anyone to directly message the user (if the tumblelog is a public one). Fans of a tumblelog can also use this function to express their love (or hatred) for it. In some occasions, an online friendship can be formed on Tumblr and subsequently maintained if two parties continue communicating. However, Tumblr’s direct message function disallows use of prosody. Direct messages can also be stored and read at one’s own pace, thus demonstrating a text-like feature as well (Figure 6).

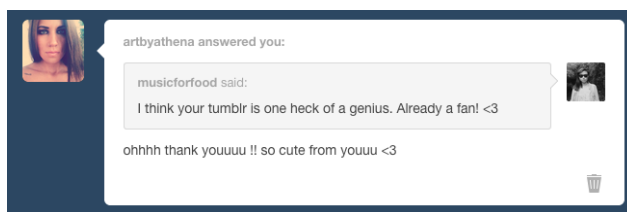


Figure 6: The ‘direct message’ function

Text-Like: Repeatedly revisable

The edit function on Tumblr can be used to revise one’s original post or a ‘reblogged’ post. Even after a post has been published for a time period, the user can still choose to edit it without much trouble, unlike speech where errors, once spoken, cannot be withdrawn. Moreover, once the post is edited, other users will only be able to view the latest edited post and previous versions will not be visible.

Text-Like: Graphically rich

Tumblr has no recording functions or text playback functions and as such it is not prosodically rich; one is unable to hear the intonation or tempo of the user's voice. However, this does not imply that Tumblr is entirely graphically rich either. In the image below (Figure 7), the user, ryuko, posted a text post because he is seeking more tumblelogs to follow. He adopts an informal tone in general as seen in the uses of his language such as "sooo", a bastardised version of the word 'so'. He also does not adhere to punctuation rules, such as capitalising the first letter after the full stop.



Figure 7: Informal tone and vocabulary used in a Tumblr post

Nonetheless, there are text posts on Tumblr that do adhere to punctuation rules and generally implement a form of spatial organisation in the text. For example, in the following image (Figure 8), the user, joycepring, breaks her text into three paragraphs and her sentences do use appropriate punctuation.

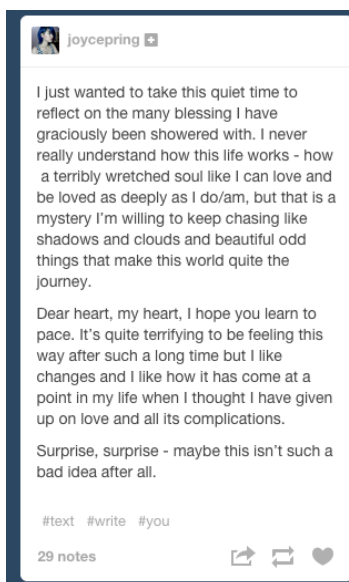


Figure 8: A graphically rich Tumblr text post

Conclusion

In summary, Tumblr is a medium of communication that is both a microblogging and a social networking website, and it is popular among young adults. Fandoms thrive on Tumblr and they express their appreciation for something mostly via GIFs. Tumblr also has more text-like features with a few elements of speech, as explained above. For future research, the various online Tumblr communities and the language or language structure used among the users could be studied.

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