can the college side of tumblr explain please
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Tumblr is a social networking and microblogging platform created in 2007. The features that I have found make Tumblr different than other blogging sites or social networks (e.g. Twitter, Facebook, Instagram) are comprised of two different things. The first are the physical features available. Tumblr users can post texts of their own choosing, and there is no word limit, like Twitter has. They can post photos, video, and audio. They can post links to other places. They can post quotes (with commentary, occasionally). They can engage in chats with other users. They can combine some of these (e.g. take a picture of the country they are visiting and describe what happened to them there). They can follow other Tumblr users, and be followed back. They can "ask" or "submit" their own ideas to another user, anonymously or not. They can "reblog" another user's "post," with and without commentary. They can also simply "like" a post as well.

There isn't any particular group that Tumblr targets, which leads to the second feature that makes Tumblr unique: there are many, *many* groups and subgroups on Tumblr. Some of them interact, and some of them don't. For example, there are many blogs dedicated to stunning photographs of landscapes all over the world. Other blogs are dedicated to learning languages, or history, or even science (which has led to the "science side of tumblr explain this" meme and subsequent parodies - for instance, the title of this paper). Or, you can just blog...whatever. Your blog doesn't have to have a theme, and you don't even have to post things yourself - you can just reblog from the blogs you follow.

However, Tumblr is mostly infamous for two things: fandom and social justice (usually taken to the extremes). Tumblr is infamous for these two things because often the two end up as quite negative (hateful comments about "wrong" ideas for a fandom leading to suicides/almost suicides; extreme, almost parodic ideas of social justice).

The above two paragraphs come from research on the Web and what I knew of Tumblr before I joined. When I joined, I was expecting a lot of fandom stuff, mixed in with a lot of extreme social justice crusades. However, I found that Tumblr was...a little different than what I was expecting.

First of all, what you see on Tumblr is mostly what blogs and topics you follow, so if you want to avoid The Discourse™ (a termed coined by self-deprecating Tumblr users and other exasperated users of the Internet), you can do so. So if you only follow travel blogs and blogs that post pretty pictures of kittens and puppies, you're probably going to avoid a lot of political arguments and the like - unless one of the blogs you follow ends up posting about such things, in which case you can just...unfollow them! There, problem gone!

As stated above, there are many different groups on Tumblr, some more famous than others. Each major group can commonly be referred to as a "side" of Tumblr - the fandom side, the science side, and so on - with maybe smaller subsections within that "side." For example, the fandom side of Tumblr (one of the largest sides of Tumblr) comprises people who are interested in a story. Whether that story is shown through words, through animation, on TV, or on a movie screen, the people in the fandom side of Tumblr are (some might say) obsessed with that story. They make gifsets of scenes from the show. They draw fanart for their favorite books. They write fanfiction and make fanvideos and cosplay as their favorite characters. This leads to a specific vocabulary for those within the fandom side

of Tumblr, a vocabulary which only gets more confusing as you explore the different subsections of the fandom side.

Another side of Tumblr might be the scholarly side - the science, history, linguistics, and so on side. The scholarly side is people who are interested in learning and sharing their knowledge. It has many branches, and each branch has its own terminology (especially as some of the branches are very academic - someone interested in thermonuclear science will make no sense to someone only interested in drawing fanart for their anime - and some of the linguistics branches are in different languages - someone explaining the nonexistent indefinite article in the *Gaeilge* or *Gàidhlig* isn't going to really attract someone interested in the political situation in Taiwan).

Basically, each group is pretty much dissimilar to every other group, and as one moves deeper into the subsections, the differences only get more and more pronounced.

Let me give you an example. First, the fandom side of Tumblr. Gifsets, fanfiction, multifandom videos, tribute videos, shipping - all common vocabulary to all fandoms (and completely confusing to those not in the fandom side). Dig a little deeper, into the subsection of fanfiction writers within the fandom side. More terms begin to appear - AU, [Description]! [Character name] (ex. Vampire!Harry, for a Harry Potter fanfiction, in which Harry is a vampire), A/N, fluff, crossover, gen, pairings, headcanon, oneshot, drabble, and so on. All of these terms are clear to those within the subsection of fanfiction writers (and readers), but maybe not to other subsections of the fandom side or even to the rest of Tumblr.

Digging even deeper into the subsection of fanfiction writers/readers, you might stumble across a group of fanfiction writers for a specific show or book. For example, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. There might be a fanfiction with a description something like this: "Roaring20s!AU. "When I saw him, I knew he was the one." "You always say that, Buffy," Willow said. Oneshot long drabble. Past Bangel, slow-burn Spuffy. Background Xillow and angsty past Sprusilla. Tooth-rotting fluff, mixed with heavy doses of angst. (idk guys, i wrote this at one in the morning)."

Now, I just made that up, and usually the summaries are better than that, but it is a good example of how incomprehensible that might be to not only people outside the fanfiction side of the fandom side of Tumblr, but also to people who don't specifically read *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* fanfiction. It translates to: "An alternate universe where the characters from *Buffy* are in the 1920s. [The author inserts a quote from their story here to lure the reader in, then the summary continues]. A long, one-chapter story that will not be continued in the future. In the past, Buffy and Angel had a relationship, but this story is all about the process of Spike and Buffy getting together (and it's going to take a while). There will be occasional mentions of Willow and Xander being a couple, and of Drusilla and Spike's messed up relationship from the past, but it's not *that* important to the story. Most of the story will be uber-sweet, sickening, and full of romance, but occasionally there will be a lot of darkness and depression. (I have no idea what I'm doing, I just do as the muse tells me to at one in the morning, don't judge)."

The translation is what someone familiar to the sub-subsection would understand immediately, but someone not familiar would be at a total loss when they read the original summary. This phenomenon, of terms and ideas specific to the section and the subsection, are repeated all over Tumblr. (And there are a *lot* of subsections on Tumblr).

So what on earth binds any of these groups together? What makes Tumblr, well, Tumblr and not just another random internet site? Is there in fact a common culture or language?

Surprisingly enough, there seems to be - but not in the more traditional ways of language.

If you look at the most popular posts on Tumblr (ruling out the really pretty pictures that everybody reblogs, or the ones with subjects not unique to Tumblr (ex. "Happy Birthday, famous person who was born today!"), you find that fandom and social justice posts (the two things Tumblr is most associated with) aren't quite as popular as memes and...weird/unique Tumblr phrases. A lot of the popular posts are simply pictures, or pictures combined with words, or not involving any unique vocabulary - not at all the traditional ways of defining a language. Presumably the reason these posts got more notes is because they appeal to more of Tumblr. But why is that? Let's look at a classic Tumblr post before we go any further.

The first document I examined is what is referred to as a "long post," or a "mega-post," meaning that when a user reblogs, likes, or comments on the post, they are dealing with multiple people's words/images. I would define a long post as more than three or four comments, but there are no official rules regarding these definitions. I chose it due to its relative popularity and reflectiveness of Tumblr as a whole (in terms of communication and character).

Here's the opening post, by Tumblr user pochowek: "tumblr user, drinking a bottle of uncontaminated water in post apocalyptic america: i love this?? this is so pure omg". Immediately, a few things are obvious. One, that this makes no sense - at least to someone not on Tumblr. Two, that this is kind of weird - who finds post-apocalyptic scenarios funny? Three, that the Tumblr user is making fun of Tumblr users - self-deprecating humor. Four, that the grammar, punctuation, and capitalization are completely incorrect, according to the standard rules of written English. So this is what someone not on Tumblr (a.k.a. me when I first read this) would immediately have thought.

However, there is some context. On Tumblr, when people post pictures of cute animals or stories of good deeds and the like, people tend to reblog with things like "OMG" and "PURE" and "i love this??", all of which pochowek is referencing. So, if you have been on Tumblr long enough, and seen tons of posts where the same words are repeated thousands of times, this is hilariously making fun of that to fellow Tumblr users.

Another thing is the post-apocalyptic scenario. Lots of people on Tumblr are interested in dystopian/sci-fi/weird fiction for many reasons - writing/reading preferences, or what-have-you. There can be a lot of serious discussions of what would theoretically happen to people during or after an apocalypse. People like *The Hunger Games* series. Another popular post is the "humans are awesome" megapost, where Earth is Space Australia and humans are space orcs, because of all the weird things we and our planet can do. Points raised by the post include our liking for literally jumping into dangerous places (like volcanoes or out of the sky), our first instinct upon seeing dangerous wild animals being *cute!!!, I'm going to cuddle it*, and our method for exploring new and dangerous places [send more and more people until they stop dying, à la exploring the Arctic. Yes. Humans are definitely weird.

In addition, it's a pretty well-known joke that Tumblr users never leave the house (or it was at the time of this post), so the thought of them surviving in the deadly conditions supposedly occurring in a post-apocalyptic scenario - while STILL talking like they do on Tumblr - is ridiculous. However, it was ridiculous and funny enough to get 176, 287 notes at the last count, which meant that it appealed to

a lot of people on Tumblr (most people making random posts are lucky to reach the hundreds, even if they have a large following).

Still, that's only the information gathered from pochowek's post! There's a bit more to be gleaned from the reblogs and added content.

People go on to reference other common Tumblr phrases and words ("beautiful cinnamon roll too good for this world, too pure," "triggered," "say it louder for the people in the back," "why doesn't this have more notes??", "i came out to have a good time and i'm honestly feeling so attacked right now" to name a few). What's interesting is how they bring each phrase back to its original meaning - for example, "triggered" originally meant something like to spring (e.g. to trigger a warning, a trap, a flashback). On Tumblr and other social justice areas, the more recent meaning of the word (to trigger a flashback) was used to the point where it became meaningless (fans could be "triggered" from a character having the wrong color dress). Tumblr user anosognosic reblogs pochowek with: "tumblr edgelord, to a booby-trap in post-apocalyptic america, an arrow embedded deep in their chest: i'm sorry, are you *triggered?*", bringing the word back to its original meaning.

This goes on for a few more reblogs until the Tumblr staff reblogs with: "tumblr user, looking helplessly at their shattered pole weapon before perishing in the battle circle of post-apocalyptic america: wtf staff" at which point pochowek hurriedly reblogs: "**staff replied, post is over**". And then the posts ends.

The context behind these last two reblogs being probably the best of the lot is that Tumblr staff is notorious for not replying to or fixing any problems with Tumblr that the users actually WANT fixed, leading to many popular posts with the variations of "wtf staff" and "@staff" in attempts to draw the staff's attention. There is a definite theme of staff vs Tumblr users on Tumblr, which is reflected in this post.

So, just from this first document, I learned that 1) Tumblr humor is kind of specifically meant to be funny to Tumblr users - you need to have been there for a while to get a lot of the jokes, 2) Tumblr humor is kind of weird, 3) Tumblr humor is self-deprecating, 4) Tumblr users don't seem to care about proper writing rules for English, though they seem to be following some sort of unspoken format here, 5) Tumblr humor and interests range to the odd and unpopular to the rest of teens (there aren't a whole lot of books about internet users humorously surviving an apocalypse, at least on the bestsellers lists that I've seen), and 6) Tumblr users do not like the staff, and their humor reflects this.

I said before that a lot of the humor in this post is due to Tumblr users knowing 1) Tumblr terms, and 2) past Tumblr jokes and humor. At the time, I didn't have a word for this, or even an idea of where to start, so I started researching humor vocabulary, and finally hit paydirt.

It's called referential humor. According Graeme Ritchie, in his essay "Linguistic Factors in Humour," which dealt with the relationship between language and humor (more specifically how one translates humor from language to language), it "uses language to convey some meaning...which is itself the source of humour, regardless of the medium used to convey it" (34). In other words, the *idea* or *thing the humor references* is itself funny, rather than the way that the humor is told. A very good example of this, given by Sarah Seewoester, in her essay, "Linguistic Ambiguity in Language-Based Jokes" (another essay dealing with the relationship between language and humor, more specifically how English is conveniently set up to be a humorous language due to its ambiguity) is: "Why is life like a

chicken coop ladder? *It's **short** and **shitty**,*" which she then shows it can be changed to: "Why is life like a chicken coop ladder? *It's **not very long** and **crappy***" (5), still retaining the same humor as the original. This concept is applicable to Tumblr as well, although with more freedom than simply using synonyms (as Tumblr users can also use GIFs, pictures, videos, memes, sound, and so on). Someone might make a post that seems very obvious, e.g. "water is wet." One use might respond with a popular GIF of Kermit the Frog and Christian Bale nodding at each other - meaning that yes, water is wet, there isn't much you can say to that. However, another use might respond in text format: "insert obligatory Kermit nodding gif here." Although the forms of expressing the same joke (Kermit and Christian Bale nodding back and forth at each other) are different, the joke is easily recognizable and humorous either way.

Referential humor also generally reflects the culture in which it is being told, and can often require some knowledge of said culture or past/current events in said culture. A good example given by Matthew Hurley and his colleagues in their book, *Inside Jokes: Using Humor to Reverse-Engineer the Mind*, in a section detailing the relationship between humor and culture, is one from Korea (translated): "Who in their right mind mixes salt water and clean water back and forth knowing his mother will give him a beating?" (32). This is apparently hilarious to Koreans in middle-to-high school because of three things: one, that a common math problem in Korean schools is mixing water and salt water (for proportions), two, "it is obvious to Koreans that you would...mix salt and fresh water...in the kitchen" (32), and three, "Korean children wouldn't dare make messes in their mothers' kitchens" (32).

In this one joke alone, we have at least two "cultures": the larger one of Koreans, and the smaller one of Koreans from middle-to-high school age. Presumably, this joke is funniest to the second group, but still can be amusing to the larger group as well.

Many theorists make the argument that language, culture, and humor are all interconnected at varying levels. In other words, the culture affects the language which affects the humor and so forth. Using the idea that Tumblr is large culture (like Korea) comprised of smaller groups and cultures (e.g. Tumblr's "fandom sides" and "science sides" and so on are similar to the groups in Korea of middle school and high school Koreans, and so on), I looked at Tumblr communication in a new light.

If Tumblr was a culture and a community of its own (comprised of smaller communities), and I was beginning to think that it was, then it must have some sort of language/reference points of its own, that nearly *everybody* on Tumblr used, understood, and found humorous (at certain points). According to the theory, if there was a Tumblr culture and a Tumblr humor (based heavily on referential humor), there must also be a Tumblr language in between.

Still, I needed more proof to make my theory more solid, so I decided to examine another document before formulating any ideas.

The next document has 666, 794 notes - more popular than the last one. When Tumblr user copperbooms wondered: "when did tumblr collectively decide not to use punctuation like when did this happen why is this a thing", user atomicairspace replied: "it just looks so smooth I mean look at this sentence flow like a jungle river" which user prismatic-bell replied to with a long in-depth examination of the mechanics of Tumblr language. I can't quote the whole thing here, but here is a brief summary: "ACTUALLY This is really exciting, linguistically speaking. Because it's not true that Tumblr *never* uses punctuation. But is *is* true that lack of punctuation has become, itself, a form of punctuation…" prismatic-bell goes on to explain that when there is lack of punctuation, it creates rhetorical speech,

whereas when there is proper punctuation, it is a question or statement that should be responded to - and when people respond to either one, they tend to respond in the same style as the question (e.g. with or without punctuation). prismatic-bell concludes his/her essay-like post with: "[Tumblr] has agreed on a more or less universal standard for these new rules, *which fits the definition of "language"*...Tumblr English should literally be treated as its own language, because it does not follow the rules of any form of formal written English, and yet it does have its own consistent internal rules", and prismatic-bell thinks this is hugely exciting. Interestingly enough, the Tumblr staff sees fit to pay attention to this post, and in response to this well-crafted and well-written post, they write: "Hey cool".

Tumblr staff, everyone.

What I gathered from this post was pretty simple. One, the first two users were classic Tumblr. Post a question to the rest of Tumblr that has to do with why Tumblr is the way it is, and have someone respond to the question in an odd way (I have never in my life seen a sentence and thought "wow loOK AT THAT SENTENCE it flows just like a jungle river"). Though, to be fair, Tumblr has been weirder.

Two, the scholarly side of Tumblr makes an appearance. This side includes basically anyone who has an interest in something, such as someone into history, science, botany, astronomy, language, anthropology, tanners, printers, librarians, and so on. One does not necessarily have to have a job in the subject to be part of the scholarly side of Tumblr. Here we see the linguistics side of Tumblr make an appearance. As per usual for the scholarly side of Tumblr, they take the question, answer it in a knowledgeable/interesting way (punctuation optional), and leave the conversation.

Basically, this continues a couple things learned from the first document, in addition to some new conclusions: 1) Tumblr and Tumblr humor are weird, 2) staff is no good and unhelpful, 3) Tumblr users are interested in why they do what they do (and not just in making fun of it), 4) Tumblr users and their interests are wide and varied, and 5) apparently Tumblr grammar and punctuation are important, just not in a way that makes sense to non-Tumblr users.

In addition, even users on Tumblr seem to recognize that they have a unique way of communicating! Not only in terms of vocabulary and content-wise, but also in terms of formatting and punctuation - the *mechanics* of portraying a language. It's similar to and based upon internet English/language, but different as well. There seem to be more unspoken rules that everybody follows, rather than the free-for-all on the rest of the internet.

If, as Hurley and his colleagues claim, humor is tied to culture, as Ritchie and Seewoester claim, humor is connected to language, and language and culture are tied together, then based on that triangular relationship, Tumblr *does* have its own language. The fact that its "language" seems to be mostly English and Internet English based doesn't change that at all. For instance, America and England both speak English. But their respective dialects of English are very dissimilar - think of the words 'bloody,' 'biscuit,' and 'football,' and how each word means something very different to each listener. This is also not even taking into account the words that are not shared between the two countries - the slang words among other things. And if you look at British humor versus American humor, the two are not at all the same. *Monty Python* and *The Big Bang Theory* are two different types of humor, and while viewers from each country can certainly appreciate and understand the other's humor sometimes, most of the time this is not the case. That's only taking into account America and England, not any of the other countries in the world that also speak English - Scotland, Australia, Canada, Ireland, Wales, and so on - or even the

regional differences in each country - London English versus the Cornish dialect or the American South versus New York City. Just because two groups share the same general vocabulary and grammar structure (though sometimes not even that - think Hiberno-English or Scots sentence structure), and can communicate with one another, doesn't mean that their humor or culture is at all the same. Each culture, language/dialect, and humor is distinct.

So, although Tumblr uses English most of the time for communicating, its vocabulary, humor, and *ways* of communicating through the written word seem to be enough to add a lot more credence to the theory that Tumblr has a language of its own.

However, there's a problem.

The problem is that Tumblr's way of communicating isn't just limited to text - it includes audio, videos, and pictures. Often these are - or become - memes. For example, the "Man Looking at Another Woman" meme, where a man, holding hands with his girlfriend, makes an appreciative face at another woman walking by, while his girlfriend looks at him in horror. People fill in labels with appropriate names - e.g. a pro-Scottish independence blog posted one where the man, labelled with the flag of Scotland, looks appreciatively at the woman walking by, labeled with the flag of the EU, while the man's girlfriend, labeled as the Union Jack, looks on in horror. A variant of this meme, posted by user Shieldfoss, shows the traditional picture, but reversed: on the left, the girlfriend (labeled "traditional meme template") looks on in horror as her boyfriend (labeled "me") looks appreciatively at the woman walking by (labeled "the increased structural clarity of reading the meme left to right").

In essence, it seems as though Tumblr's language is unlike most languages in that it seems to rely heavily on not only the written and spoken word, but also on images. It also relies heavily on references to its past humor (whatever form that took) in ways that most languages don't, presumably because most languages are concerned with more important things, like sleep, food, activities, and so on, rather than memes and abstract humor. Still, just because Tumblr language doesn't act like other languages does not make it a non-language.

With regards to the need for Tumblr language to rely heavily on references to its past humor, I would like to point out that this is very common on Tumblr - in fact, it is often one of the more popular posts on Tumblr when people do this. Shieldfoss' above meme, where the meme is used to make fun of the popular meme and the Tumblr user him/herself, is simply one of the better examples of this phenomenon.

I think Tumblr user ommanyte expressed this Tumblr phenomenon so well I'm going to quote him/her in full (original typing retained):

My friends(don't have tumblr): have u seen this meme lol, it was on the 'best of tumblr' facebook page, tumblr is so funny

Me, a tumblr gremlin: haha yeah lol, think i've seen that one before lol

Me (what I really mean): you fools. I am plugged into the mainframe, wired to the primary source. Of course [I] have seen that meme, and all 5000 of it's variants, 3 and a half months ago. I have seen the rise and fall of that meme, the boom and bust, the drama, the pain, the shitposting, oh god, the shitposting. I have seen this meme in it's rawest, freshest, unpasturised, most primal state. Do not insult me with these rank, stale puddles, that sit at the very base of the meme trickle down economy.

If this isn't Tumblr at its finest, I don't what is.

First of all, the sheer weirdness of the text. Classic Tumblr. Once again, the spelling/grammar are not that important, but it's interesting how their word choice and syntax changes between their conversations between their real life friends and their Tumblr audience. And it also represents how on Tumblr, these memes evolve into many different things, and more often than not get combined with other memes to make super memes. Often the jokes on Tumblr reflect this, and reflect a deeper understanding of how Tumblr works: because the jokes make references to old jokes/new jokes/meme combinations/memes, often all at once, they are only funny to veteran Tumblr users.

Bearing in mind referential humor, I would argue that this is referential humor at its most extreme. Not only do Tumblr users have to know previous text-jokes, memes, and picture-jokes, but also subsequent combinations, and combinations of those combinations, until you get the "super-meme." And it doesn't seem to depend upon the English language (although the majority of them do). There are common memes on Tumblr that are in other languages (Russian cat memes come to mind) where people understand the meme without understanding the language, leading to phrases like "this meme/picture transcends language" (it helps if there's a picture).

And it is those kinds of posts (with references and so on) that become the most popular. In other words, posts that are full of referential humor are what, essentially, transcend the barriers between different groups on Tumblr - what a good portion of Tumblr users find interesting or funny enough to reblog/like. Those posts are what is essentially Tumblr - what makes Tumblr what it is. It's the definitive answer to the question I posed - is there a common culture or language or humor? There is.

It may be a *strange* way of communicating, of being part of a culture, of humor, but it *is* a way of communicating. True, people don't usually talk through weird phrases and memes and odd subject choices, but Tumblr does. In fact, people elsewhere on social media and the internet tend to view Tumblr with an odd mix of aversion and curiosity. They seem to view Tumblr users like curiosities in a zoo - weird oddities that are disturbing to view (like an octopus unscrewing a jar from the inside and then walking away), but at the same time strangely compelling, making you unable to resist getting a closer look. But you see people posting Tumblr posts on other sites all the time. To name a few, there are Facebook pages dedicated to the best of Tumblr, Twitter has countless posts of Tumblr users' posts, and Pintrest is like the poor man's Tumblr sometimes. And let's not even get started on BuzzFeed - that site practically worships Tumblr. What each of these places has in common is that they mostly post *exchanges* from Tumblr - in other words, people on Tumblr *communicating* with each other, using Tumblr *language* to make Tumblr *humor*, in the Tumblr *culture*. And do you know a very common reason for people joining Tumblr?

They saw people posting pictures of these Tumblr posts online and wanted to know more.

They were interested in Tumblr because something in those pixelated pictures seemed unique from other internet/social media sites - not only the humor, but the language and the culture was different from elsewhere online.

If that isn't evidence of a unique Tumblr culture, I don't know what is.

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