Gender expression in a small world: Social tagging of transgender-themed books

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ABSTRACT

Social tagging is evaluated as an information behavior in a small world, using Chatman, Burnett, and Besant’s Theory of Normative Behavior. A survey was distributed to people who assign tags to transgender-themed books in LibraryThing, an social network site that allows members to catalog and tag their personal book collections. This study first establishes that there is an identifiable community of interest and then lays the groundwork for understanding the function of tagging in sharing information among a marginalized community for whom vocabulary and taxonomies are vital.

Keywords
tagging, folksonomies, gender, transgender, genderqueer, small worlds

INTRODUCTION

The following exchange between two members of the genderqueer discussion group in LibraryThing illustrates the function and complexity of tagging in a social network site (SNS) for a community whose terms are shifting and under negotiation.

I’ve noticed that if you search the tag "genderqueer" most of the books that come up have been tagged with that tag by only one person. Also, there are only 80 books with this tag. The could, of course mean that there aren't that many genderqueer books and they’re spread pretty thin among us. But it could also mean that we don't have a similar vision of what a genderqueer book is...So when do you use the tag “genderqueer”? Do you see it as distinct from other tags like transsexual, transsexuality, transgender, transgender and transgenderism?

In the global sense, rather than the LT-tagging-specific sense, I do see "genderqueer" as distinct from trans*. My personal definition is that genderqueer is more behavior-based and can be transitory, rather than identity-based. Dressing in drag, for someone who doesn't generally identify as transgendered, can be genderqueer behavior. I think deliberate subversion is a big part of it -- when my (cisgendered) friend wears a skirt and a men's shirt + necktie to work for the sake of messing with people's minds, that's genderqueer. If a frat boy does the same thing as a pledge-week stunt, it isn't. (chrisjones & lorax, 2007)

Here chrisjones and lorax are negotiating the meaning of “genderqueer” and the appropriate application of the term as a tag for genderqueer or transgender-themed books. Since this thread was posted to the genderqueer discussion group in LibraryThing in July 2007, the occurrence of the tag “genderqueer” more than doubled within a year, and as of April 2013 it has been assigned a total of 448 times by eighty-nine different users. Noting that “genderqueer” and “transgender” are not synonymous but related terms, this paper will examine the tagging of transgender-themed books in LibraryThing to provide insight into the significance of folksonomies for information sharing within online communities.

In their discussion of virtual communities as hosts to small worlds, Chatman, Burnett, and Besant (2001) provide an explanation applicable to the above discussion within an online community. They assert that a virtual community is situated within a context of shared interest, which is influenced by or derived out of a shared worldview and may be subject to competing perceptions.

Virtual communities can be defined by reference to what could be called a generally accepted and agreed-upon context of shared interest. Although this context of shared interest is, in large part, a matter of a particular community's subject of concern, it is also significantly influenced by a shared worldview. To the extent that it is distinct from a particular subject interest, this worldview is typically more implicit than explicitly stated, and can often be subject to competing perceptions concerning its precise nature” (543).

LibraryThing is an interactive online library
catalog that pulls bibliographic information from such sources as Amazon.com and the Library of Congress. Members of LibraryThing create own personal catalogs and tag their books, and from the collective tagging, powerful folksonomies have emerged.

Expanding on Adler’s (2009) comparison of tags in LibraryThing and Library of Congress Subject Headings in WorldCat for transgender books, this paper focuses on members of LibraryThing and their tagging behavior. The study aims to gain an understanding of the community that reads and tags transgender-themed books, and will begin to reveal the role of folksonomies within this community. The study strives to find out who is tagging, what motivates them to do so, what factors enter into their decision-making process, and how they view the social network environment as a community. It is interested in determining the extent to which this user community is a small world in the sense that Elfreda Chatman explored in a variety of contexts. The Theory of Normative Behavior (Besant, Burnett & Chatman, 2001) provides a framework to analyze tagging as an information behavior in a small world.

This paper begins with a review of relevant literature on folksonomies, SNSs, and transgender studies, as well as an overview of the Theory of Normative Behavior. It then discusses the research methodology, which relied upon an online survey of active taggers of transgender-related books in LibraryThing. The next section provides analysis of the survey data, informed by the Theory of Normative Behavior, to ascertain whether this is a small world, and if it is, how tagging operates within that world. This research is part of a larger project aimed at learning about tagging as an information sharing behavior in online communities that are typically underserved by traditional classification systems.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This inquiry draws from research on social networks, folksonomies, cyberculture, and queer studies. It is an inherently interdisciplinary project, informed by Sociology, Library and Information Studies, Gender Studies, Computer Science, and Rhetoric and Communication.

LibraryThing is an SNS that brings people together through books. It has been described as the “Facebook for books” (Barry, 2008). In an introduction to a special issue on social network sites, boyd and Ellison (2007) write,

We define social network sites as web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. The nature and nomenclature of these connections may vary from site to site.

Tagging is a particularly important practices within LibraryThing. Melodie Fox has provisionally concluded that LibraryThing can be described as community of practice, but with regard to gender, more research is required to identify the relationship between the community and linguistic variation. This study offers a response and complementary framework through which to evaluate the function of tagging in LibraryThing.

Folksonomies are also known as ethnoclassifications, distributed classifications, social classifications, and free tagging systems. According to Thomas Vander Wal (2005), the inventor of the term, a folksonomy is:

the result of personal free tagging of information and objects (anything with a URL) for one’s own retrieval. The tagging is done in a social environment (shared and open to others). The person consuming the information does the act of tagging. The value in this external tagging is derived from people using their own vocabulary and adding explicit meaning, which may come from inferred understanding of the information/object as well as. The people are not so much categorizing as providing a means to connect items and to provide their meaning in their own understanding” (Vander Wal, 2005).

Louise Spiteri (2006) has asserted that the growth of folksonomies is due in part to “a desire to democratize the way in which digital information is described and organized by using categories and terminology that reflect the views and needs of the actual end users, rather than those of an external organization or body” (p. 77).

Arguably, folksonomies’ greatest strength lies in their capacity to allow all interested parties to add to the vocabulary, reflecting all users’ positions without bias or definitive rules. Bringing minority and marginalized voices together with the more popular, mainstream terms contributes to the “long tail,” as presented by Chris Anderson. A study on the social bookmarking site Delicious found that tags followed Zipf’s law, commonly known as the 80/20 law. Simply put, a few tags are used by most of the members, and a lot of other tags are added by a few. For example, a user in LibraryThing tagged Bridge to Terabithia “genderqueer,” thereby giving voice to a gendered interpretation of the book and adding to the “long tail.”

Members of communities will frequently adopt common vocabularies, allowing people to name and locate their own items, and to communicate with other members of the community who might be interested in similar subjects. In fact, within a folksonomy a common language begins to emerge, as users share tags. In another study on collaborative tagging in Delicious, Golder and Huberman (2006) observe:

One might expect that individuals’ varying tag collections and personal preferences, compounded by an ever-increasing number of users, would yield a chaotic pattern of tags. However, it turns
out that the combined tags of many users’ bookmarks give rise to a stable pattern in which the proportions of each tag are nearly fixed (p. 205).

Also relevant to the present study, Cattuto, et al (2008), have found that that folksonomies provide information about emergent communities. As genderqueer and transgender communities are continually shifting and negotiating the use of terminologies for gender expression, folksonomies may offer insight into information retrieval technologies, not only for these particular user communities, but also for other groups that could be considered small worlds.

Barry Wellman has conducted extensive research on social networks and virtual communities. Following Granovetter (1973), he argues that weak ties in real and virtual worlds are vital for sustaining specialized relationships and sharing information. Wellman (1999) believes that weak ties are well-supported in online environments and serve as bridges across communities. He also finds that virtual communities are developing norms of their own. Identifying types of taggers and tagging behavior within Xtube, Patrick Keilty (2012) has observed that social discipline within sexual subcultures serves to stabilize nomenclature in online communities.

Research on SNSs is directly related to, and sometimes is considered to be a part of cyberculture studies, which examines communities and culture in cyberspace. This includes such subjects as communication, identity construction, networking, as well as race, gender, and class in virtual communities. A significant body of research credits the Internet with empowering and mobilizing the transgender movement. (Alexander, 2002; Shapiro, 2004; Whittle, 2002; Stryker, 2008). Other works discuss the phenomenon of transgndering virtual worlds or “computer cross-dressing,” which means that participants will frequently perform a gender other than one that they identify with in the real world (O’Brien, 1999; Stone, 1994; Ferreday & Lock, 2007; Turkle, 1995). Nina Wakeford’s “Cyberqueer” (1999) draws attention to the potential and limits of cyberspace for gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgender people and calls for critical cyberqueer studies that recognize the institutionalized natures of sexuality and gender and cyberspace. She observes that most cyberqueer research centers on the theme of identity construction, but she asserts that, although cyberqueer spaces allow for fluidity and multiplicity, these spaces are embedded in social, economic, and political practices that need to be addressed.

The term "transgender" was coined in the 1970s, as a way to distinguish from cross-dressers and transsexuals, and a way to identify non-surgical gender variance. The 1970s and 1980s brought a new meaning for “transgender” as being the “radical edge of gender variance…not a category between "transsexual" and "transvestite," but an alternative to binary gender expression” (Valentine, 2007, p. 32). By the 1990s, the idea of transgender became much more inclusive of all gender expression. Leslie Feinberg's "transgender liberation" in 1992 is "among the first published uses of the collective form of transgender which explicitly politicized transgender identification beyond individual radical acts and called for a social movement organized around its terms" (Valentine, 2007, p. 33). That decade witnessed the forging of a national transgender identity, with expanded political, social, and scholarly activity. Stryker (2008) notes that the strength of the transgender movement would not have been possible with the networking power of the Internet (p. 146).

Today, most gender and sexuality historians consider gender to be a social and cultural construct, and sex to be biological, and both are distinct from sexuality and the gender of the object of erotic attraction. Gender, the vocabularies used to identify and explain it, and people's varied relationships and identifications with it are continually expanding and changing. The transgender vocabulary expands in nearly infinite ways to mean different things to all people. Anne Enke, historian of sexuality, provides two points of departure for talking about transgenderism, defining “transgender” as such:

An identity that some people embrace for themselves. Transgender identity may include: a gender identity that differs from sex assigned at birth; a gender expression (presentation) that differs from that conventionally expected of people according to their bodily sex; a desire for alteration of the body's sex/gender characteristics.

An ever-expanding social category that may, for the purposes of organizing and social service recognition, incorporate transsexuals, transvestites, cross-dressers, and male impersonators, persons with intersex conditions, butch lesbians, studs, fem queens, drag queens, drag kings, feminine-identified men, masculine-identified women, MTF, FTM, trannies, gender variants, genderqueers, boi dykes, trans men, trans guys, trans women, bi-gender, two spirit, etc. People who place themselves in any of the above categories may or may not identify with the collective term 'transgender' (Enke, 2008).

Enke's inclusive, expansive definition captures the elusive nature of the category. “Transgender” and the people who may or may not identify with the term ultimately resist definition or categorization.

TAGGING IN A SMALL WORLD

The concept of “Small Worlds” is widely used in fields as various as Sociology, Computer Science, Physics, and Biology to analyze different types of networks. First tested by Stanley Milgram in his 1967 study that illustrated the “six degrees of separation” phenomenon, the small world theory continues to be used to help explain how social networks function. Chatman's small world theory diverges from the "six degrees of separation" model and instead, it focuses information behaviors within small,
marginalized communities. The contexts of small worlds are used to test, define, and inform Chatman's other theories, such as her theories of normative behavior, life in the round, and information poverty. By looking at different types of small worlds Chatman finds a continuum of information wealth and poverty. Information poverty results in communities that are rife with distrust and a illiteracy, whereas wealth abounds in small worlds that develop norms, cooperation, trust, understanding, and respect.

A working hypothesis for this project is that the community of people who add and tag transgender-themed books in their LibraryThing catalogs is a small world that has social norms and types, they share a worldview, and they gain information wealth by communicating through tags. According to the Theory of Normative Behavior, small worlds have four analyzable components:

- Social norms: the normal, acceptable standards of behavior within a community. As Chatman observes, “The boundaries of a world are set by social norms, and most members feel disinclined to cross them” (Chatman, Besant, and Burnett, 2001, p. 537).
- Worldview: a collective perception of the world held by members of a social group. A shared worldview provides a sense of belonging among members of the group.
- Social types: classifications of persons in relation to the social group. Social types play a significant role in enabling or hindering information sharing. Members of the social group will be more likely to seek and use information from desirable and trustworthy individuals who fit an acceptable social type.
- Information behavior: the seeking, use, sharing, rejection, and/or avoidance of information. It “can be defined as a state in which one may or may not act on available or offered information” (Burnett, Besant, & Chatman, 2001, p. 537).

The primary aim of this study is to ascertain whether the group of people who tag transgender-themed books in LibraryThing can be considered a small world. Second, if this is a small world, then how does tagging function in information sharing? In order to determine whether this is a small world, this research aims to find the degree to which a shared worldview exist. Beyond being readers of transgender-themed books, social types may be discerned along lines of gender and sexual identity and expression, occupation, and tagging and other behaviors. Finally, the information behavior under scrutiny is tagging. Social tagging results in folksonomies, which serve as the collective vocabularies for the content they describe. Does tagging enact, enforce, produce, or reflect social norms? What role does tagging play in a community for which vocabulary is both under negotiation, changing, and critical to the community.

Chatman, Besant, and Burnett illustrate that groups, while setting out to challenge dominant social norms, can create their own norms. For the Women in Print movement, publishing is a social norm: The “use of the printed word...became an indispensable information behavior (a way of ensuring the availability of information to those women who need it) whereas it also played a fundamental role in self-definition. This process of definition, or identity creation, is related to social types” (541). Within SNSs, tagging is an information behavior intrinsic to the process of definition and identity.

The Theory of Normative Behavior allowed Chatman to expand the small world phenomenon beyond the confines of geographic boundaries. The small worlds of feminist booksellers and virtual communities are tied together by interest, rather than location. This has particular significance for transgender communities, which are disperse. Frequently, especially in smaller towns, it is not possible for transgender people to find or form geographically based communities. This community has a range of information needs that are often unmet or are violently challenged by mainstream sources. Such needs are greatly enhanced by the Internet and SNSs that provide and allow for sharing of information on education, identity, safety, employment, civil rights, medicine, and lots of other topics.

Burnett and Jaeger have recently revised Chatman’s small world theory. They argue that one cannot simply look at small worlds as existing independently of a wider world. Drawing from Habermas’s notion of the public sphere, they have expanded an understanding of small worlds to address intersections with society. Small worlds are set within a much broader world, and boundaries are much more fluid that Chatman’s earlier notions would suggest. In the case of LibraryThing, a small minority of members of LibraryThing are interested in transgender and genderqueer-themed books, and such are likely to own books on a wide range of topics. LibraryThing is not a transgender SNS. Rather, the intended audience is readers of all interests and types, and readers of transgender materials share books on a wide array of topics.

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study is to get a general picture of who tags genderqueer and transgender-themed books, why they participate in LibraryThing, and how they view themselves as being part of a community. Questions were written to begin to draw out patterns and gather data to begin answering questions about whether this community is a small world.

An online survey comprised of nineteen questions, plus a request for participation in interviews, was created using SurveyMonkey. Selections for email recipients were based on a number of key factors: 1) they were members of LibraryThing; 2) they used the tag “transgender,” or were a member of the genderqueer or queer and trans lit interest groups, or added a book under investigation in the previous comparative study on tags and subject headings; 3) they actively tag their books; and 4) they included an email address or Web site in their LibraryThing profile. Overwhelmingly, most of the profiles that met the first three criteria did not include email addresses, thereby limiting the number of contacts. The survey was distributed
to 130 people via email. Of these, seven were returned because they were undeliverable. Four days after the email was distributed, the same email message was sent to the TransAcademics listserv. The survey was open for twenty-four days. A total of sixty-one people completed the survey. Two of these were discarded because they indicated that they do not use LibraryThing. In total, 59 people completed the survey.

DATA ANALYSIS

LibraryThing offers a variety of features that foster social networking through interests in books. As of April 2013 there were 1,672,203 members who have cataloged a total of 81,494,160 books (with 7,531,216 unique titles) and added 97,232,444 tags. Members create profiles, which include most commonly used tags, as well as spaces to provide email addresses, photos, biographical information, a description of users' libraries, other online affiliations, and real names. Members can make connections by becoming friends with other members, and lists of members that own the same books appear on members' profile pages. Based on algorithms, the site makes book recommendations and suggests tags that are related to the tags members have assigned. LibraryThing actively maintains two blogs on the site, solicits and posts reviews by LibraryThing members, and connects members to authors. On the book pages, in addition to the bibliographic data and tag clouds, there are conversations about books, recommendations for books on similar themes, lists of other members who added the books to their catalogs, reviews, and book cover images. As of this writing, there are over 9,000 discussion groups on a vast range of topics, with a total of 4,036,122 messages posted to the group forums (LibraryThing Zeitgeist). In sum, this online network is highly oriented toward providing and forming social connections.

Two groups are specifically geared toward genderqueer and transgender interests: Queer and Trans Lit has 437 members, and the genderqueer group, from which the introductory quotation for this paper was drawn, has 321 members as of April 2013 (LibraryThing, Queer and Trans Lit, genderqueer). A key component of this and many other SNSs is the provision of a space for people to tag their content. In the case of LibraryThing, members add tags to their catalogs to help them organize, retrieve, and share information about their books.

According to LibraryThing, as of March 2013, the tag “transgender” has been assigned 4,025 times by 996 unique members, “trans” is used 2,756 times by 251 different members, and “transgendered” is used 69 times by 54 members. Additionally, there are dozens of other tags that include some form of “transgender,” e.g., “transgender studies” and “transgender children.” “Genderqueer” is assigned 448 times by 88 members.

The survey data can be categorized according to the four components of a small world: social norms, worldview, social types, and information behavior.

Social norms

The social norm under analysis for this project is the terminologies used to express gender categories and other labels that people use to describe their books. Categories become institutionalized by communities of practice, as well as the members of the categories themselves. As a category becomes institutionalized, it impacts the members of the category, and meaning is negotiated among the interested parties within a dominant framework. Categories have the power to shape perceptions of the self, and they tend to play an active part in a wider discourse that shapes others' views of the people to which the categories are intended to refer. Norms governing gender expression in the real world must certainly carry through in virtual environments, including SNSs.

Worldview

According to the survey data, 86.2% of the respondents feel a sense of community with the people who catalog the same books that they own. 72.4% perceive sharing a somewhat to very similar worldview or values system. 81.4% say that they read books as part of gender/sexuality identity exploration. It is reasonable to speculate that most people in this community share similar worldviews about gender and sexuality.

Social types

Self-identifications do show that there are different social types. There are transgender allies and transgender/genderqueer-identified people. The survey results reveal the categories participants selected to identify themselves. Questions regarding education and library work reveal academics and library workers as predominant types. 62.1% consider themselves scholars or students of LGBT studies, queer studies/theory, or transgender studies, and 50.8% have worked in a library or attended library school. This data indicates that this user community is somewhat skewed and does not accurately represent the general population. Certainly, less educated people and people with limited access to the Internet are less likely to be represented by this study population and their tagging behaviors. Additionally, librarians are likely to be more interested in tagging resources within this SNS, as it is specifically a library-themed site. Perhaps a follow-up study would assess the extent to which their interest in librarianship influences their behaviors.

Among transgender and genderqueer communities, multiplicity and fluidity are the norm. The survey data bears this out. One question asked respondents to select terms that they self-identified as. Twenty-eight choices were offered, and people were asked to choose all that apply. The fifty-nine participants supplied a total of 304 answers. Ten identity categories were added by respondents as an “other” choice. This speaks to the multiplicity of identity, as well as the significance of the capability for folksonomies to provide a space for the long tail. While certain categories were identified by a larger number of
participants, others were only indicated by a few as being a category with which they identified. 69.5% indicated that they identify as queer. 22.8% identify as genderqueer, and 25.4% identify as transgender, and 42.4% consider themselves transgender allies.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Queer</td>
<td>69.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>44.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transgender ally</td>
<td>42.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friend or family of transgender person</td>
<td>35.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bisexual</td>
<td>35.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gay</td>
<td>30.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Genderqueer</td>
<td>28.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transgender</td>
<td>25.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>25.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pansexual</td>
<td>25.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesbian</td>
<td>22.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FTM</td>
<td>15.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Femme</td>
<td>15.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-heterosexual</td>
<td>15.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Butch</td>
<td>8.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MTF</td>
<td>6.8%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bear</td>
<td>6.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crossdresser</td>
<td>6.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boi</td>
<td>5.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drag king</td>
<td>3.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transvestite</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Frequency of survey terms selected

Included in the survey question were the choices, “Male impersonator” and “Female impersonator,” and no one selected either of these. The options were provided because these are the authorized terms for drag kings and drag queens in the Library of Congress Subject Headings. In addition to the categories supplied, two participants added “Neutral,” and others added “Two-spirit,” “Faggot,” “Pomoosexual,” “Leather person,” “Spouse of a Genderfluid/Genderqueer person,” “Dyke,” “MTB,” and “Androgy nous.”

The range of categories includes a long tail, with space for the few bois, bears, and drag kings to appear along with the more dominant, popular categories. Displayed as a tag cloud, the above table would look something like what appears in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Self-identifications displayed as a tag cloud

With such assessments made, the author is compelled to point out her uneasiness with assigning categories within this small world. As transgender and genderqueer identities and expressions push and resist the limits of categories, creating categories of social types to meet the requirements of a theory is a highly problematic undertaking. Perhaps with further study, other social types will emerge along lines other than gender and sexuality. Keilty's (2012) assessment of guerilla taggers, super taggers, and tag bombers in Xtube may be an apt point of departure.

A hypothetical scenario might help to illustrate the impact of social types on information sharing: Imagine a user adds a book to her LibraryThing catalog, and the recommending system directs her to other members who own the same book. She clicks on a member's username to view their catalog and finds lots of books that are on topics that interest her. She becomes interested in this person, and so she goes to the user's profile page and finds out that they are both students in the same field of study. She adds this person as a friend, contacts the person, they have some exchanges, and over time they monitor each other's catalogs and sometimes check out books based on each others' recommendation. In contrast, perhaps this same user clicks on another user's catalog, again because they share some similar titles. Upon entering the person's catalog, it becomes obvious that this person is active in the ex-gay movement. This person would be considered a deviant within this community, who doesn't share a similar worldview concerning sexuality and gender. The person is not a social type that would be likely to be trusted.

Information behavior

Tagging is a particularly interesting information behavior because it performs a number of information tasks: it creates information, helps to enable information sharing, promotes information seeking, and serves both self-interested and community-interested purposes. Tags are inherently social; while tagging allows people to organize their own collections, it also aids them in finding other peoples' books with the same tags and helps other members to discover their books and other information, such as profiles, friends, or discussions, or reviews.

This particular SNS depend on social tagging for its efficacy and relevance. According to the survey, 71.2% add tags for all or almost all of their books, and 13.6% add for more than half but not all. The survey purposely only went out to people who do tag the books in their catalogs. There are plenty of users who do not add tags at all. This research is intended to find out why people tag, rather than why they do not.

Because tagging is essential for LibraryThing’s success, it is important to understand the motivations behind tagging. 83.1% of the respondents said that they use or create tags to organize their personal collections. 59.3% reported that they tag so that others will find their books, and 61.0% said that they tag to find books in other's catalogs with the same tags. Interestingly, 35.6% said they tag to contribute to the collective vocabulary, and 37.3%
said they tag for fun. Might this be because so many of them are librarians? Only 27% said that they tag for social networking. These statistics agree with the results from an open-ended question asking why they joined LibraryThing. 79.1% of the people said they joined LibraryThing to track and organize their books. 25.8% said that they are interested in social networking and finding out what other people are reading. Five people skipped the question. In reality, though, people are engaging in many of the social networking features of this SNS. A majority add friends, 62% join interest groups, and 68% add reviews or ratings. It seems some people are unaware of the inherent social nature of the activities in which they are engaging.

The survey begins to address the questions of how folksonomies evolve and how people tag. Although 56.0% said that look at what other tags have been used sometimes or most of the time, 62.7% reported that tag clouds never or rarely influence their tagging. Only 3.4% said that tag clouds influence their tag choices most of the time. This suggests that people add tags based on their own preferences, rather than simply copying and reproducing already given tags, potentially providing important insight into the shifting vocabulary within this community.

Not only do tags serve as an information behavior, but they also provide a means to negotiate norms of gender expression through categories or labels. They communicate, organize, and provide access to information using names that are intelligible to the user community. The previous sections address the nature of categories in this small world. The tags users assign reveal the extent to which certain terms are normalized and others remain rarely used. They may reveal dissenting voices, as well as new terms as the enter the lexicon. See Adler (2009) for an analysis of tags assigned to twenty transgender-themed books in LibraryThing, as compared with the Library of Congress Subject Headings for the same books. That research reveals two features of folksonomies in LibraryThing:

(1) there is some degree of consensus regarding tagging; (i.e., “transgender” is by far the most frequently used tag for the books at hand), and (2) the range of expressions of minority voices is highly visible and negotiable. Social tagging reflects the relationships between language and communities, and results in very different practices and vocabularies than an authorized, regulated discourse might allow (328).

Adler (2009) evaluated the limitations of LCSH in providing subject access, as well as the wide range of terms applied by taggers in LibraryThing. The present study postulates a method by which to identify a user community in order to understand the relevance and implications of the limitations of controlled vocabularies.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS AND LIMITATIONS

This paper opens up a range of possibilities for future study. Certainly, interviews of people who assign tags will provide a rich understanding of why and how people use tags for transgender-themed books. Social types need to be established in terms of the roles they play within the social network, e.g., whether they are frequent taggers, or something like freeloaders who don’t assign tags but use them to find resources. A deep analysis of the variety of tags assigned by members of the small world would reveal information about the terms that have become normalized, deviate from a norm, or are emerging. Such data would inform processes of social norms and how tags serve to negotiate meaning among members.

Worthy of consideration would also be Burnett and Jaeger’s revision of Chatman’s small world theory, in which they argue that one cannot simply look at small worlds as existing independently of a wider world. Similarly, the range of small world communities within LibraryThing is vast, with users likely possessing interests in a variety of subjects. Such intersections across this SNS, as well as the broader societal context, would likely impact the behaviors within the small world. This framework might operate differently in an expressly transgender/genderqueer social network site. Relatedly, following Wellman, a future project might study the strength of the ties within this community and seek and understanding of how it operates both within the wider LibraryThing network and with other transgender SNSs. Additionally, the framework can also be applied to a variety of other communities of interest, either within LibraryThing or other sites.

Clearly, the sample size and the specificity of the user community limit the generalizability of the study. On the other hand, one may argue that every tagging community is a small world to some extent. The present study is an invitation to a conversation regarding how to best analyze the role of tagging in a community--particularly a marginalized community--for which language is key in identification and formation.

CONCLUSION

This study suggests that the community of people who tag transgender-themed books in LibraryThing is, in fact, a small world. It also indicates that an information behavior—tagging—contributes to a social norm that is vital to the existence of the SNS, and inscribes and reflects norms of gender expression among members. Tagging is a unique type of information behavior, as it a mechanism through which people can create, search, or share information.

REFERENCES


