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A Guide to Understanding & Using Folksonomies


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A GUIDE TO UNDERSTANDING & USING FOLKSONOMIES

Learn about the role of user tags and social tagging in the context of social media platforms like Twitter, Instagram & Facebook



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DEFINITION¹

Folksonomy is a system of categorizing content with the use of user tags. A folksonomy evolves when users create and store content on online websites to identify what they think the content is about or representative of.

STRENGTHS²

- Natural classification
- User generated and user friendly
- Collaborative
- Aligned with user behaviour and trends
- Uses natural language
- Improves usability of search engines

WEAKNESSES²

- Lack of controlled vocabulary
- Repetitive/redundant entries
- Tags become reflective of popularity instead of usefulness
- Difficult to achieve precision in information retrieval

WHAT IS FOLKSONOMY?

OTHER TERMS FOR IT

Collaborative tagging, social tagging, social indexing, social classification, social bookmarking

¹Definition of Folksonomies (Social Tagging) - Gartner Information Technology Glossary. (n.d.). Gartner. <https://www.gartner.com/en/information-technology/glossary/folksonomy>

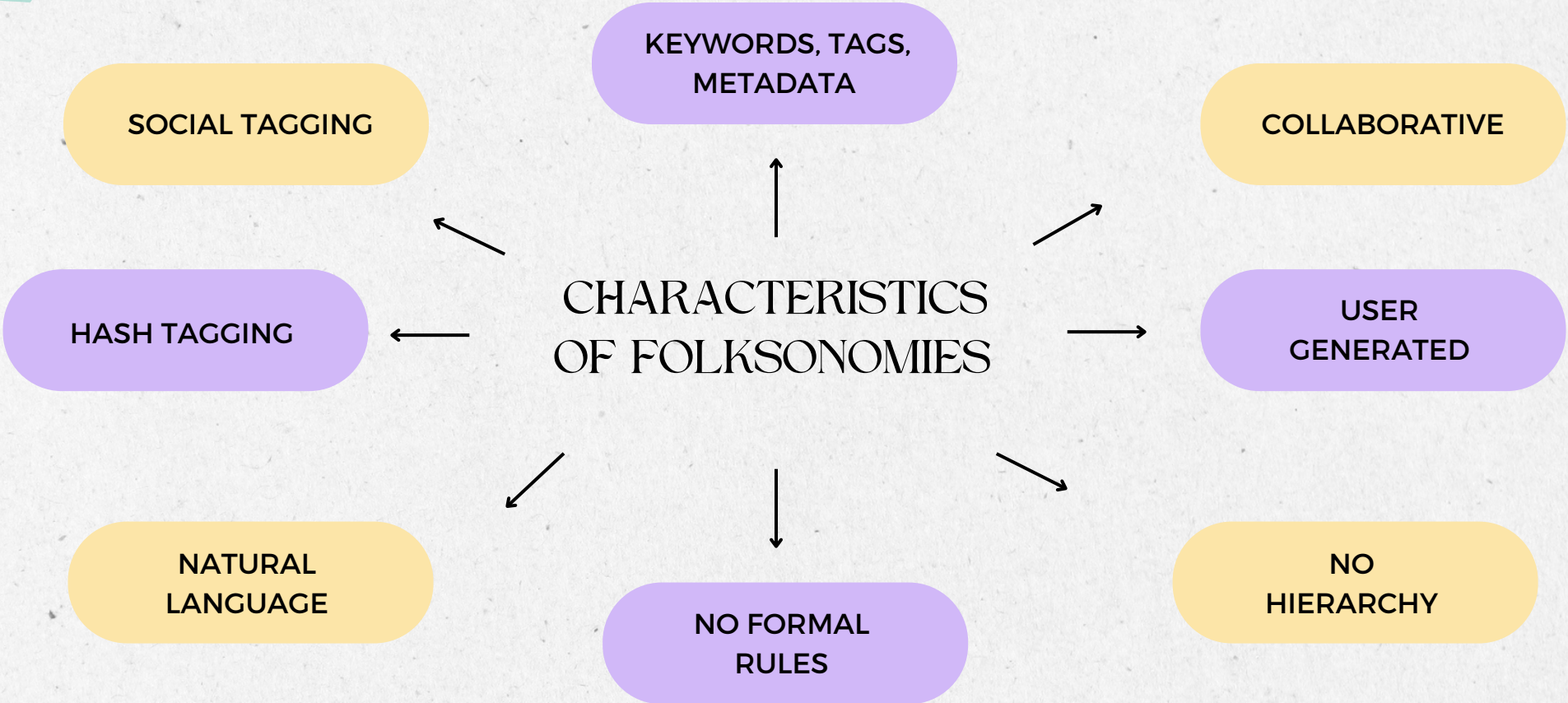
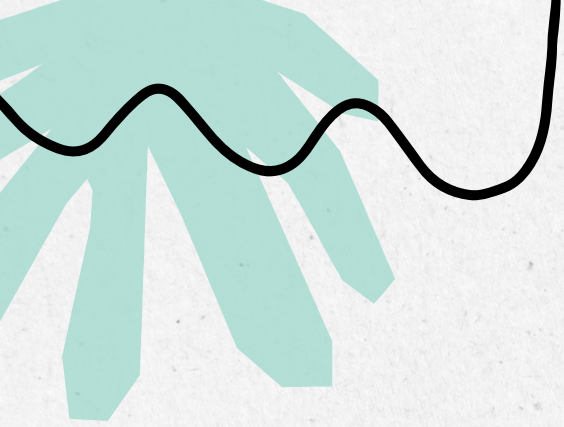
²Potnis, D.D. (2011). *Folksonomy-based User-centric Information Organization Systems*.



WHAT IS FOLKSONOMY?

The term folksonomy is a combination of “folk” and “taxonomy” and is used to refer to an informal and collection of related terminology (Trant, 2008). It is predominantly known as a system for categorizing content with the use of user tags. Users use tags to identify what they think the content is about or representative of to organize and classify it (*Definition of Folksonomies (Social Tagging)*, n.d.). Accordingly, folksonomies evolve and grow the more that users create and store content on online websites.

Folksonomy is commonly referred to as social tagging amongst other similar labels (collaborative tagging, social indexing, social classification, etc.). The term derives from the practice of users publicly labelling and categorizing resources in the digital environment. Thus, folksonomy is a classification system that stemmed from the creation and predominance of Web 2.0. Social platforms such as Flickr, Twitter, Facebook, Reddit, and Instagram heavily rely on social tagging to organize information and make it searchable for users. An important characterization of folksonomies is that there are no formal rules. The users of these platforms are both the creators and enablers of the classification system. This is because users are the ones who create content and will add a tag to identify the piece of content (Trant, 2008). The content is descriptive in nature and the classification system is built on natural language.

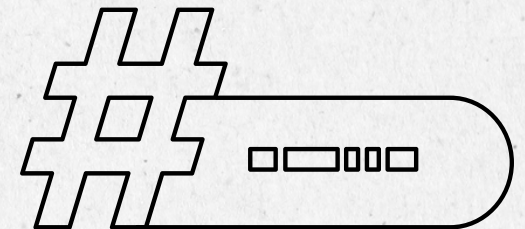


¹Definition of Folksonomies (Social Tagging) - Gartner Information Technology Glossary. (n.d.). Gartner. <https://www.gartner.com/en/information-technology/glossary/folksonomy>
²Potnis, D.D. (2011). *Folksonomy-based User-centric Information Organization Systems*.

TAGGING & FOLKSONOMIES

As a classification scheme, folksonomies follow the core principle of using sorting methods to organize information and items through the use of tags. Hash tagging is a classification practice imbedded into the structure of common social media platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook. Hashtags function as descriptive elements in the text, image, and video content shared on the app, thus explaining the content and categorizing it in order to be searched by users (Ibba, Orru, Pani, & Porru, 2015). In the social media landscape hash tagging is predominately known as inputting the pound symbol before a word or series of words. For example, #dogs or #CuteDogs.

Social platforms are data dense and tags function as forms of meta data that aid in the organization, discoverability, and retrieval of information (Ibba, Orru, Pani, & Porru, 2015). Yet, folksonomies are distinct from traditional classification schemes as the main purpose of social tagging is to promote the visibility of content and create a system of information organization that can then be used to recommend relevant information to users (Ibba, Orru, Pani, & Porru, 2015).



ADVANTAGES

Natural classification & natural language

Folksonomies are built on language that is relevant, understood, and used by the user group that is creating, sharing, and interacting with the content on these platforms. This aids in the relevance and discoverability of the content (Trant, 2008).

User generated & collaborative

Similar to natural classification, social tagging is a process of users creating content that is meant to be shared and discovered by relevant user communities. Accordingly, tags will evolve and grow as similar content is created and shared. For example, a simple tag like #dogs can expand to include #CuteDogs, #DogsOfInstagram, #DogLove to make the content more niche and discoverable by specific user groups (Rathnayake & Ntalla, 2020).

Reflective of user behaviour and trends

Information on social platforms is entered by users and they are the ultimate creators of trends and influencers of user behaviour in this social digital landscape. This leads to the development of social organization centred around what the users deem as "on trend" and relevant in this current digital, social, and political landscape (Ibba, Orru, Pani, & Porru, 2015).

Supports the usability and functionality of search engines

Within the online environment where there is an excess and wide range of content, finding information is critical (Trant, 2008). Social tagging allows users to create identifiers for their content, thus increasing the find-ability of the content by like-minded users on a social platforms.



LIMITATIONS

Lack of controlled behaviour

Social tagging allows users to create whatever tags they want and use whatever tags they want to identify content. Thus, there are no concrete rules, a lack of hierarchy, and the increased likelihood of redundant and repetitive entries. This impacts the discoverability of content in a digital landscape that already grapples with an excess of content (Ruslan, 2018).

Lack of rules

The most obvious issue with folksonomies is the lack of rules. This leads to varying practices being employed by each user. For instance, when using a tag with multiple words, what is the rule? Do you use underscores, capitalization, or blend the words together? Different tagging practices ultimately make searching difficult (Ruslan, 2018)

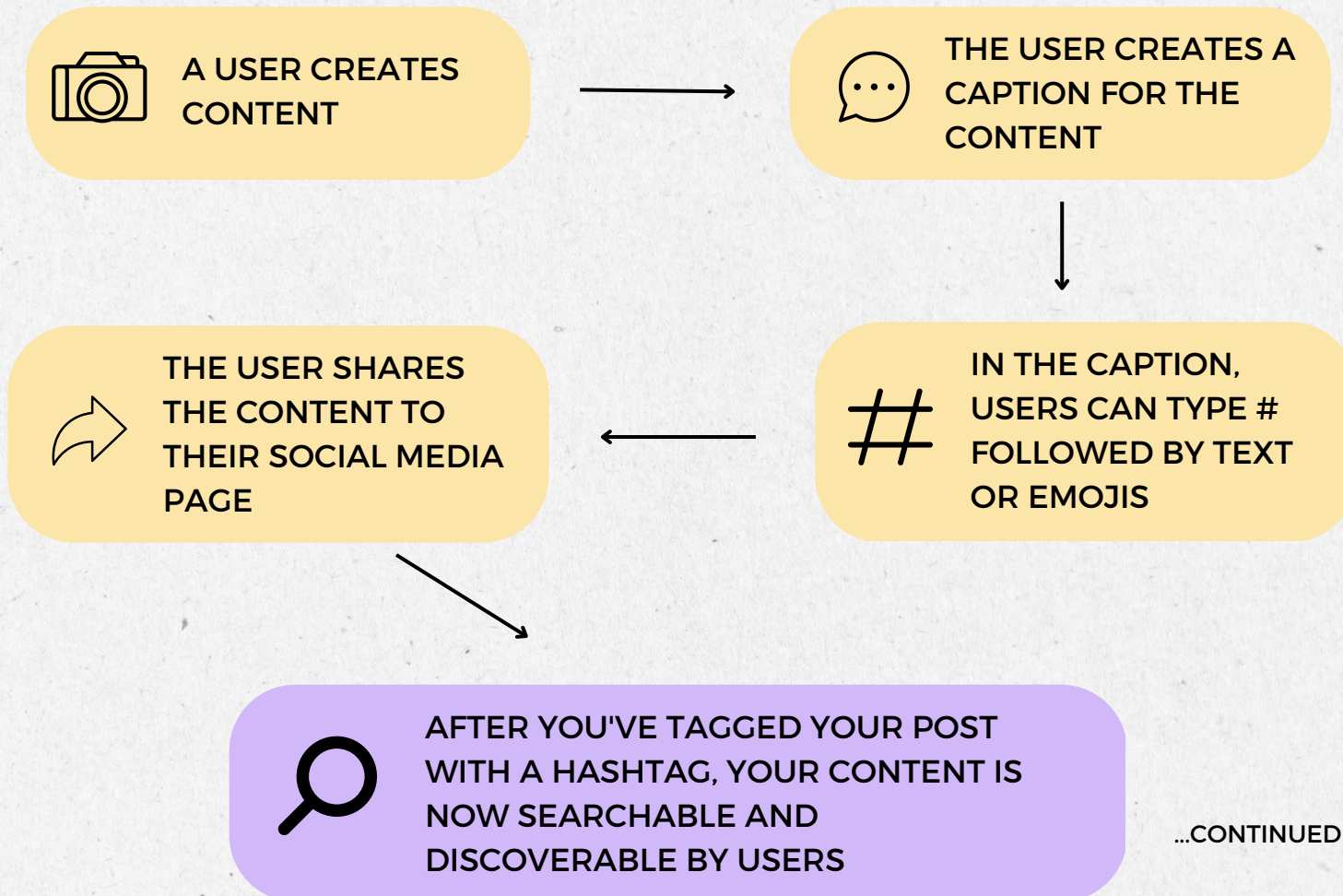
Preference of popularity over usefulness

The main purpose of social tagging is to facilitate the visibility of information in the digital landscape. Accordingly, the most suitable or applicable tag may be ignored in favour of a popular or trending tag that will increase the visibility of digital content (Ibba, Orru, Pani, & Porru, 2015).

Difficult to achieve precision in information retrieval

Since social tagging is dependent on the preference of the user, information retrieval and searching for content is difficult on social platforms. Users may have tagged content too broadly, used a lack of relevant tags, or used too many personal tags that are vague in nature. This leaves the searcher of information with the responsibility of relying on a system of organization that is chaotic rather than systematic (Ruslan, 2018).

EXAMPLE: TAGGING ON INSTAGRAM



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EXAMPLE: TAGGING ON INSTAGRAM

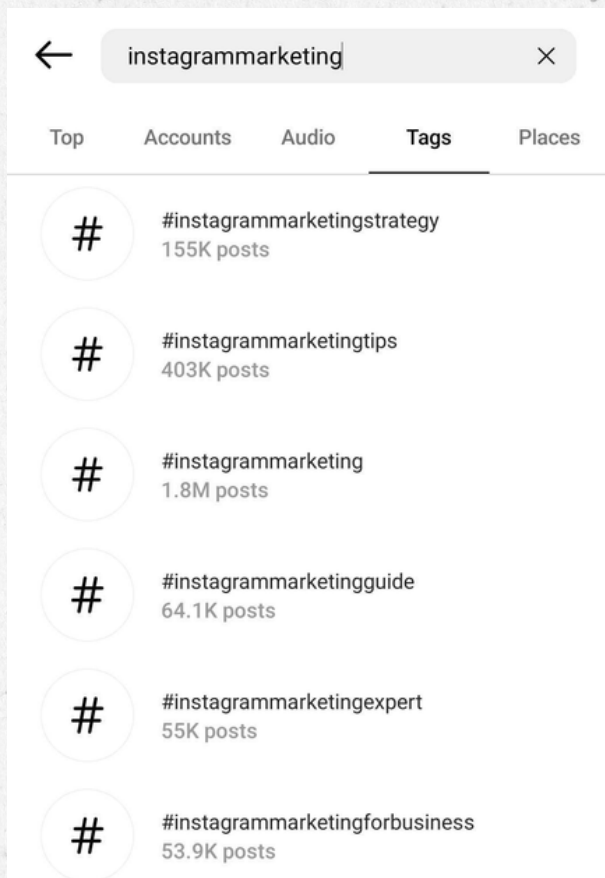


IMAGE SOURCE: SOCIAL MEDIA EXAMINER

Hashtags act as content identifiers that support the discoverability of a piece of media on the social platform.

Hashtags are interactive and act as an informal subclass that stores relevant information within the larger classification system. Accordingly, after you tag your post with a hashtag, users can search or click on a hashtag that leads them to a page with all the videos and photos other users have uploaded and identified with the same hashtag (Malik, 2019)

As shown in the image, hashtags evolve and grow the more that users create and identify content. As a result, a lot of entries will get repetitive or redundant. And while folksonomies traditionally don't operate as a hierarchy, popular, most used, or trending tags will be ranked higher in the search engine and algorithm on social platforms.

TAGGING ON OTHER SOCIAL PLATFORMS

A similar tagging framework is applied to other relevant social platforms such as Twitter and Facebook. These platforms can be referred to as a social network or a social ecosystem. While they each have tagging schemes in their ecosystems, the way the tags operate in the algorithm, organize information, and push or suggest relevant content to users varies based on the platform. However the core foundation of social tagging remains the same, which is that it is still user generated, uses natural language and classification, operates on little to no rules, and is used to identify and assign labels to content (Malik, 2019).

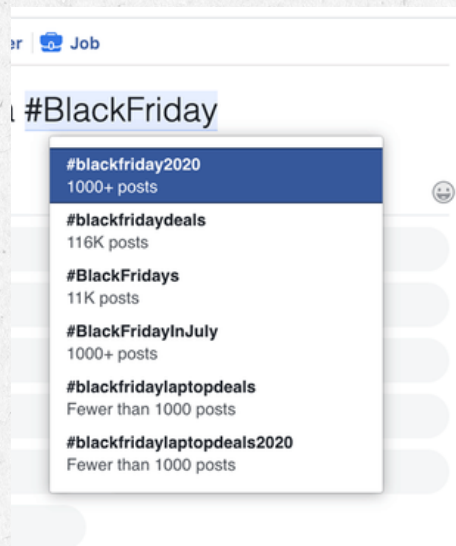


IMAGE SOURCE: LOUISE MYERS
VISUAL SOCIAL MEDIA BLOG



IMAGE SOURCE: PENGUIN RANDOM HOUSE
TWITTER



THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN TECHNOLOGY & USERS

While hash tags and tagging systems are markers of content organization, they are also representative of social organization and the arising social context that exists in the digital landscape. Accordingly, social tagging indicates a shift away from merely categorizing artifacts and showcases a way for users to coordinate their activity, connect with likeminded communities, and shape their social commentary in an organized fashion (Rathnayake & Ntalla, 2020). Users can create and use tags that they feel is representative of their content and self-image in the online world. The hashtags used by users build online communities and promote conversations between other users who are either creating content or merely searching and interacting with existing content. These are all characteristics of user-driven construction that have aided in the development of folksonomies within these social platforms (Rathnayake & Ntalla, 2020).

Likewise, according to Ibba, Orru, Pani, & Porru (2015) hash tags are representative of subjective opinions, feelings, places, or a variety of emotions. Since the user is in control they can use words, symbols, numbers, and phrases that make sense to them without any specific regard for anyone else's interests, preferences, or requirements (Ruslan, 2018). Though this can be regarded as chaotic in some contexts, it is representative of the true nature of Web 2.0, which is what folksonomies are emerged and evolved from. In Web 2.0, social computing engages users at a grass-roots level to stimulate creative, collaborative and information sharing networks (Ruslan, 2018).



THE SERENDIPITOUS NATURE OF FOLKSONOMIES

Folksonomies can be viewed as an anti-authoritarian symbol, that embraces emergence and excess, as well as represents a multiplicity of world views (Trant, 2008). In this perspective there is a discovery element and a finding element. Accordingly, users will often discover content that they did not know existed, and therefore could not have been trying to find (Trant, 2008). Thus contributing to the serendipitous nature of folksonomies. This has been aggravated with the evolution of smart algorithms based on user data, but the core principle is that folksonomies aid in the visibility of multidimensional content to users in an organic way.

This is in contrast to traditional classification schemes, where the user usually seeks out information that they intend to find in a specific way (i.e. by subject area, author name, etc.). However, the disadvantage to this is that folksonomies make it difficult to achieve precision in information retrieval. This problem is largely attributed to the lack of controlled vocabulary in folksonomies that results in both density and overlap in tagging. Density is the "frequency with which users annotate objects" and overlap is the "frequency with which users are annotating the same objects as one another" (Trant, 2008). Both concepts lead to the creation of multiple versions of tags all centered around a similar idea, but expressed in a different way. For instance, one user tags content as "blue" but another tags it as "teal" or "aqua."



THE SERENDIPITOUS NATURE OF FOLKSONOMIES

Subsequently, a user searching for a post focussed on a particular idea will run into difficulty with figuring out how to broaden or narrow their search based on the results they receive (Trant, 2008). Likewise, users will run into the issue of lack of recall that occurs while searching on social platforms. A user that searches for the term "green" will run into a results page that did not pick up on related terms or synonyms for the tag. Thus, leading to a search result that yields only a small fraction of content or information on the subject or idea (Ruslan, 2018). On the other hand, users may run into the occurrence of information overload, in which case they receive a search result with too much content or information that requires them to manually filter through to find the content that is of relevance to their original search intent.

Despite these challenges, the underlying advantage is that the lack of structure in folksonomies promotes the serendipitous discovery of information and content through browsing (Trant, 2008). In that essence, folksonomy is well-suited to the digital landscape where content is stored in abundance and there are many users that are seeking an array of content and information.



WHY FOLKSONOMIES WORK ON SOCIAL PLATFORMS

Web 2.0 is focused on both user-driven design and social participation (Trant, 2008). In this context, social platforms follow the same patterns with the reliance on tagging to organize information. This is because tagging is also user-driven and collaborative. Accordingly, tagging can be viewed as solution to improving the search capabilities of networked and social platforms that thrive on personalized use (Trant, 2008).

Further, there is a social influence that has impacted the predominance of tagging and folksonomies on social platforms. This is largely attributed to the fact that social platforms are built on community-created content (Trant, 2008). Without creators choosing to develop and share content, social platforms would cease to fulfill their purpose. This is related to tagging because tagging is how creators choose to identify their content. This form of classification gives the user a sense of autonomy over their work. Thus, the user does not have to pick a subclass that vaguely describes their work, rather they are able to apply specific tags (that may or may not already exist) that use descriptive and natural language to make it discoverable.

While folksonomies may appear to be chaotic and definitely less structured than traditional classification schemes, they work in the digital landscape because the world wide web is a catalyst for free expression. As such, tags operate as social signatures that promote communication and participation amongst users of social platforms (Rathnayake & Ntalla, 2020)

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