Vulnerable and Online: Fandom's Case for Stronger Privacy Norms and Tools

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Abstract

When social media platforms do not offer adequate privacy and safety features, users construct their own strategies for protecting private information and avoiding harassment. Women and LGBTQIA people are vulnerable targets if their privacy is violated, leading to situations that can compromise their safety both online and off. In an initial exploration of privacy and safety concerns of participants in online fan communities, we find that they avoid engaging online to preserve their privacy and safety, thus limiting the involvement of already marginalized voices in public discourse. LGBTQIA people in particular practice non-use for fear of being outed in personal spaces if recognized. In response to challenges users face, we recommend that developers consider finer controls over user content in addition to thoughtful practices among researchers and journalists when it comes to sharing "public" data.

Author Keywords

fandom; harassment; LGBTQ; online communities; privacy; safety; social norms; tumblr

Introduction

Ensuring users' safety is a major challenge for platform developers. When a site does not offer nuanced control over a user's privacy, that user might become more at risk for unwanted online experiences. Problems like harassment and "doxxing" (maliciously disclosing information such as a home address) negatively impact both users and platforms. However, the current design of many online platforms do not afford tight control on user privacy, and as a result those with safety concerns linked to their privacy are at risk of coming to harm.

Methods: We recruited on social media sites that are gathering places for fans, including Tumblr and Twitter. We sought fandom participants who were at least 18 years old and were willing to talk to us about privacy and ethics.

We conducted semi-structured interviews via voice or instant message depending on the interviewees' preferences. Of our 25 participants, a majority are LGBTQIA and/or female. Our sample includes 2 cisgender men (1 heterosexual) and 2 heterosexual women. We spoke to 2 transgender participants and 3 people of color. 1 declined to provide information about their identity. These demographics are typical for fandom [6].

Following transcription, we conducted a thematic analysis of the data, with the authors discussing and converging on emergent themes.

Furthermore, people with historically marginalized identities are harassment targets more regularly, especially in online spaces stereotypically associated with masculinity like online gaming [1]. Those who may not be "out" with respect to their sexual orientation or gender identity are at further risk, facing complex privacy problems both online and off.

There is, however, an opportunity to learn from community-based strategies that protect large groups of users. For example, the social site Tumblr is considered a safe space for questioning gender identity [6]. This research examines online fandom for two reasons: (1) they attract a large number of marginalized identities, particularly women and LGBTQIA people [7]; and (2) because these communities have existed since before the internet, they have long-standing, community-based norms [4], including strategies around privacy and safety that are not dependent on particular technologies. We approached this study with two research questions. (1) What strategies do vulnerable online communities develop to preserve norms around privacy and safety? (2) What can "outsiders" do to better preserve these norms? Based on a thematic analysis [2] of 25 semi-structured interviews, we examine three challenges participants face when protecting their privacy: (1) anticipating harassment; (2) avoiding being outed; and (3) managing the risk of amplification.

Anticipating Harassment
In online fandoms, fans share discussions and creative works (e.g. fan fiction or art) about their favorite media. Our participants frequently described themselves as "lurkers" in fandom, passively consuming content or contributing fanworks without

engaging with the community. One common motivation for lurking was rooted in the publicness of a platform:

P20: "It unnerves me that [Tumblr] is a mass-distribution platform about something I treat personally and feel is intimate... I see people having conversations in tags, but because the platform's not designed for one-on-one connection there's a sense of having a private conversation in a public crowded room. I dislike that immensely."

As a result, the participant felt "lucky" that she was invited to more private communities like the Discord server she belongs to. Because Discord is a locked, private community space, she participated in more socially oriented community activities there.

Historically, people in fandom have been concerned with their privacy, using pseudonyms separate from their "wallet," or legal, names [3]. Motivations include concern about legal repercussions since fanworks fall into a gray area of copyright law [4], or "moral" backlash for sexually explicit or non-normative fanworks [3]. Therefore, non-use as a strategy arises from fear of harassment or other consequences when a post or comment reaches the wrong audience sharing online space. All these worries pile up to make fans vulnerable to outsiders like researchers or journalists.

Out and Proud Online, Closeted at Home
Beyond these worries, a subset of fans are concerned about backlash for identifying as LGBTQIA. Some participants worried that if their fandom identity linked to their legal name, they might lose their jobs, be disowned from their families, or be at risk of violence. Those that felt safe often cited concern for friends. In

communities where participants are particularly vulnerable, there are sometimes trade-offs between privacy and social support. For example, people in health communities may disclose personal details about their conditions to get needed social support [9].

Similarly for some people, fandom is the only place they can openly express their identity and receive support. This is empowering, but also scary when it comes to privacy. It also means that non-use strategies are actively harmful toward an important social connection, as described by P12 (see sidebar).

Some fans expressed worry over the lack of privacy controls available on Tumblr and Twitter. Participants like P16 warned against over-sharing personal information (see sidebar) and emphasized a need for kindness and respect in fandom, stating that it can be a vulnerable space. This strong norm for privacy and respect is two-pronged for participants: they wish both for fans to respect one another, and for outsiders coming in to seek to understand or, at minimum, ask permission before sharing content beyond fandom.

Amplification to the Wider World
This need for outsiders to understand the community comes in part from these safety concerns. With fandom taking up more space on Tumblr and Twitter (which lack sophisticated privacy controls), fans find it difficult to curate their fandom life from everything else as fandom becomes more mainstream. Overall, participants welcomed outsiders such as journalists and researchers into fandom, but urged that they spend time with the community before publishing content.

Participants advocated for an approach similar to ethnography when researching fandom. At worst, as P5 puts it, outsiders can "parachute in" to the community, taking what they need and exiting fast. Quick turnarounds for publication might encourage someone to pull text or a photo from an online space without fully considering consequences. Our participants described complex social norms for determining what is and is not acceptable to share outside of fandom, and this would be a difficult judgment to make without investing time into understanding a community. As a result, some fans worry that their content will be shared without their permission or knowledge.

Controversial spaces of online debate or discussion are considered especially risky, with participants believing journalists are more likely to intervene in those spaces. P15 described a friend waking up to discover their Tumblr content had been featured in a news article without their consent. While avoiding certain spaces helps keep fan communities from unwanted exposure, it also encourages non-use and limits people's engagement in public discourse.

Though asking permission to share "public" data is not a common norm for academic research [5], special care should be taken with more vulnerable communities. Developers could also design privacy controls that restrict outsider access to content in fandom communities, much like the "friends-locking" mechanic on LiveJournal that restricted access of content to approved users.

Participants agreed that while online content is not necessarily private, fan community norms helped fans feel secure—the "unspoken rules" noted by P2 (see sidebar, next page). However, the idea of outsiders ignoring norms is, as P15 (see sidebar) puts it, a "looming threat", and leads to people avoiding social opportunities or chilling their creative work.

Moving Forward: Exposed and obscure

There is an ever-present tension in fandom between knowing that online activities are public and curating that public image. The issue of imagined or unintended audience is a known problem and design challenge [8]. However, fans understand the potential for unintended audiences interacting with their content. The problem is that the strategies required to deal with this possibility, such as non-use, are not ideal.

As researchers or designers, we can address participant concerns. With so much time spent curating what information is shared with whom, online platforms should consider how accessible posts are. Allowing for granular control of privacy settings can help people better manage their identities. Addressing these privacy concerns should be a priority for designers, because in the absence of privacy controls people opt to not use platforms to their fullest capabilities--hurting a community for otherwise marginalized users.

The women and LGBTQIA users in these interviews self-censor their online activity. Actions that address these concerns should ensure that people have more opportunities to participate in public discourse that they might otherwise avoid out of fear. We hope that these insights will inform best practices for creating a safer, more inclusive community across all platforms.

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