

USER EXPERIENCE (UX) DESIGN AS AN INCLUSION PRACTICE IN DISCORD COMMUNITIES

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INTRODUCTION

Online communities act as community building agents across many demographics. Underserved populations, especially those with limited access to traditional social settings, may rely on these spaces for networking, support, mutual aid, and collective action. With this in mind, I examined the experiences of marginalized users on Discord communities and aim to assess the utility of practices in User Experience (UX) Design and Universal Design (UD) in online settings, focusing on the key features of community norms, roles, fonts, and emojis/emoticons on Discord. I aim to view UX and UD as tools for accessibility and justice, as well as providing a practical toolkit for those facilitating online communities.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- How do **community norms** and server rules shape users' expectations and behaviors?
- Do the self-selected **"roles"** influence users' interactions on the server and with one another?
- Do the various **fonts and stylization options** supported by Discord facilitate or hinder communication? To what extent are emojis and emoticons influential in facilitating communication online?
- How does the division of topics through "channels" influence user behavior on Discord?

METHODS

The inquiries above were explored in the following dimensions:

- **Observational:** The Discord server for Write4Change, a youth-oriented writing community was monitored for discussions of the topic(s) at hand. Recurring discussions of
- **The Digital Walkthrough Method:** A sample of five members was selected to trial the features of a hypothetical Discord server. They provided feedback on the features and layout of the server on an interactive online platform, "marking up" their thoughts and reactions.

CONCLUSION

Both the design of Discord and the individual server's practices have tangible implications on the way users interact with a given community. Considerations of rules, the self-identification roles that are offered, the use of stylization, as well as the layout of the server channels can deter or encourage the participation of users based on their race, gender identity, dis/ability, etc.

COMMUNITY NORMS

- **Spoilers:** It is common practice to provide and encourage the use of trigger warnings to indicate distressing or dangerous material. Properly disclosing how to spoiler messages may promote implementation. Avoiding wording such as "censor" to describe this practice, unless discussing the topic is banned altogether.
- **Alternative text:** It is beneficial to provide and encourage alternative text (e.g. image and video descriptions) for those using screen readers. Providing resources for how to write effective alternative promotes inclusion for these users.
- **Consequences:** Indicating actions that will be taken in case of a breach can promote safety in the community.

ROLES

- **Identity-Based:** Having roles such as "person of color," "LGBTQ+," etc. may foster a sense of community and understanding but give way to targeted violence.
- **Pronouns:** Roles that indicate the personal pronoun of the user can help others refer to them according to their wishes. Roles should encompass a wide set of pronouns, and, if possible, allow for customized options to promote inclusion.
- **Colors:** Color roles allow users to select which color their username is displayed as. However, few colors are compatible with Discord's dark and light modes alike. Having adequate contrast, as well as a balanced wheel of colors, benefits users with blindness, visual impairments, or color blindness.

STYLIZATION OPTIONS

- **Role emoticons:** On Discord, it is common practice to include an emoticon in roles or messages to make identification and communication easier. The symbolic meaning of each should be assessed carefully, maximizing recognition while avoiding stereotyping, e.g. by choosing a pink emoticon for she/her.
- **Channel emoticons:** Some users report that navigating between channels is easier with emoticons. However, the emoticon should come after the written title to avoid conflicts with screen readers.
- **Text:** Utilizing bolded, italicized, strikethrough, etc. text as well as custom fonts may help with emphasis and conveying tone accurately. However, excessive stylization may conflict with readability and may render the server inaccessible for those using screen readers.

CHANNELS & NAVIGATION

- **Categories:** Channels, which each host discussions about a specific topic, should be grouped in a logical manner. When possible, similar topics should be grouped into one channel to avoid confusion.
- **Discussion opt-in:** Roles that give access to closed discussions may be beneficial for sexual or emotionally distressing content. Consideration should be given as to whether the server is the right setting to be hosting these discussions at all.