

Tumbling Through Social Media: Exploring the Conventions of a Tumblr Blog

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Through an examination of Tumblr as a genre of social media posting, Ragan demonstrates how writing research is applicable to everyday interactions with genre. The article walks through how the author learned about composing a Tumblr post and how she discovered that even genre conventions that seem confusing at first do, in fact, make sense and are important to defining the genre.

It seems like keeping up with the ever-evolving trend of social media sites should be a full-time job. From the dinosaur Xanga (does anyone even remember what Xanga is anymore?) to MySpace, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, my own personal social media journey has been quite an adventure. The more technology makes advances, the more of our everyday lives these social media sites take over. It is through virtual spaces and interactions that many people socialize, stay informed about others' lives, and communicate. I have had people tell me that if you can operate one social media site, you can operate them all because they are not that different. This is something I know, through experience, to be false. With so many options available in so many different forms, it becomes crucial to understand the context and conventions of each different social media outlet in order to be an active and legitimate participant. This makes social media a good fit for a genre-studies approach, which examines how a particular writing situation works in order to be able to operate within it. By taking the approach of a writing researcher, I came to understand a new genre of social media, allowing myself to become one such participant. I discovered that in the genre of Tumblr posts, conventions may at first seem confusing and haphazard but once examined and understood are actually logical and important.

These days, everyone is getting online. From grandparents in other states to bosses to former youth pastors, the information you post on sites like Facebook is pretty much out there for anyone who knows you to see. The influx of family and adult connections being made on social media sites greatly changes the audience for whom posts are written. You have to constantly be on your guard, censoring your posts or pictures because you never know who is watching. There are privacy settings, of course. You can hide Facebook posts from Great Aunt Such-and-Such twice removed if you really want to. But then what's the point of posting it in the first place? This raises the question of purpose. Social media sites, as they currently exist and operate, are almost always about finding and connecting with the people you already know and about the dissemination of information about you and your life to these people. With that as the driving force, these sites tend to lose the fun factor and entertainment value. If the purpose of these social media platforms is to entertain the users rather than just to forge connections with others, then people need a place where they can post whatever they want, without having to worry about offending people they know or getting grandma on their case about the things they are posting. That's where Tumblr comes in.

I can guess the question you're dying to ask right now. What's so great about Tumblr anyway? That's the same question I faced when making the decision of whether or not to join, whether or not this was a genre I wanted to take up in my life. There was a time when I ventured into the world of blogging via BlogSpot. I had nothing interesting or specific to blog about, so I treated it as a sort of online journal where I wrote about what was happening in my life or how I felt about things and also people. By this time social media trends had shifted to sites like Facebook that I didn't feel were meant for blogging. What could it hurt because no one read it?

Irresponsibly, I put a link to my BlogSpot on my Facebook page, and people did read it—people I would rather have not read it. In this case, I had leapt headfirst into a genre that I hadn't taken the time to understand. You know what they say—only fools rush in. I based all my decisions on what I considered experience in the genre, a mistake that people often make, assuming one genre is the same as another and functions in the same way. Needless to say, that blog came down, and I left the world of blogging, in my mind, forever. But I wasn't done with social media. I stuck with Facebook because it was still the big thing, and I eventually made an attempt at the Twitter craze, but it never really caught on for me. A couple of years passed, and Tumblr came to the forefront of my social media journey. I was wary due to the antecedent genre experience I'd had with blogging, but a friend's praise of the site pushed me over the line. But this time I was determined not to have

the same experience as I had with BlogSpot. Instead, I wanted to take the time to examine and understand the genre of Tumblr posts before making an attempt to engage in the genre myself.

The first step of my writing researcher journey began with getting access to Tumblr and the posts that already existed so that I could analyze them, understand them, and then replicate them. If you go to the Tumblr homepage without being logged in, you're not going to get much. All the actual home page consists of is a prompt to sign up (or sign in if you already have an account), the current statistics of the website (including the number of blogs, the number of posts, and the time it takes to join the site), and a rotating background of posts from different users. Unlike a site such as Pinterest, a virtual corkboard, you can't just browse through Tumblr. You can access a specific blog, but you have to be able to go directly to that page by using its specific URL. This is a common element among social media sites. If you go to the Twitter, Facebook, or Instagram home page without logging in, you'll get the same sign up or sign in prompt page. In respect to privacy, this is comforting. These sites are designed to protect the users' privacy. So, I signed up.

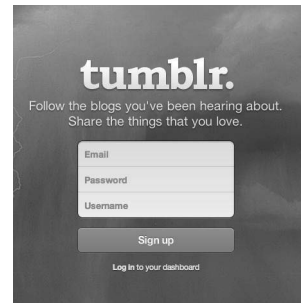


Figure 1: Tumblr “Create Account” Screen

If you've ever joined a social media site, you know how tedious it can be to set up a new account. There's so much information you have to give to start and then even more information to create a profile. By the time I was done, I think the Internet probably knew me better than my friends. This is, obviously, the experience I was anticipating. Considering Tumblr is just another social media site, I assumed the genre conventions of creating an account that I had previously encountered would extend to this new site as well. Again, I was wrong in my assumptions.

Yet unlike many of these other social media sites, with Tumblr, actually setting up an account is easy, as long as you have an email address and can generate both a password and URL (your blog has to have a name, after all). With those three pieces, the puzzle of your new blog is complete; you don't have to provide a lot of personal information or create a profile. This lack of information seemed strange to me, but the more I learned about Tumblr, the more I realized it is a practice that adds to the anonymity of the website, one convention that draws users to the site. Once you've input the required information and your URL has been approved (not they-care-what-you-name-your-blog approved but make-sure-no-one-else-has-that-URL approved), you're released out into the world of Tumblr, supposedly ready to start blogging.

There is no tutorial about blogging or how the buttons on the site function, and having already experienced the dangers of participation in a genre without truly understanding the situation of the posts, I was not willing to repeat that experience. But drawing on antecedent genre knowledge of other social media sites enabled me to figure out, fairly quickly and easily, how to navigate the site. Tumblr's dashboard allows seven types of posts—text, photo, quote, link, chat, audio, or video. I did not anticipate the level of diversity present in the posting options, and at first the number of options seemed overwhelming and, to a certain degree, overkill. I had no idea why I would ever need to post a “chat” or an audio post. But through an examination of these different types of posts, I came to better understand how the genre of Tumblr posts worked, how different composers utilized the different types of posts, and where I might fit into that dynamic.

The second part of my writing research journey was learning about the genre's conventions in order to adhere to them. I spent a fair amount of time observing and reblogging other people's posts that made their way across my dashboard, making a mental list of the conventions of each type of post so that once I began creating my own posts, I could do so in a fashion that followed the genre conventions of other Tumblr posts. The text posts you find on Tumblr are one of the features that seem like a hybrid of social media and blogs. Twitter and Facebook are built on brief insights into a person's life or thoughts in less than 160 characters. Other blog platforms like WordPress, Blogger, or Svbtle are for long, detailed blocks of text. Tumblr functions as both, with three options for text posts—text, chat, and quote. Personal preference and what you have to say dictates whether you post witty one-liners or paragraph-long text posts about something that interests you or that you feel passionate about.

This is one area where the antecedent genre knowledge of other social media sites came in handy, since people who post Facebook statuses, Twitter tweets, or Wordpress blog posts already have experience composing those types of posts. I did not understand the hybridity in text posts at first because I was used to either a character-limited status update or a lengthy, wordy blog post—but not the option to choose. But once I had experienced more posts of other Tumblr users, I saw that the freedom to post either type of text post was actually helpful because many different types of blogs could be generated within the same website.

Tumblr is also a very visual and auditory site, which is where the photo, link, audio, and video posts become relevant. The site is chock-full of images: art, photographs, Photoshop manipulations, cartoons, videos, and graphics. The visual element draws on networks like Pinterest and Instagram that

are almost solely visual, but the hybrid nature of the site allows those with familiarity with these antecedent genres to expand on them in new ways.

Another element of composing Tumblr posts that initially seemed unfamiliar but turned out to be important is the tags. In many cases, the tag a post is tagged with is almost as significant as the content of the post itself. With a little digging, I learned that the tags on Tumblr serve two purposes. First, it is an organizational system for posts, which fit with my knowledge of my antecedent genres. You can browse Tumblr through the tags, like Instagram and Twitter, which compile all the posts that users have tagged under a certain word or set of words together in one stream. By tagging posts on similar topics with the same words, or tags, the posts will be grouped together both on the Tumblr search screen and within the individual blog. This is standard for social media sites that use tags. Yet by investigating Tumblr, I realized that tags have a second purpose, which is particular to Tumblr: to provide commentary on a post. By using tags rather than adding text to a post, the commentary itself is not rebloggable.

This second practice has developed on Tumblr over time because of the user-friendly nature of the site, and only comes to light through observing the practices of other bloggers, through reading the tags and text posts that address the practice of adding commentary to others' posts. There is a user-generated stigma to "tagging hate," which essentially means clogging up the tags that people who like a certain topic would use to search for positive posts with negative posts about that topic. This also applies to adding negative text comments to other people's posts, which are then viewable by the original poster and everyone who reblogs that strand of the post. Therefore, Tumblr is unique because it encourages the practices of neither explicitly tagging hate nor adding negative text comments, so that users instead put comments and criticism in sentence form as tags on the post. People can read the tags, but it is unlikely that searching a sentence-tag would generate any results. This practice, which exemplifies the fluidity of the Tumblr post genre, is one of the less explicit conventions of the genre. It's a practice that only becomes apparent to people who have those instances of tags and text posts come across their dashboard, which is the only way I became aware of it myself, though as with any convention of a genre, there are people who choose not to follow it.

Initially, I used the tags much like I use tags on Instagram: single words or maybe book, movie, or television show titles. I saw people I followed posting long, wordy tags, and I was confused. I would click on them and nothing came up. Again, I was drawing on genre knowledge I already possessed, and in this case that knowledge wasn't wrong. Tags on Tumblr can and do function in

the same way as Instagram or Twitter tags. But their use also goes above and beyond those of Twitter and Instagram. By existing as a place where thoughts and opinions can be written, Tumblr tags become part of the composition process itself. What is more, they add a level of composition to the reblogging function of Tumblr while still respecting the integrity of another person's post. The decision to compose in tags or in text on the actual post is one made when considering the audience for which you are composing. Once you reblog a post with text at the bottom and someone reblogs it from you, the text you provided becomes part of the post. If what you are saying is something that you don't mind anyone on the site who might come in contact with that post seeing, then posting text at the bottom is fine. But if your addition is negative or sensitive material that you don't want to share with people outside your followers, the option of composing within tags is highly valuable. Without taking the time to care about learning the conventions of Tumblr posts, the importance of tags to the composition process would have been lost on me, and I wouldn't have been as effective within the genre.

Another aspect of Tumblr that is both similar and unique from other social media sites is the "Like" feature, an aspect common to Facebook and Instagram, although the posts you like on Tumblr merely collect in a tab called "Liked Posts" on your dashboard (where posts from all the blogs you follow are compiled). While similar to Facebook in that you can "Like" other people's posts to show them a form of approval, the "Likes" that pile up on Tumblr are also a way of collecting posts you may want to go back and reference later without having to reblog it for everyone who follows you to see. Posts that are liked but not reblogged cannot be tagged, and so they just pile up in their tab with no way to search or navigate through them, and if you do not regularly filter through them, you will end up with a massive amount of posts you have to weed through to find anything, another piece of knowledge I chalk up to experience. I was familiar with the "Like" feature in Facebook, but here again the antecedent knowledge didn't cross over—"Liked Posts" in Tumblr function differently.

Similarly, Tumblr gives the option to reblog other users' posts, like Twitter's retweet function, so there is the opportunity for self-expression but also for adopting the thoughts and ideas of others, creating a sense of community and companionship. Like I mentioned before, this is the practice that took up the majority of my time in the first couple of months that I had my blog. But I should also note, there is a very explicit distinction made on Tumblr between reblogging and reposting. It is another distinction that developed due to the user-driven nature of the site, and is only apparent to users who come in contact with it in some way. The distinction is made in respect to people's intellectual and artistic property. Reblogging, which is

an actual function of the site and is indicated by the same square of arrows button that Twitter uses, is acceptable and encouraged because it allows the original poster to retain credit for the post. Reposting, which involves saving an image or post and then posting it to your own blog as if an original creation, is looked down upon because it is a practice that gives the new poster credit for the work rather than the person who created it.

Tumblr users are particularly passionate about the distinction between reblogging and reposting, and when you are new to the site and the community, as I was, it seemed like a superfluous distinction people were just being petulant about. But after being part of the community for a substantial period of time and making my own posts that I was proud of and wouldn't want someone else to take credit for, it became clear that there is a reason for things to be done the way they are done, even when they don't initially make sense to someone outside of the genre. Particularly in the online community created and fostered by Tumblr, members want to maintain the integrity of the posts and posters, which influences the conventions that are created and shaped over time in the genre.

Tumblr additionally gives the option for private messaging in the “ask box,” a function that Facebook has used for years and Twitter has recently adopted as well. The private messages and reblogging are the places where the social aspects of Tumblr really come into play. It is in these elements that connections between people are made and communication is enacted. All of these elements are what people have come to expect in a social media site, and they are what we know how to use because they are so common across social media platforms so the antecedent genre knowledge most people possess comes in handy. The difference between Tumblr and the other social media sites is that on Tumblr connections are made based on mutual interests, whereas other sites establish most of their connections based on real-life interactions, a difference which necessitates the unique characteristics that set Tumblr apart from those other social media sites.

There are also actual posts from other sites that find their way onto Tumblr. Scrolling through your dashboard, it wouldn't be unusual for you to come across a Facebook status or a tweet. People take screenshots of tweets or statuses posted on other sites and post them on Tumblr, often marking out names to protect that sense of anonymity. Sometimes these crossover posts are created because a person agrees with whatever was posted on another site, or he/she wants to simply share information. Other times crossover posts exist for humor, because something is funny or the Tumblr poster thinks whatever the original poster said was silly or idiotic. Quite often I will see tweets or Facebook statuses screencapped on my feed with comments that either praise

or make fun of whatever the post is about. This is a common practice, and one that is socially acceptable, although Tumblr users tend to get offended when someone “steals” a post off Tumblr and posts it to another site because of the previously mentioned emphasis within the community on individuals always being credited for their work.

This seeming double-standard, where cross-posting is only acceptable in one direction, accounts for another way Tumblr is unique. Like most other social media sites, there is an option to connect your blog to Facebook or Gmail in order to find people you already know, but Tumblr doesn’t prompt you to do so as soon as you sign up. It’s a feature you have to search for. That, paired with the lack of personal information requested, went against the expectations built by my previous social media experiences. I made the mistake, early on in my Tumblr career, of mentioning Tumblr in a Facebook status, and it did not take long for one of my Facebook friends who also participated in Tumblr to inform me that the first rule of Tumblr is that you do not, in fact, talk about Tumblr. At first the reason for this seems odd, and it certainly is not obvious. It’s not like Tumblr could actually be a secret with over one hundred and thirty million blogs . . . or at least not a well-kept one. But once you become more immersed in the Tumblr culture, it becomes apparent that one of the attractions of the site is its potential for anonymity. Tumblr offers a place for people to distance themselves from the person that they are in everyday or “real” life. The wonderful thing about the lack of required “profile” information on the site is the freedom it gives users to be whoever they want, emphasizing what parts of themselves they desire, or parts of themselves that they’ve never explored before. There is a sense of safety in divorcing these Tumblr blogs from not only other social media sites but also the people we are as we operate Facebook or Twitter or what have you. In the minds of the majority of the users, Tumblr is a sort of island unto itself.



Figure 2: I get set straight about the first rule of Tumblr.

“Tumblr Island,” where Tumblr exists separate from anything and anyone outside of Tumblr, is not a concept that is inherent to the website as it was created, and it is not expressed directly to anyone (hence my lack of understanding that Tumblr isn’t to be mentioned outside of Tumblr). It is a user-generated idea that becomes apparent through acculturation to the site.

Through investigating Tumblr as a genre and comparing it to the antecedent genre knowledge of social media sites I already possessed, I discovered that Tumblr, like Twitter and Pinterest and Instagram, focuses on the content of the blog. That’s how people connect. The objective is to follow blogs that post content you are interested in, rather than just following someone because of a personal relationship. The way in which Tumblr differs from those other sites is that element of anonymity. You don’t have to tell people who you are on Tumblr, and in fact it isn’t expected.

Tumblr is a one-of-a-kind site, at least for now. It is very much a culture, one that is discovered through immersion and experience and is hard to explain to people who are not participants, though I have done my best to do so. It is only through approaching Tumblr as a writing-researcher, with the intention of examining the genre of Tumblr in order to participate in it, that I have been able to understand not only the composition of Tumblr posts but the genre of Tumblr itself as a social media site and therefore become part of the Tumblr culture myself. Drawing on elements of other social media and blogging sites is a necessity for the survival of any social media platform because social media sites are constantly in conversation with each other. Elements of interconnectivity and influence from the other popular social media sites like Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, and Instagram are easily seen in the construction of the website itself. But it is the essence of Tumblr, the spirit of freedom and anonymity brought to the site by the community its users have formed, that truly answers the question of what is so great about Tumblr anyway.

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Not having yet received her Hogwarts letter, **Shelby Ragan** is a native Tennessean who spends her time collecting books, organizing those books, and even occasionally reading them. She also enjoys marathon-ing seasons of television shows and is currently studying Children's Literature as a Master's student at ISU. But she has not given up on that Hogwarts letter yet.