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# Understanding tag functions in a moderated, user-generated metadata ecosystem

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to investigate tag use in a metadata ecosystem that supports a fan work repository to identify functions of tags and explore the system as a co-constructed communicative context.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Using modified techniques from grounded theory (Charmaz, 2007), this paper integrates humanistic and social science methods to identify kinds of tag use in a rich setting.

**Findings** – Three primary roles of tags emerge out of detailed study of the metadata ecosystem: tags can identify elements in the fan work, tags can reflect on how those elements are used or adapted in the fan work, and finally, tags can express the fan author's sense of her role in the discursive context of the fan work repository. Attending to each of the tag roles shifts focus away from just what tags say to include how they say it.

**Practical implications** – Instead of building metadata systems designed solely for retrieval or description, this research suggests that it may be fruitful to build systems that recognize various metadata functions and allow for expressivity. This research also suggests that attending to metadata previously considered unusable in systems may reflect the participants' sense of the system and their role within it.

**Originality/value** – In addition to accommodating a wider range of tag functions, this research implies consideration of metadata ecosystems, where different kinds of tags do different things and work together to create a multifaceted artifact.

**Keywords** Information systems, Knowledge management systems, Metadata, Fan culture, Tags, User-generated metadata

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

The problem of search and retrieval requires clear, coherent subject keywords in order to facilitate referencing across multiple sources. Preservation metadata, on the other hand, needs to be descriptive and comprehensive in order to allow future preservation workers to maintain the integrity of the record and to allow future users to understand the context. User-generated tags are not quite like subject categories and not quite like archival descriptive metadata. A tag like “hang onto your butts team” or “I have no idea what I’m talking about” seems particularly worthless when compared against either of these kinds of metadata. Instead, can we consider the case of user-generated tags in order to develop a more complete picture of metadata purposes, including purposes previously ignored? Within the information science context, research has been done on how user-generated metadata, specifically tags, can add value to materials (Marshall, 2009; Steinhauer *et al.*, 2011). In most of these studies, however, the tags in question are either sparsely descriptive, or considered to be not useful to others. Moreover, only a small portion of research on user-generated metadata considers the special case of content creators tagging their own content, rather than users tagging content made by others (He *et al.*, 2010; Kim and Rieh, 2011).

Fan fiction, on the other hand, has a rich history of tagging practices developed through multiple intersecting communities. While the idea of creative re-imaginings of other stories