

A Comparison of Social Tagging Designs and User Participation

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Social tagging empowers users to categorize content in a personally meaningful way while harnessing their potential to contribute to a collaborative construction of knowledge (Vander Wal, 2007). In addition, social tagging systems offer innovative filtering mechanisms that facilitate resource discovery and browsing (Mathes, 2004). As a result, social tags may support online communication, informal or intended learning as well as the development of online communities.

The purpose of this mixed methods study is to examine how undergraduate students participate in social tagging activities in order to learn about their motivations, behaviours and practices. A better understanding of their knowledge, habits and interactions with such systems will help practitioners and developers identify important factors when designing enhancements.

In the first phase of the study, students enrolled at a Canadian university completed 103 questionnaires. Quantitative results focusing on general familiarity with social tagging, frequently used Web 2.0 sites, and the purpose for engaging in social tagging activities were compiled. Eight questionnaire respondents participated in follow-up semi-structured interviews that further explored tagging practices by situating questionnaire responses within concrete experiences using popular websites such as YouTube, Facebook, Del.icio.us, and Flickr.

Preliminary results of this study echo findings found in the growing literature concerning social tagging from the fields of computer science (Sen et al., 2006) and information science (Golder & Huberman, 2006; Macgregor & McCulloch, 2006). Generally, two classes of social taggers emerge: those who focus on tagging for individual purposes, and those who view tagging as a way to share or communicate meaning to others. Heavy del.icio.us users, for example, were often focused on simply organizing their own content, and seemed to be conscientiously maintaining their own personally relevant categorizations while, in many cases, placing little importance on the tags of others. Conversely, users tagging items primarily to share content preferred to use specific terms to optimize retrieval and discovery by others.

Our findings should inform practitioners of how interaction design can be tailored for different tagging systems applications, and how these findings are positioned within the current debate surrounding social tagging among the resource discovery community. We also hope to direct future research in the field to place a greater importance on exploring the benefits of tagging as a socially-driven endeavour rather than uniquely as a means of managing information.

References

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