

2017

Stumbling onto New Ideas: Technical Structure and Interactional Norms on Online Social Media

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Stumbling onto New Ideas: Technical Structure and Interactional Norms on
Online Social Media

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Prerequisite for Honors in Sociology

Under the advisement of Markella Rutherford

Wellesley College
April 2017

Abstract

In its early stages, the Internet was viewed as an open forum for sharing and learning. Now, with a few dominant social media sites mediating most web access and the popular conception of these sites as polarizing filter bubbles, the promise of the open web appears to have been compromised. However, users of the microblogging website Tumblr do not experience this effect, instead encountering new ideas and topics alongside the content with which they intend to engage. Through a survey of over 250 Tumblr users, computational analysis of blogs, and interviews with users, my thesis seeks to uncover why Tumblr has become fertile ground for exposure to new content, expanding users' information networks rather than reinforcing their preconceptions. I identify the key technical features of the site and social norms that work in combination to create this effect. The technical affordances include Tumblr's disconnect from users' offline networks, the site's less socially focused user experience, reblogs and tags, and the customizability and control given to blog owners. The social understandings that have developed within these affordances include perceived anonymity, low-risk participation, and self-centered blogging. Within the limitations and allowances imposed by these technical constraints and social rules, many users curate personal blogs where they post a diversity of content that reflects their own interests and thoughts. Because of the unsorted nature of the Tumblr dashboard, users that follow personal blogs will encounter all of the content posted on those blogs, and in this way, be exposed to topics and ideas they were not looking for originally.

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Acknowledgments

My deep gratitude and thanks goes first to Professor Markella Rutherford, who not only provided expert guidance through this process of more than a year, but whose Social Inequality course that I took the spring semester of my first year introduced me to sociology as a discipline, the discipline through which I now seek to understand and change the world.

My appreciation also extends to other faculty members whose advice and encouragement were instrumental along the way. Chris Peterson of the MIT Center for Civic Media was one of the first people to urge me to turn what was then a heartfelt but hastily written final paper into a senior thesis, and he has continued to provide critique and connections throughout this process. Nicholas Knouf of Wellesley Cinema and Media Studies and Ethan Zuckerman, director of the Center for Civic Media, also gave valuable commentary during the fall of 2015 when I began thinking about these ideas. Eni Mustafaraj of Wellesley Computer Science provided both advice and code that enabled me to successfully scrape data from Tumblr itself. Casey Pattanayak, director of the Quantitative Analysis Institute, has been a mentor at Wellesley since my first semester here, and I credit her with encouraging me to enroll in my first computer science course, as well as honing my statistical instincts.

Finally, my entire college career has been made far more joyful, relaxed, and meaningful by everyone who has supported me at Wellesley, at home, and across the world. Special thanks goes to my wonderful mother, not only for editing this work but for taking my innumerable calls throughout the last four years; you've helped more than you know.

JC

Introduction

In the early days of online communication, users viewed the Internet as a decentralized, democratic utopia that would enable authenticity, collaboration, and freedom of expression like never before (Barlow 1996; Turner 2006). With the development of social media and the compartmentalization of online experience onto a few dominant sites that take the form of algorithm-based information streams, however, critics have argued that the Internet has lost its potential for openness and discovery (Derakhshan 2015). Instead, online spaces are seen as increasingly segregated, both through users' own preferences and through personalization algorithms such as those used by Facebook and Google, creating "filter bubbles" within which users' own beliefs are constantly reaffirmed (Sunstein 2009; Pariser 2011). In this perception of online interaction, there is little room for exposure to new ideas; one's identity and values are unlikely to be challenged or change.

However, this cyberbalkanization is not the necessary result of online communication. On the microblogging website Tumblr, some users report experiencing sometimes dramatic changes to their interests, beliefs, or identities, and interacting with content unrelated to their original intent on the site. For some users, passive exposure via Tumblr to content related to gender identity or sexual orientation even leads to a changed understanding of their own identities. This was not content these users were looking for when they joined the site; as one user who created an account simply "to reblog things I like" explained:

I did not understand why I was not like my friends when it came to sexuality--I had no idea I was asexual or what asexuality was. It was through tumblr that I learned

about the vast spectrum of sexuality and was able to find resources to learn more. Sexuality was not (and most likely still in many places, is not) touched upon in my health class in high school. I had a lot of turmoil up to that point, the relief I felt after knowing there were others like me and that I wasn't sick was like a mountain off my shoulders.

For this user and others like her, Tumblr and the content she found there led to a significant shift in her understanding of her own identity- the opposite of the filter bubble effect, which reinforces users' prior knowledge (Sunstein 2009). But why do some users experience this kind of discovery on Tumblr, while users of many other social media websites congregate into closed circles that rarely expose members to new viewpoints?

This work seeks to explain this question--why and how users encounter new information on Tumblr--through an analysis of the structure of the website, both as a technological artifact and as a social structure formed by people and their interactions. To understand the way users experience Tumblr, I take into account both the technical constraints of the site caused by design choices made by the Tumblr staff, and the social norms that constrain users' interactions, which are distinct from but influenced by the technical constraints, and have developed over time among the society of Tumblr users.

Before entering a review of the relevant scholarly work, I describe the technical structure and design of the site and how certain features¹ shape user experience, as well as a summary of the demographics of Tumblr users, in order to situate the reader with a basic understanding of the site.

¹ For a more thorough description of these and other terms I use in discussion of the Tumblr website, see Appendix I.

Tumblr: A Brief Introduction

In Tumblr's microblogging² format, users' online identities are manifested as personal blogs with custom URLs that double as usernames. The look of one's blog, the buttons included and the design, are known collectively as a theme. Upon creation of a Tumblr blog, users are offered choices from a wide variety of default themes made by Tumblr or by other users, as well as given the opportunity to edit the HTML themselves. This freedom allows a high degree of customization of one's online identity representation, similar to MySpace profiles and in opposition to the standardization of the Facebook Timeline or Instagram profile.

Tumblr supports text posts, links to outside sources, images, gifs, videos, and audio posts, allowing for a wide range of content to be shared easily on the site. Users follow others' blogs and interact with their content, liking or reblogging others' posts and adding their own commentary if desired, either on the post or in trackable, searchable tags. Tags, however, unlike text added directly on a reblogged post, can only be viewed by the followers of the tags' poster, and not by anyone who sees a further reblogged iteration of the post. The likes and reblogs accumulated by a post are known collectively as notes, and a post's notes are displayed wherever that post appears. Users access others' blogs primarily through the dashboard, Tumblr's term for the chronological stream of posts comprised of everything posted by every blog a user follows. The user's dashboard is the center of their Tumblr experience, and each user's dashboard will be unique based on the blogs that user follows. Users interact with others' posts via the dashboard, but can also

² Microblogging refers to blogging via short posts that often rely heavily on images and other media besides text, as opposed to traditional longform blogging.

choose to visit other's blogs directly, where they can view everything that user has posted, as well as perhaps a short biography or description. Users cannot, however, view other users' lists of followers or those blogs they follow by default. As of 2015 the site also includes direct messaging that allows users to send messages to other users without the messages appearing on either of their blogs.

Tumblr users tend to be young: the site does not gather demographic information from its users, but as of early 2015, 20% of internet users ages 18-29 reported using the site, compared to just 10% of all internet users; many Tumblr users are less than 18 years old (Duggan 2015). Women and men use the site in nearly equal numbers, while Black and Hispanic Americans are overrepresented, with 15% of internet users in those groups reporting use of the site. Internet users with some college education, urban internet users, and users reporting an income of less than \$30,000 per year are also more likely to use Tumblr (Duggan 2015). As of April 2017, over 344 million blogs have been created on Tumblr (Tumblr 2017).

Review of Literature

This work is situated within the larger sociological body of theory relating to structural constraints on people's thoughts and actions. In reviewing the literature, I first examine the theoretical underpinnings of the patterns of human interaction, drawing on fundamental ideas of social structure, human agency, and patterns of social interaction, as well as certain conceptual aspects of modernity theory. However, Tumblr is a website, and the interactions that occur on it take place between people, but mediated by the computers they are using. Thus I note how the frameworks of structure, agency, and

norms of human interaction have more recently been altered to better capture the social realities of online interaction. I then turn to conceptual work about online interaction focusing on privacy, audience, and networked community; these concepts will drive much of the analysis of this work. Finally, though Tumblr has achieved immense popularity as a microblogging platform, scholarly research on Tumblr has lagged even as rich online communities flourish on the site, and most of the existing work related to community formation on Tumblr is descriptive, rather than analytic. However, I engage with the existing research about Tumblr; these works provide valuable examples of community-building beyond the data collected for this project.

As a sociological endeavor, this work relies on the framework of social structure and human agency outlined by Giddens (1984, 1979). This framing constructs the idea of the duality of structure and social reproduction, and defines a social structure in terms of the “rules and resources” that are properties of the social system (Giddens 1984:25). Giddens explains rules as “techniques or generalizable procedures applied in the enactment/reproduction of social practices” (1984:21). These social rules are not necessarily formally articulated or binding, but Giddens notes that “It would be a serious mistake to underestimate the strength of informally applied sanctions in respect of a variety of mundane daily practices” (1984:23). In this formulation of society, social actors both draw upon and reinforce structural features of social systems. In doing so, actors are operating not from a formally articulated set of rules, but from a learned understanding of how to behave within society, following paths of least resistance: “Most of the rules implicated in the production and reproduction of social practices are only tacitly grasped

by actors: they know how to 'go on'" (Giddens 1984:22-23). The society is not dependent on the actions of any one individual, but without the collective composed of many individuals, the society would cease to exist.

All society and social reproduction takes place within a set of physical, biological, and geographical constraints of the world. Giddens notes that alone among the constraints placed upon human behavior, these constraints--the limitations of the body, differences of time and distance, physical laws- do not "derive from the impact which the activities or social ties of actors have upon those of other actors" (1984:175). Physical constraints are "limits to the feasible social lives that people can lead"; within these limits, all social reproduction takes place (Giddens 1984:175). This distinction between constraints that are immutable by agents and social rules that are drawn upon and reinforced by agents, but do change over time based on the action of agents within a social system, is critical as I attempt to understand society on Tumblr, an environment with its own set of binding constraints as well as socially constructed rules.

Within a society, social interaction is governed by various norms of behavior. Goffman describes much of the complexity of human-to-human interaction in his works (1959, 1974). Goffman's theories are based in traditional face-to-face interactions, but his insights into the way we navigate social life are still relevant as we consider online interactions. Goffman introduces the idea of primary social frameworks that govern the way we understand social events and actions (1974). He also explores the way people consciously and unconsciously alter their self-presentation depending on who is perceiving us and how we want to be perceived (Goffman 1959). Though many of the

factors Goffman investigates, such as dress, body language, and physical action are clearly nonexistent in text-based online communication, his formulation is still useful as we consider how and for whom users craft identities on Tumblr.

Finally, in conceiving of Tumblr as a social organization of people and their interactions, it is useful to recall Simmel's conception of the metropolis (1903). The modern organization of human life into densely populated, large population centers forms a sharp contrast from the small group where nearly every member is known to and has some relationship with every other (Simmel 1903). Simmel describes the modern city dweller as "'free' in contrast with the trivialities and prejudices which bind the small town person," characterizing the metropolis as a dizzying social world of stimulation and broadened horizons (Simmel 1903:16). This comparison will be useful as we explore the differences in users' experiences on Tumblr, on other online social media sites, and in their offline social lives.

Though using Tumblr and other online social media is undoubtedly a social experience, there are some key differences between online interaction and in-person human contact. Writing in 1985, Meyrowitz sums up the basic change thus: "electronic media have undermined the traditional relationship between physical setting and social situation" (7). Communication technology changes the "'situational geography' of social life" (Meyrowitz 1985:6). Specifically, by upending the traditional separation of actors from the various settings they are normally confined to, with electronic media we are forced to confront various actors in the same settings. Writing more than thirty years before Marwick and boyd, Meyrowitz anticipates what they term 'context collapse'

(Marwick & boyd 2011) as he investigates the changes to audience and social behavior caused by the disassociation with social interaction from physical space. His insight that “Audiences for particular group behaviors are no longer determined by physical presence, and the performance of roles on all social levels shifts as a result” will be key as we attempt to determine what social pressures and norms guide users on Tumblr (Meyrowitz 1985:149).

To craft an understanding of Tumblr as a social place, we must understand the various aspects of interaction taking place through use of the site. Gotved describes these interrelated interactions: “At once, we have an interaction between the human and the computer’s interface, a human-to-human interaction through the mediating technology, and the emergence of meaning within and between these two levels” (2006:471). Any conception of social engagement online must delineate the ways that interaction is technical, social, and both social and technical simultaneously. Gotved offers a useful formulation of cyber social reality as “constructed by the individual as well as by the collective, in close cooperation with advanced communication technology and the possibility of computer-mediated interactions” (2006:472). She also notes the connections between Simmel’s metropolis and online life today, describing “the same themes of alienation, compression of time and space, anonymity, and the evolvment of special competencies” (Gotved 2006:483). Later I will return to this connection, arguing that Tumblr, as opposed to other less anonymous social networks, indeed approximates a ‘cybermetropolis’.

I now turn to those scholarly works that form the conceptual foundations of our understanding of online social media use. danah boyd, in her investigation of American teenagers' use of Friendster, MySpace and later, Facebook, has developed the idea of networked publics, the public or semi-public online spaces that form on online social media (2007). According to boyd, networked publics are differentiated from unmediated publics such as a city street based on four properties: persistence, searchability, replicability, and invisible audiences. Persistence refers to the relative permanence of online content; in contrast to the temporary nature of a face-to-face conversation with a friend, an exchange between two users through responses on Tumblr will be recorded on both of their blogs, as well as that of anyone else who chooses to reblog it. Searchability is a consequence of the text-based internet; trackable tags make discovering users or conversations easier still. Replicability refers to the way that, online, content can be reposted in exactly the same form in which it was originally created³. Finally, the concept of the invisible audience is concerned with the fact that, online in networked publics, it is impossible to ascertain who may be viewing and interacting with the content one posts, both at the time of posting and at any later time, due to the persistence of online content. When posting online, we must imagine the audience, and this imagined audience shapes how and what we post. The differences between the audience imagined by users of Tumblr as opposed to the same users on Facebook allows for a higher degree of vulnerability and openness on Tumblr, as users tend to exclude most of the people with

³ This property is complicated by the prevalence of Photoshop and other photo-manipulation technologies: just as it is simple to share another's post, it is simple to modify that post, whether subtly or dramatically, and share it as the truth, leading to cases of mistaken identity, intent, and confusion.

whom they have relationships in real life from the imagined audience that views their blog on Tumblr.

This imagined audience is decomposed more thoroughly in an article by Alice E. Marwick and boyd that focuses on Twitter users (2011). When writing a tweet or posting to one's blog, one does not hold the same level of control over the viewing audience that one holds in real life. There may be multiple categories of audience included in one's list of followers, and others who are not even part of the network can view a publicly available Twitter feed or Tumblr blog. This leads to what Marwick and boyd name context collapse, when a multiplicity of audiences are privy to the same stream of content. Navigating the invisible, imagined audience can be tricky, and users employ a variety of strategies to manage interaction with wide-ranging, unknowable spectators.

boyd and Ellison also offer a precise definition of the online social network, which we can use to compare and contrast Tumblr to other online social media (2013). A social network will include these features: public or semi-public user profiles, an articulable list of other users whom a user is connected to, the ability of the user to view and traverse their list of connections and the lists of others, and the ability of the user to interact with streams of user-generated content provided by their connections (boyd & Ellison 2013). Later when we explore the technical structure of Tumblr in greater depth, we will see that according to this definition, Tumblr is not a true social network due to its decentralized user experience.

A final useful conceptual tool in the analysis of social network sites, originally proposed by Norman in relation to physical design objects, is the affordance, "a

relationship between the properties of an object and the capabilities of the agent that determine just how the object could possibly be used” (1988:11). boyd performs the crucial analytical step of applying the idea of affordances to online settings and social media specifically, defining affordances as particular characteristics of an offline or online environment that make certain practices possible or impossible (2014). Though technical affordances of social network sites constrain users in certain ways, the social norms that arise among users of a site also have a profound influence on users’ engagement with the site. Thus, we need to examine the overlap and distinctions between boyd’s technical affordances and Giddens’s rules of social structures to account for the social and technical ways users’ behavior on Tumblr is guided and constrained. With few exceptions, these concepts have yet to be applied to Tumblr specifically. This piece seeks to use these analytical tools to begin to understand why users of Tumblr are engaging with content they were not looking for when they joined the site.

One scholarly work that does engage with the ideas of boyd and others is that of Bryce Renninger, writing about the asexual community’s use of Tumblr as what he terms a networked counterpublic, in conversation with boyd’s ideas of the networked public (2015). Renninger differentiates counterpublics based on the ideas of Nancy Fraser and Michael Warner, the latter of whom describes counterpublics as “constituted through a conflictual relation to the dominant public... structured by different dispositions or protocols from those that obtain elsewhere in the culture, making different assumptions about what can be said or what goes without saying” (1990, 2002). Online counterpublics maintain the properties of networked publics but reject certain norms of the dominant

society. Renninger discusses the technical affordances that he sees as most salient in allowing counterpublic communication to flourish on Tumblr, drawing our attention to a less direct focus on profiles and follower lists, specific public commenting tools, stream-based updates, and the use of searchable hashtags. Based on these technical constraints, Renninger proposes six dynamics that differentiate Tumblr from other social networking sites and make it conducive to the formation of counterpublics: 1) Trackable but deemphasized commentary. 2) Deemphasis of trolling. 3) Easy access to the original poster of content. 4) Equivalent access to posts from new and established users. 5) Private interaction with other users. 6) Consolidated discussion through tag tracking (2015). According to Renninger, these dynamics of Tumblr contribute to the way that the asexual community and other marginalized groups use the site as a networked counterpublic.

Renninger's analysis provides a useful set of site features to consider; however, it neglects to investigate whether the users that form these networked counterpublics on Tumblr joined the site to become involved in these communities, or whether they were drawn to Tumblr for other reasons, and then encountered this alternative content serendipitously. Indeed, among those Tumblr users who responded to my survey, the vast majority, including those who do end up engaging heavily with social, political, or identity-based issues online, joined the site for reasons unrelated to this content; in my survey of over 260 Tumblr users, the most commonly cited reason for creating a Tumblr account was the influence of friends or peers, without mention of any particular type of content.

Though without the depth of structural analysis that Renninger performs, others have offered detailed descriptions of various communities on Tumblr focused around social issues or identity. One undergraduate honors thesis delves into various aspects of the feminist community on Tumblr, proposing that the site has become a location for feminist world-building (Connelly 2015). She describes female-to-female positivity, education and consciousness-raising, solidarity through ironic misandry, a focus on intersectionality, and community responses to anti-feminist content as key facets of the feminist community on Tumblr. Another broadly defined community that has gained attention on Tumblr is the queer community. One master's thesis uses ethnography to examine the way young queer Tumblr users form and work to maintain norms of "good politics", part of queer utopia-building online (Zamanian 2014). The author highlights careful identity presentation and the use of call-outs and compulsory trigger warnings intended to create safe spaces as key aspects of this community. Another article delves into trans culture on Tumblr, focusing on the period from March 2011 to May 2013, when Yahoo! acquired the site (Fink and Miller 2015). For trans Tumblr users whose bodies are often stigmatized offline, self-representation on Tumblr is a powerful act of collective resistance; these users engage with images of themselves and others online in opposition to heteronormative, cisgender-centric discourse. All of these users, many of whom are members of multiple such communities, use the site to connect with others who share their experiences and concerns. These experiences are often disregarded in mainstream society, but on Tumblr, users find like-minded communities that become support networks that are difficult or impossible to find offline.

A few descriptive works provide insight into how users interact on Tumblr. Chang et al. conduct a quantitative overview of Tumblr in comparison to other social networking sites using a sub-graph of the Tumblr social graph and a sample of more than 500 million posts from August 10 to September 6, 2013 (2014). They begin with a comparative discussion of the structure and layout of Tumblr as a microblogging site, noting the differences between Tumblr and Twitter, the most common microblogging platform. The most important distinctions are the lack of the famous constraint that limits Twitter posts to 140 characters or less, and the ability of Tumblr users to post images, videos, audio and gifs in addition to text. More than 78% of all Tumblr posts in this sample were image-based, meaning posts consisting entirely of images as well as images and reblogged commentary. Chang et al. also investigate follower reciprocity, post length, degree of separation among users, and the structure of the Tumblr reblog cascade, all details which will be useful in my upcoming analysis of the site (2014).

A conference paper presented at WebSci '14 by Xu et al. provides key insights into the way users interact on Tumblr. This work is another quantitative study drawing on four consecutive months of data for more than 23 million Tumblr users and their posts, over 10 billion of them (2014). The authors examine user behavior, the use of tags, and the reciprocity of the reblog network. The Tumblr reblog network is extensive; the vast majority—more than 90%—of posts on Tumblr are reblogs, not original content (Xu et al. 2014). Together, these two pieces provide a fairly robust quantitative depiction of the Tumblr user network and its activity. Tumblr is made up of millions of young users who, on

the whole, spend their time reblogging one another's images rather than posting original content.

How do Tumblr Users Encounter New Content?

At face value, Tumblr appears to have many similarities to other social media sites. However, some Tumblr users have a singular experience on the site through exposure to content they did not come to Tumblr looking to find. For some of these users, this content can lead to changes in their beliefs, viewpoints, or identities. My research asks what it is about Tumblr that makes this possible or likely. Through a survey of Tumblr users, computational analysis of Tumblr blogs, and semi-structured interviews, I use qualitative and quantitative methodologies to investigate what features of the Tumblr user experience make for an environment where users encounter content they did not come to the site to find.

I argue that the structure of Tumblr--both the technical affordances of the website and the social rules that have developed among users--combine to create an environment in which this kind of exposure takes place. My research indicates that the type of blogs users maintain and follow have a strong impact on their likelihood of encountering content they were not intending to engage with. Specifically, Tumblr use primarily leads to exposure to new content due to the widespread use of what I term 'personal blogs', blogs where users do not stick to a particular topic, but instead post whatever they feel drawn to, mainly by reblogging others' posts. Tumblr's technical structure makes the creation of these personal blogs straightforward, while the social norms that have developed on the site make users feel both safe and free from judgment when posting to these blogs.

Because the Tumblr dashboard is unfiltered and unsorted, users are shown a raw chronological feed of the posts of the blogs they follow on their dashboards. Thus, when users follow others' personal blogs, they are exposed to all of the content posted on those blogs, even when it may be unlike any content they have engaged with previously. In this way, Tumblr's technical affordances and the social norms that have developed around them have created an environment where, unlike in many other online spaces, users are likely to encounter ideas that are unlike their own.

Methods and Summary of Findings

My findings are based on significant original research. I conducted a qualitative survey, computational analysis of Tumblr posts, and semi-structured interviews. The survey offers insight into how a larger group of users describe their use of the site, the computational analysis, in combination with similar analyses conducted by others, gives concrete evidence of the ways users actually engage with the site and the kind of content they post, and the interviews offer the chance to understand how users attach meaning to their use of Tumblr.

Survey

The first component of original research was a survey disseminated through Google Forms. This survey was designed with multiple goals. The first was to verify that the phenomenon I am investigating is actually occurring for a substantial segment of Tumblr users; in other words, the survey was meant to gather evidence that conversation relating to social issues, current events, or identity was taking place on Tumblr, and that users who did not seek that conversation out were engaging with it in some way. As the survey was not representative of the entire user base of Tumblr, findings do not indicate that any particular percentage of users on the site as a whole engage in the behaviors reported; rather, they confirm that this phenomenon is a fairly common pattern, and begin to offer insight into how and why users engage with this content.

The other goals of the survey were to identify avenues of investigation to shape my interview protocol and further analysis, to identify interview subjects, and to generate a dataset of Tumblr blogs for computational analysis. To this end, the final questions of the

survey asked respondents to enter their email address if they were willing to be interviewed, and to enter up to eight blog URLs: their own primary and secondary blogs, three blogs they follow, and three blogs from which they often reblog.

The survey comprised five pages of questions, with an estimated completion time of about ten minutes. Questions began more broadly and became more specific over the course of the survey. The survey collected demographic information, general information about the way respondents use Tumblr, information about the way respondents use Tumblr in regard to “political issues or current events” and “social issues, activism, or identity,” and the effects of Tumblr on respondents’ understanding of political or social issues, and their understanding of their own identities. The full survey protocol is included in Appendix III.

The demographics of the Tumblr user base are not exactly known, because creating a Tumblr account does not require the user to enter demographic details. However, based on the Pew Research Center 2015 Mobile Messaging and Social Media survey, we can build a rough picture of the Tumblr user base: disproportionately younger than 29, and more likely to be urban than suburban or rural (16% of urban internet users use Tumblr, while only 8% of suburban users and 3% of rural users do) (Duggan 2015). In survey distribution and analysis, no attempt was made to gather a representative sample of all Tumblr users, or to analyze survey results as proportional to the entire user base. For this reason, my survey results do not indicate that these particular findings generalize across the site; rather, they provide evidence that some users are having the kinds of experiences I describe.

My distribution strategy focused on increasing response rate, to gain as wide a distribution as possible. To do this, I employed various strategies to distribute the link to the survey to potential respondents, including posting to college email groups at Wellesley and MIT and posting to social media pages on Facebook, on certain subreddits, and on Tumblr itself. The closing page of the survey encouraged respondents to distribute the link to the survey in their networks, and I know of at least two survey respondents who shared the link on their own Tumblr blogs. To encourage participation, users were given the opportunity to enter their email address in a separate Google Form (to preserve anonymity) to be entered to win one of three \$50 Amazon gift cards. The survey was open from March 20 - April 16, 2016, and the final total was 264 respondents.

Computational Analysis

Though not all of the 264 original respondents volunteered blog URLs, the survey generated a dataset of 730 unique blogs from which to scrape data. Using the Tumblr API, I scraped the most recent twenty posts from each of these blogs, generating a dataset of posts that includes a timestamp of posting, the type of post, the tags, and the number of notes the post had achieved at the time of sampling. The data was taken from the blogs on May 16, 2016.

Interviews

From those who indicated a willingness to be interviewed on the survey, I arranged interviews with thirteen subjects. Interviewees were twelve Wellesley College students and one other subject; the twelve Wellesley students were American and the other interview subject was Russian. Eight subjects were cisgender women, four were gender

nonbinary, and one was agender. Six subjects were white, three were Asian-American, two were Latinx, one was Black, and one subject was of mixed race. Four interview subjects were straight, while nine were not, reflecting the approximate percentages found through the survey. Non-straight sexual orientations included lesbian, bisexual, homoromantic, asexual, and panromantic.

Interview subjects also described a wide variety of experiences on Tumblr and reasons for joining the site in the first place. The contents of the subjects' Tumblr blogs were varied, though many users primarily used a personal blog. Users were followed by varying amounts of people, ranging from less than 100 followers to close to 4000 followers.

Interviews were conducted in person or over Skype and recorded, then transcribed later. Interviews averaged about 45 minutes in length, but ran from 27 minutes to 1 hour and 23 minutes. I conducted semi-structured interviews, with a baseline interview protocol and follow-up questions that differed by subject. Similar to the design of the survey, the interview protocol began with more general questions about the subject's Tumblr use, then narrowed to questions about social issues, activism, and identity. The full interview protocol is included in Appendix III.

Summary of Survey Findings

Demographics

264 people responded to my survey. Respondents were mostly female or gender nonbinary, as shown in the following chart:

Cisgender woman	200	77.8%
Transgender woman	0	0%
Cisgender man	15	5.8%
Transgender man	6	2.3%
Gender nonbinary, nonconforming, or genderqueer	22	8.6%
Agender	5	1.9%
Other	9	3.5%

Responses for 'Other' included 'Demifemale', 'Demigirl', 'Questioning', 'no idea', and 'nonbinary woman-aligned.'

Although the largest group of respondents, 40%, identified as 'heterosexual', the majority of respondents were non-straight (LGBQ, asexual, or other).

Heterosexual	103	39.9%
Lesbian	33	12.8%
Gay	18	7%
Bisexual	62	24%
Queer	55	21.3%
Asexual	40	15.5%
Aromantic	8	3.1%
Other	18	7%

Common responses for 'Other' included 'Demisexual', 'Pansexual', and 'Questioning.'

Respondents racial backgrounds' were somewhat varied, with whites and Asians heavily represented:

American Indian or Alaska Native	4	1.6%
Asian	70	27.1%
Black	9	3.5%
Latinx/Latin@	24	9.3%
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	0	0%
White	179	69.4%
Other	14	5.4%

Respondents were mostly American, with 221 stating that their permanent address was in the United States. The other respondents were of 19 other nationalities, including eight Canadian and four Indonesian respondents.

Survey respondents were mostly young, with the most commonly represented ages between 18 and 24, with 62 19-year-olds comprising the most represented age group. Respondents' ages ranged from 13 to 46 years old.

Age at time of survey

13-17	13	5.1%
18-19	102	40.3%
20-21	70	27.7%
22-23	35	13.8%
24-25	17	6.7%
26-46	16	6.3%

The ages that respondents most commonly first created their Tumblr accounts was between ages 13 and 18, with 48 respondents creating their first account at age 15.

Age when first created an account on Tumblr

12-13	30	11.8%
14-15	85	33.5%
16-17	67	26.4%
18-19	37	14.6%
20-21	16	6.3%
22-40	18	7.1%

The demographics of the respondents demonstrate the limited reach of my survey, disseminated as it was among the Wellesley College community and other nearby networks to which I had access. Though not all respondents were Wellesley College students, many were⁴, and others were likely connected to that original network. For this

⁴ As the survey was anonymous unless respondents chose to provide their emails to be contacted for interviews, I cannot determine exactly how many respondents were Wellesley College students; I estimate around 70% of respondents were current or former Wellesley students, but it is impossible to be sure.

reason, my response population skews heavily female and nonbinary, young, with some college education and a current residence in New England. This likely affects the content that the respondents are exposed to and engage with on Tumblr; however, I argue that the structural features of the site that create an environment within which users are exposed to new content influence the user experience in ways that apply to most or all users of the site, regardless of demographics or interests.

Tumblr Use

Respondents joined Tumblr for two main reasons: their friends or peers had one, or they wanted to engage with a specific kind of content, often centered around a particular form of media. The most common reason given was that a friend or someone else known to the respondent had a Tumblr account and encouraged or otherwise influenced the respondent to create their own account; 117 respondents reported this reason for joining the site. 55 respondents joined the site to find specific content, perhaps coming from elsewhere online that linked back to Tumblr. Other respondents simply wanted to create a blog.

A plurality of respondents, 101, only had 1 blog on Tumblr, while 69 respondents had two blogs, 40 had three, and 43 had four or more.

Respondents were asked to “Describe the content of your primary blog” in an open-ended response. After coding these responses, three main types of blogs were identified: personal blogs⁵, special interest blogs, and aesthetic blogs⁶.

⁵ My use of the term ‘personal blog’ for this type of blog comes from general use on Tumblr itself. As evidenced in my survey responses, users use the term ‘personal’ for blogs they use mostly for themselves, though the content may be primarily reblogged.

Personal blogs (176 respondents, 67.7%): These blogs are used to aggregate any and all content that the user enjoys. They normally do not have a designated theme; rather, the content posted on a personal blog will vary according to the user's current interests.

Personal blogs are primarily for the user's own enjoyment and not necessarily oriented toward followers; users tend to feel relative freedom to post whatever they want on these blogs, and the type of content posted can vary widely. See Figures 3-5 in Appendix II for examples of personal blogs.

"It's a hodge-podge of things that I find interesting: some fandoms, language-learning, politics, art, and other things"

"A lot of pictures and photography, personal thoughts, some social justice-y stuff, lots of music references"

"My primary blog is best described as personal. It mainly consists of reblogged posts that I like or agree with, which range from fanart to photos of cats, various jokes, and text posts. Overall, it is very much a fandom-oriented blog, however."

"Anything and everything that I like! Oftentimes it is photosets/gifsets, inspirational quotes/stories, funny anecdotes, fan art, music I like, and lame puns/jokes."

Special interest blogs (29 respondents, 11%): These blogs are focused on a certain topic, and users tend not to stray from that topic in the content that they post. These blogs may or may not be oriented toward followers, and the type of content posted will depend on the topic the blog is focused on. See Appendix II, Figure 6 for an example of a special interest blog.

"It's a popular news / updates blog on one member in a kpop group."

"Fanart from anime and video games"

"Health and food related"

⁶ Similarly, 'aesthetic' has a particular meaning on Tumblr, referring to image-centric blogs that follow a certain visual theme or style. I use these terms in order to adhere most closely to the ways Tumblr users describe their own blogs.

Aesthetic blogs (22 respondents, 8.3%): Similar to special interest blogs, these blogs are focused around a particular theme. However, these blogs tend to focus on the look of the blog and fitting content into a particular “aesthetic”, a style or theme, rather than posting content related to a particular topic. Posts on aesthetic blogs are mainly images, even more so than on other types of blogs. See Appendix II, Figure 7 for an example of an aesthetic blog.

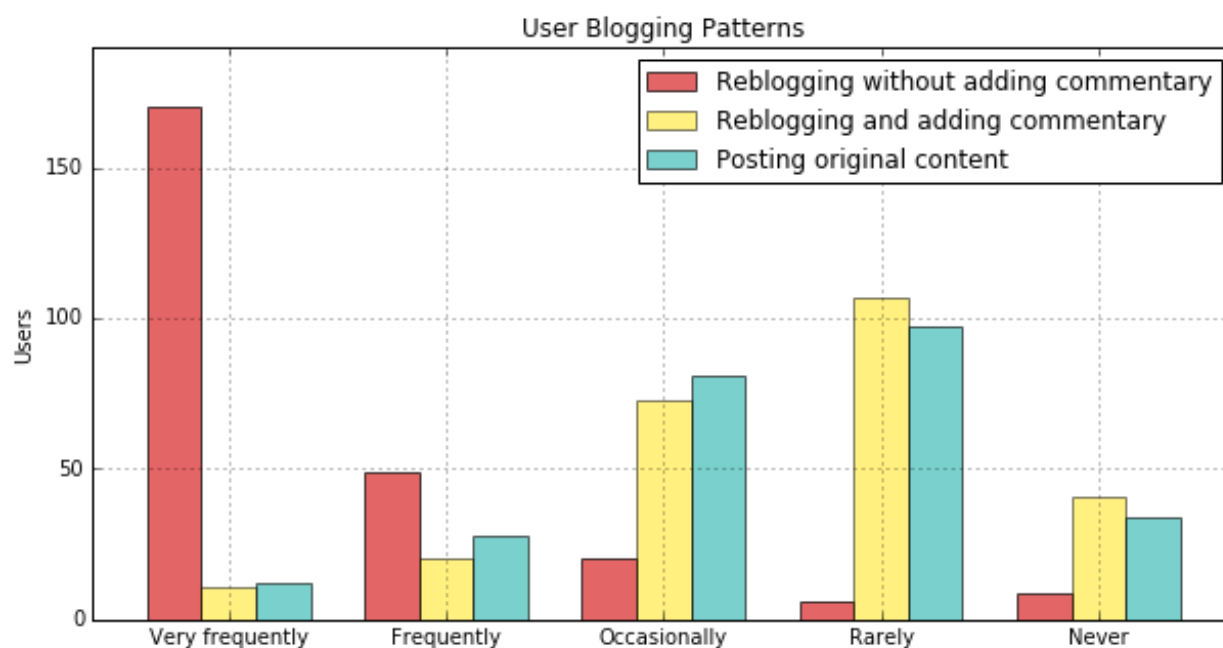
“Just simple aesthetic photos”

“artsy photographs”

“Mostly photos not taken by me that match my aesthetic. I don't really incorporate things I find funny or many personal posts.”

Respondents use their blogs mainly to reblog content posted by others, far less frequently adding commentary or posting original content. 85.2% of users surveyed reblogged content posted by others “Very frequently” or “Frequently,” while only 12.1% reblogged and added their own commentary “Very frequently” or “Frequently”.

When you use Tumblr, how often do you engage in the following activities?



Engagement with Political and Social Content

Respondents report occasionally reblogging political or social content others have posted and less frequently adding their own commentary. They are much more likely to reblog political or social content posted by others without adding to the post, and to view political or social content in their dashboards without posting it to their blogs.

Respondents rarely post original political or social content; the engagement patterns for this type of content are similar to the patterns found for content as a whole.

When asked what specific issues they engage with on Tumblr, respondents volunteered a variety of responses⁷, with 'feminism' most commonly stated:

What specific political and social issues do you engage with most frequently on Tumblr?

feminism	75 mentions
racism/race	74
rights	47
gender	46
lgbtq/lgbt	40

The majority (70.5%) of respondents said that their understanding of political or social issues had changed as a result of being on Tumblr. When asked how that understanding had changed, respondents discussed increased awareness of the issues listed above and exposure to topics they were not exposed to elsewhere in life.

Approximately half (49.6%) of respondents said that their understanding of their own identity had changed as a result of being on Tumblr. After coding responses, I identified three thematic categories: those who had experienced a change in their

⁷ At the time of data collection in the spring of 2016, the US presidential primaries were taking place. Terms including 'presidential' and 'election' were commonly brought up, but I expect these and related terms would have featured much more heavily in my responses if the survey were released later that year or early in 2017.

understanding of their own gender or sexual orientation, those who experienced increased awareness of activism and social issues, and those who experienced a change in their understanding of their race, culture, or ethnic identity. These changes, reflecting the complex identities they describe, often intersect.

Gender or sexual orientation: 77 respondents

"i've become more comfortable with just identifying as "queer" or pansexual, because i feel like my sexuality is fluid and i've learned through tumblr and hearing about others' experiences that that's normal"

"I didn't know what a nonbinary identity was before I joined tumblr, and after learning about it figured out that I was nonbinary; in addition, it made me much more comfortable in my bisexuality."

"Before I was on tumblr I had pretty standard southern-middle-schooler attitudes toward LGBT+ issues--that is, I was casually homophobic and transphobic, largely because I really didn't know anything about these groups and so had a very skewed idea of what they were like and what they entailed. As I followed more LGBT+ bloggers and interacted with more of their content, however, I was able to better understand these communities and therefore able to critically examine my own sexuality and gender identity in ways that I wouldn't have thought to before."

"The best example would be the discovery of the asexual community. I originally found it through a personal blog and then read more about it, which led me to the conclusion that I was asexual. I suppose it has given me a bit more confidence because I am starting to be at peace with who I am."

Activism and awareness of social issues: 17 respondents

"I call myself a feminist!"

"as a preteen, race issues and sexism didn't matter to me so much, and as I've grown older (and spent more time on Tumblr), they've become more noticeable problems to be in the real world; I've also learned the responsibility of calling out anti-blackness in Asian communities, which I used to think unnecessary because Asians are a small minority"

"I'm a minority and I am oppressed. I used to believe the model minority myth, and didn't realize all the subtle oppressive structures and behaviors that are pretty much everywhere. I'm also racist, sexist, ableist, etc. because I grew up in a society that is all of those things, and it's not a bad thing as long as I'm aware and am working to correct myself."

Race, culture, or ethnic identity: 7 respondents

"I was able to connect with more people from my cultures which is really important to me because I haven't been able to go back to my homelands for a long time."

"Well now I see how my race, white, has given me enormous privilege in the past."

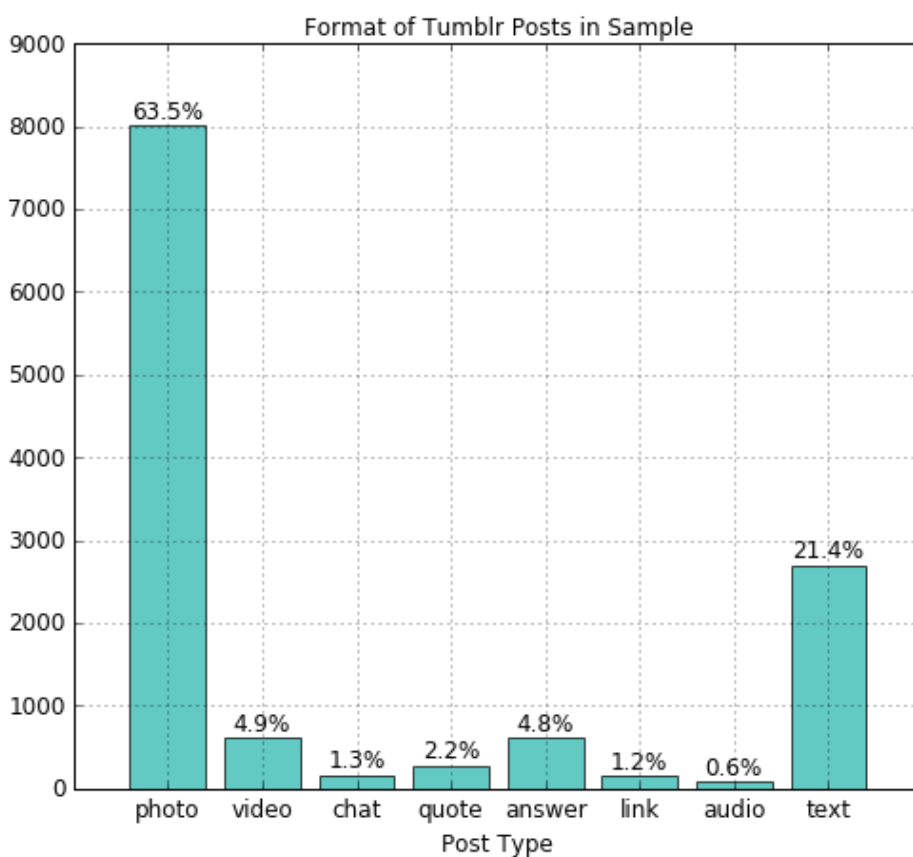
“I was raised with internalized racism, misogyny, and homophobia. I now embrace who I am: a queer Latina woman with beautiful brown skin.”

“It made me more open to a side of my blackness that I never thought was cool to show to other people, and has also helped me explore other parts of myself that I maybe wouldn’t have been comfortable exploring in other places.”

Summary of Computational Analysis

My computational analysis of the 730 blogs yielded a dataset consisting of more than 12,000 individual blog posts. Analysis of this data provides insight into the use of Tumblr by survey respondents and those in their networks. In general, these findings reflect the use patterns found by Chang et al. and Xu et al. (2014, 2014).

This sample is mostly images and text posts.



Many of the most commonly used tags in this sample relate to the type of post or other metadata about the post, rather than its specific content. Tags like this are used by Tumblr users to categorize posts based on type according to the tags. Common tags unrelated to content include #anonymous (used to label a question asked anonymously), #queue, #submission, #photo, and #video. Other commonly used tags describe the actual content of the post: #art, #fashion, #cute, #food.

To get a sense of the frequency of reblogging within this sample, we can examine the notes, which tally the sum of the post's likes and reblogs. Posts in the sample have a wide range of notes, from 0 to over 4 million.

<i>Number of Notes per Post</i>	
0-24	1598 posts
25-99	1180
100-499	1824
500-999	962
1000-4999	2106
5000-19,999	1543
20,000-99,999	1707
100,000-5 million	1699

In this sample, there are similar amounts of posts with between 0 and 24 notes and between 100,000 and 5 million notes. This indicates the high frequency of reblogging that occurs on Tumblr, and the overall reblog pattern: some posts that are created do not circulate very far from their place of origin, amassing relatively few notes. A somewhat smaller number of posts are extremely popular, and circulate among scores of blogs, amassing millions of likes and reblogs. Thus, when viewing a Tumblr dashboard or blog, most posts that appear are reblogs, not original content.

Technical Affordances of tumblr.com

The technical constraints of the Tumblr website and of the Internet as a whole create a set of binding frameworks within which all social interaction on the site takes place. This is a key difference between online and offline human engagement. Social action within human societies in the physical world is governed by rules, but these rules are not fixed or binding in a true sense. They may be enforced by law and state-legitimated violence, explained as part of an unbreakable moral code, or enact harsh social punishments on those who stray from them, but the sanctions of everyday life are technically breakable, though breaking social rules may lead to consequences (Giddens 1979). By contrast, without another user's password, a Tumblr user simply cannot use the site to post to another's blog; the constraints of the site prevent this action. This constraint is more comparable to the human constraint of being unable to walk through walls than to a social rule, which is reconstituted through social reproduction (Giddens 1984). For this reason, I rely on the concept of affordances, or "the particular properties or characteristics of an [online or offline] environment that...make possible...certain types of practices, even if they do not determine what practices will unfold" (boyd 2014:10). Giddens's stipulation about material constraints applies equally well to the constructed world of bytes; both material constraints and technical affordances are "enabling as well as constraining", encouraging some practices while making others impossible (1984:175).

Just as physical limitations and abilities affects the way humans interact with one another in social settings, the technical affordances of a website affect the social norms that develop on the site. These rules operate similarly to the rules that bind our offline

interactions, according to the duality of structure: they are drawn upon by actors in choosing a course of action, and in these choices, rules are reinforced (Giddens 1979). These social rules, many of which stem from the technical constraints of the Tumblr site, act in combination with these affordances to create the social framing through which a user views her dashboard, posts to her blog, or messages other users. Thus, to understand Tumblr use, we need to understand both the relevant affordances and the social norms that have developed within the structure created by those affordances.

Certain affordances of Tumblr, in contrast to those of other social media sites, create a space in which users encounter content they are not looking for. I identify four key sets of features of the site stemming directly from its technical design that contribute to users experiencing this exposure. First, Tumblr lacks features that encourage users to construct their Tumblr networks as a mirror of their offline social network. Secondly, posting to a Tumblr blog does not necessarily invite response and feedback in the same way that posting to other social media sites does; based on various features of the site, the user experience on Tumblr is more decentralized and less social than on other popular online social media. Third, Tumblr's design creates an easy, low-risk way to curate a blog through the technical ease of reblogging and adding tags. Finally, a Tumblr blog is nearly infinitely customizable, a wide variety of formats of posts are allowed, and each user has complete control over the content that appears on her blog. Due to these affordances and the social norms that have developed around and because of them, many Tumblr users experience the site as a fairly solitary space, creating personal blogs that reflect their own interests without much concern for the judgments of others.

Tumblr accounts are not necessarily related to one's offline persona; the technical constraints of the site do not force users to reveal any identifying information. Other social network sites, most notably Facebook, have attempted to enforce a real name policy for users. Facebook's policy was altered in 2015 in response to protest by members of the LGBTQ community, Native Americans, and others; Facebook now employs an "authentic name" policy, under which one can verify one's authentic name through a government-issued ID, a bank statement, or a piece of mail--all evidence from the offline world (Hern 2015). Facebook's network is clearly intended to be tied to one's offline social network; when one joins the site, one is presented with "People You May Know": classmates, coworkers, and others Facebook guesses the new user has known in real life. According to José Van Dijk, however, this insistence on one uniform, authentic, "real" self across multiple platforms is unrealistic; to navigate various social spheres, we shape our identities differently depending on the social context (2013). The social context that the affordances of Facebook create is a collapsed context of people from various areas of a user's life, encompassing friends, classmates, and relatives, and Facebook users employ various strategies to navigate Facebook as a networked public (boyd 2014).

In contrast to Facebook, Tumblr makes no attempt to tie the user to an offline identity. When signing up, new users must choose a username that will also serve as their blog URL via `username.tumblr.com`. If the new user has trouble coming up with a username, Tumblr will suggest some: "KawaiiCollectorNinja," "SwimmingTragedyDonut." Clearly, Tumblr does not prioritize tying users to their real names or other identifying information; all that is necessary to create an account is an email address. Users can have

multiple, separate Tumblr blogs where they curate varied personas, and the technical affordances of the site do not compel users to connect their online personas to their offline selves. This is reflected in the networks that users construct on Tumblr: every user I interviewed interacted with just a handful of peers that they know in real life on Tumblr, and these connections form only a small minority of the total number of connections these users have on Tumblr. Thus, while Tumblr is a public website, and by default, Tumblr blogs are accessible to anyone with an internet connection, the networks formed on Tumblr tend not to reflect users' offline relationships in the same way that other sites characterized as networked publics do (boyd 2014). In this way, Tumblr more closely approximates Simmel's metropolis (1903), where actors are "free" from the limitations of engaging with those they know in real life, as opposed to the small town of Facebook, where all of one's peers and relatives are liable to see and enter any public interaction.

The way users interact with Tumblr is also decentralized from a central social experience; the visual and experiential focus of the site on the user's unique dashboard creates a user experience that can be fairly solitary, even as users interact with others' posts. Tumblr, while certainly containing social aspects, is not as focused on the interactions between users as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, or Reddit⁸. These social networking sites are centered around social interaction, where every action of posting a status, changing a profile picture, or commenting on another user's post is a public act of social positioning. According to boyd and Ellison's definition, Tumblr is not a true social

⁸ Reddit introduced user profiles and the ability to follow other users, necessary components of social networking sites, in March 2017, with rollout only to certain high-profile users (boyd 2010, Lunden 2017). However, due to the forum-based framework of Reddit, the site is inherently social; any post a user makes is immediately subject to scrutiny by others.

networking site, because users cannot traverse others' lists of followers and those they are following (2013). This deemphasizes the importance of cultivating a following, as demonstrated through a comparison of Instagram profiles and Tumblr blogs: the number of Instagram followers is featured prominently at the top of one's profile, while Tumblr does not allow users to see other users' followers counts or lists⁹. Though certainly a social website, the affordances of Tumblr allow many users to engage with the site without feeling much social pressure. Indeed, one user I interviewed described Tumblr as "self-centered, because you're centered around your blog, and you follow other people and you interact with other people, but in the end you're creating your profile and your blog which is what you like."

Instead of interacting publicly with others or jockeying for accolades on their posts, users tend to focus on curating their own Tumblr blogs. This focus on creating a blog as an expressive outlet is a key difference from social networks like Facebook, Twitter, or Reddit, which are more focused on interactions between users, and offer little to no customization options for user profiles. Tumblr's founder, David Karp, highlighted this difference between Tumblr and other social sites in an interview, saying,

Tumblr is very much about creative expression, and sort of limitless creative expression...You can share anything, and I think if you compare it to Twitter or Facebook today, you realize that...there is some creative expression that can come through in those Timelines or those feeds, [but] they're not tools built for creative expression (Schonfeld 2011).

Facebook Timelines can only be customized in a very limited way within Facebook's set parameters, and content posted by others is featured heavily on users'

⁹ Users who do want to display their followers on their blog can do so using certain themes or custom HTML, but the feature is not standard.

Timelines; the default privacy settings on Facebook do not check with a user before displaying posts or photos posted by others on that user's Timeline and in their friends' feeds. By contrast, Tumblr blogs can be customized in nearly infinite ways; users can choose from a variety of preset themes, or edit the HTML of their blog themselves, changing the background, the format in which posts appear, and adding a description, links, or anything else they want to include. A wide variety of content, from images and videos to audio, GIFs, and text without a character limit, can be easily posted to any blog on Tumblr. Furthermore, nothing will be posted on a Tumblr blog without that user actively posting it through a reblog or an original post. Thus, users can completely control the narratives on their blogs. This works both to disincentivize trolling and negative comments, and to contribute to the experience of curating a Tumblr blog as a personal, creative experience (Renninger 2015). The technical framework of Tumblr requires users to create their own blogs in order to express themselves on the site; the social aspects of Tumblr are not as integral as they are on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, or Reddit. One user described her experience on Tumblr: "Obviously I'm interacting with other users but [it is] kind of more personal because it's my blog and I'm controlling the content, and kind of figuring out myself as opposed to trying to like prove myself to other people."

Though Tumblr use is centered around creating blogs, Tumblr still contains social elements that set it apart from traditional blogging platforms such as WordPress. The page that functions as the center of Tumblr interaction on the website and the mobile app is the dashboard¹⁰, not the user's individual blog. From the dashboard, Tumblr makes

¹⁰ See Appendix II, Figure 1 for a screenshot of the Tumblr dashboard.

viewing, liking, and reblogging others' posts quick and seamless. This contributes to the high rates of reblogs on the site: a 2014 analysis found that 93.2% of posts on the site are reblogs, rather than original posts (Xu et al. 2014). Other blogging sites similarly create a customizable archive that can be seen as a form of self-representation, but when each post must be original, adding to one's blog requires more active participation and risk. Design features of traditional blogging platforms tend to encourage more lengthy, polished pieces as the typical post. Simply put, this is a lot of work, and many casual Internet users are not prepared to put in the ongoing time and effort necessary to maintain a long-form blog (Schonfeld 2011). By encouraging relatively passive, easy expression through reblogging and shorter posts, Tumblr's technical apparatus allows users to curate their own particular flow with a relatively low barrier to creative expression.

Even beyond reblogging, Tumblr includes features that lower the perceived risk of posting even further by providing different levels of engagement when posting to a Tumblr blog. When a user reblogs a post, they have the option to add directly to the body of the post. If this post is then reblogged from them, their addition will stay on the post. However, the user also has the option to leave the body of the original post as is, and instead add their own commentary in the tags, which are visible to their own followers, but will not stay with the post if it is reblogged beyond that first directly linked layer of their network. Visually, tags feature less prominently on followers' dashboards than direct additions: the text of tags is smaller and contrasts less with the background, and only a

limited number of tags are displayed by default. The existence of these various levels of engagement shapes the way users perceive their own and others' actions.

All of the technical affordances of the Tumblr site encourage or enforce the use of Tumblr in particular ways, and affect the social norms that have developed among users to further govern Tumblr society. Decentralized, semi-social activity, a focus on creating an infinitely customizable blog, and the ease of adding to one's blog all allow Tumblr users to create personal blogs where they can post and reblog whatever they want, and feel relatively free to do so without pressure to please others or fear of judgement. In the next chapter, I turn toward describing the particular social norms that have grown within these affordances to contribute to users' curation of personal blogs that lead their followers to encounter diverse content.

Socially Constructed Rules of Interaction

The affordances of Tumblr allow and disallow certain uses of the site, influencing the social norms that have developed in Tumblr society. These norms are not true constraints, but nonetheless influence users' behavior heavily, just as social rules operate as "informally applied sanctions," not codified in law or physically prescriptive but still governing all aspects of offline daily life (Giddens 1984). The social rules I identify here are likely not universal across Tumblr, but they constitute general patterns; furthermore, they are recognized and adhered to by different users to varying degrees, just as social rules in society govern actors' behavior to varying degrees according to their social positioning.

I have identified various affordances of the Tumblr site that affect the way users interact with the site and with each other. These affordances work in combination with the social norms and shared understandings that have developed on the site to create a social environment in which exposure to new ideas is commonplace, through the prevalence of personal blogs and the unfiltered dashboard. Now I trace how specific technical affordances promote social rules that encourage and discourage various ways of using the site, based on users' explanations of their own Tumblr use.

First, the technical framing of Tumblr as a not-so-social social media creates less social pressure for many users; they feel comfortable posting whatever they want on their personal blogs, which they curate primarily for themselves. The existence and ease of reblogging and of various levels of active, public participation through tags contributes to the readiness and informality that users feel about posting on Tumblr, increasing their engagement with the site and willingness to share. Finally, the construction of Tumblr as

decidedly not a reflection of one's offline connections creates a sense of perceived anonymity for many users, even as they know they are on a public website; this perception promotes vulnerability about topics that feel risky to discuss in other spaces. This comfort, low-risk participation, and perceived anonymity create an environment in which users curate personal blogs that they feel are accurate representations of their true selves, without much outside pressure to post certain content. Users also feel more comfortable posting about sensitive topics on Tumblr than on other, more public-seeming social media sites (Renninger 2015).

This is not true for all users; this relatively free-form, sometimes confessional use of the site is most common on what I characterize as personal blogs; some users maintain blogs that are more focused on a set theme or on the social aspects of Tumblr. Nonetheless, with the prevalence of personal blogs, users that follow others will likely be following at least some blogs of this type. Because the Tumblr dashboard stream is not filtered or edited, followers see everything a user posts on their personal blog, regardless of whether or not that content is what they were intending to see when they joined Tumblr or followed that user.

Due to the aspects of Tumblr that make the user experience less social, posting to a blog on Tumblr is not characterized as an act of public presentation for many users; users tend to feel that others can choose to look at their posts and choose to follow them, or not. As one user who maintains a personal blog with about 250 followers says, "I don't go on Tumblr to post for others, I go on Tumblr to just like shit that I like or whatever, and I don't need people coming on my shit judging me." Posting to one's own blog is often

experienced as a fairly solitary action. This action may or may not influence others or bring about continued interaction; that isn't the point.

Multiple interview subjects described this experience of Tumblr as a private space where they can express their thoughts and feelings for themselves. One user said, "I could rant about whatever I want and not really like care so much if people really needed to hear, but I could put it out there". Another user described their use of their personal blog: "Sometimes I just kind of like talk to nobody in particular, just like as if you're standing in a room kind of talking to yourself". This user knows their blog has followers, but describes posting to their blog as "talking to yourself." It is highly unlikely that most Facebook users would characterize posting to their Facebook Timelines in this way. Technically, a Tumblr blog is just as public as a Facebook Timeline, if not more so, but the social aspects of Tumblr feel deemphasized for many users, who treat the site as an "online diary" of sorts.

There is a social aspect to Tumblr to be sure, but it is not integral to every user's experience. Reblogging another's post is understood more as an act of curating one's own blog with the chosen content, as opposed to an interaction with another user, even though it could be understood in that way under the technical allowances of the site. Similarly, posting to one's personal blog, even though users know they have followers, is for many users a more personal experience, rather than a social act of presentation performed with followers in mind. As one user said, "Tumblr is just kind of like chucking things into the void, I just need this to go somewhere so I'm putting it here." For many users' personal blogs, there is an understanding that people can choose to follow, or not, and users care

less about the number of followers they have on these blogs than on blogs with a strictly defined theme or focus. For one user:

[Tumblr is] so faceless, and you don't know who's seeing what. It's kind of this realm of less judgment I guess, just in the fact that you can just blather on and do whatever the heck you care to do, and there's nobody who's gonna be able to stop you, it's just gonna happen regardless. So like there's people out there [on Tumblr], but if it's not support that you receive in response then it's probably not worth your time...the thing is, it's like a way to be social without having to be social.

For many users, having “a way to be social without having to be social” is one of their favored aspects of Tumblr, and they take advantage of this perception to be creative and express themselves.

The ease by which one can create a unique blog based entirely or almost entirely on content posted originally by other people encourages self-expression on the site by lowering the perceived risk of participation. Users curate blogs primarily through reblogging, and often express their own reactions to posts through tags, rather than by adding directly to posts. Nearly all users interviewed expressed a strong aversion to adding directly to posts, preferring instead to put their reactions or thoughts in the tags. Of those users surveyed, 85.2% said that they reblogged content posted by others “Very frequently” or “Frequently,” while only 12.1% said that they reblogged content posted by others and added their own commentary “Very frequently” or “Frequently”.

Users who prefer tags only add directly to the post if they feel their addition is a meaningful contribution. As one user explained,

I never ever add something to something I reblog, ever. Because that just is like, I don't know, I feel like it's taboo, I feel like I usually don't like it when people add things unless they're like really well thought out additions...But the tags allow me to both have my own commentary on it without being very intrusive, and you know, people can choose to look at the tags or just scroll right past.

Another user echoed this feeling that adding commentary to others' posts is "intrusive":

Most of the time if I tag something I just like to talk in the tags...because then it's like I kinda get to comment on it but you know, not really commenting on it because you don't do that, that's kind of like, distasteful to do that unless you have something really valuable to say. I think it's a little bit egotistical to comment on everything you reblog, like, you have 25 followers, who's gonna see that. So you just like comment in the tags because then people will see it, but it's not presuming that you have something so important that the OP [original poster] will see it.

These descriptions of adding commentary--"taboo," "distasteful"--indicate the social norms that have developed among Tumblr users regarding the different possible levels of engagement allowed by the site's technical affordances. The site offers multiple options when reblogging. Users act according to social rules governing the meanings of those options, and in doing so, reproduce those rules. The tagging feature of Tumblr allows for a feeling of increased privacy within the relative privacy of perceived anonymity, as one user explained: "Instead of posting a lot of text, like I would post tags because then you can't see any text so only your followers can see it". The relatively passive nature of reblogging and adding tags, compared to reblogging and adding directly to the post, makes users feel that much of their activity on their personal blogs on Tumblr is both informal and relatively private.

Finally, an important factor in the shared feeling of privacy on Tumblr is the perceived anonymity due to the lack of many offline connections to the site. Though it is possible to link Tumblr blogs to other online social media, users who have accounts on Tumblr and on other social media sites tend to keep their Tumblr accounts separate from

their other accounts. They may bring content from their other accounts onto their Tumblr blogs, but it is rare for them to share content from Tumblr on other sites, or to publicize their Tumblr URLs via other social media accounts. For many users, this separation is due to the different audiences that they perceive on Tumblr versus other social media sites, one user said:

I don't have Facebook involved with my Tumblr at all, like I don't even link it...I do have my Instagram linked but only where, from Instagram it posts to Tumblr, and I'm not like posting stuff from my Tumblr to my Instagram, so I keep that separately too...But yeah, I actively keep that separation only because I know that my like, the Tumblr me is very open about certain things that I wouldn't want to necessarily discuss in real life so I don't want my like, real life people finding out about my Tumblr life.

Users with personal blogs that they feel are reflective of aspects of their identity often work hard to ensure separation between those blogs and most of the people they interact with in daily life. One user feels that her Facebook profile, because she is friends with her relatives and other people she interacts with offline, is a less genuine representation of her personality:

Facebook is more of like an even more constructed version of myself, where only like, appropriate and like, school appropriate kind of things [are on my Facebook] 'cause like my family's on there; and then Tumblr is more like the nerdier, friends-only version of me so I want to keep them kind of separate.

Another user experienced an unintended breach of this separation when their cousin made a Tumblr account and discovered their blog. They explained,

That's actually accidentally how I came out to my cousin...a month or so ago he got a Tumblr, and he asked for my URL. And I was all set to give him the URL of my side blog because that one isn't connected to real me, and I wasn't out to him as nonbinary, and I wasn't planning on coming out to him as nonbinary, but he apparently remembered the title of my blog and Googled that and found me and he was like, "They, them, theirs?", and I was like, "Fun fact about me?!"

Because of the separation between the self this user presents to their family and the “real me” they reveal on Tumblr, they did not intend to grant their cousin access to their primary Tumblr blog. However, the cousin knew the blog’s URL, and was able to find the blog anyway; after all, Tumblr blogs are public websites that anyone with an internet connection can access, with the right search terms. In this awkward meeting of spaces that were designed to be kept separate, this user had to navigate the sharing of potentially sensitive information, and control its spread: “I kind of explicitly said, like, ‘Hey, can you just not address it, and not tell your parents about it, and not tell my parents about it’”. Users work to maintain the privacy of their blogs from certain figures in their offline lives. This is one of the fundamental seeming contradictions of online social life: people want privacy, but are perfectly comfortable posting personal information to a public website where ostensibly anyone can access it. In fact, these users only want privacy from those whom they interact with in daily life, and Tumblr is a space where they feel this privacy is intact.

Indeed, the perceived anonymity of Tumblr is one of the key reasons users feel comfortable revealing personal or sensitive information on the site. One user described how for her, vulnerability online feels safer than offline:

People are so much more open on [Tumblr] than they are in real life...I think it’s part of the anonymity aspect of it, like people are more willing to talk about things and share things that could be considered embarrassing... You can share things without feeling like, ‘I have to see these people again the next day, so anything I share will impact me for the rest of forever with these people.’... It’s just this kind of environment where you can be a little more open with a little less stigma. And it’s one of those things where if you share something to like just a general group of people then you’re being very vulnerable, it’s a very vulnerable thing. But if you go on the Internet and do it, people don’t have to read what you post.

For another user,

I think on Tumblr, people are just a lot more upfront and a lot more like, just talk talk talk, whereas in real life I think a lot of people are just kind of like, testing the waters and a little bit afraid to express their true opinion...I think sometimes when you're just feeling clammed up and just kind of like, can't handle people right now...I think it's just very conducive to just like, letting your thoughts exist.

Many users on Tumblr view the site as relatively private, safe, and separate from most of their offline connections. They can easily curate a blog through reblogging, and tend not to take these blogs or their content too seriously, posting whatever they like and expressing their own thoughts through tags. Users customize their blogs and content in endless ways, curating their own unique flow made up mostly of others' original images and their own personal touches. For these users, their blogs are personal blogs, where they tend to not feel any outside pressure to stick to a certain type of content or please their followers. Many of these users see their personal blogs as a reflection of their selves, their identities and interests. Speaking about her personal blog, one interview subject described its content: "My primary blog is anything I see that I like, like anything at all". Another described their blog as "an accurate representation of my personality...who are you really? Look at my Tumblr, this is me...me at my purest form."

Not all blogs on Tumblr are personal blogs like this, and the experiences of users curating a personal blog are very different to users' experiences curating other types of blogs. When users gain large amounts of followers or are actively seeking to gain followers, they focus more on the social aspects of Tumblr and the reactions of their followers to their posts, instead of posting only for themselves. Users with blogs that are focused on a particular aesthetic or a specific topic also tend to feel more constrained to

conform to a certain set of content. One user who had amassed nearly 4000 followers on the site at one time acknowledged the existence of personal blogs, but explained that she could not see herself using the site in that way:

Some people don't care about [the look and aesthetic of their blog] that much and they just post what they enjoy which is really really good, but...when I was most addicted to it I guess like it was because oh I have the freedom to post whatever I want, but now like I think I can never go back to that, like I can never have an ugly blog.

This user is much more focused on the visual appeal of her blog than most people who operate personal blogs; she characterizes a blog where “I have the freedom to post whatever I want” as an “ugly blog.” Another user who previously had more than 2000 followers on a blog that her mother made her delete discussed the different ways she used the site on her old and new blogs. She previously focused more on self-promotion and the look of her blog, but now with a personal blog, she feels less pressure to post for others: “Way back when I had more followers... I was a lot more strict about like coming up with an aesthetic for the blog but now it's like more for me, it's like a mood board.” With the social pressure of purposely posting content for a wider audience, this user felt constrained to stick to a certain look, but without that invisible but imagined audience, her blog is “more for me.”

Another user runs two different blogs, one personal blog and one blog that is specifically focused on various fandoms. This latter blog is more carefully curated, as the user is actively working to become well-known as a cosplayer and content creator within their fandoms. They note that their fandom blog is curated, “for my followers and my future followers, my image, basically.” The way the user runs their two blogs differs

greatly, they explain, “I carefully select the things I’m putting on my main blog, and the rest of it goes on my junk personal blog that only my mutuals follow”. Users approach Tumblr very differently when they conceive of their blogs as focused on increasing their follower counts or promoting a certain theme or aesthetic, as opposed to personal blogs, where followers matter but they are not the purpose or focus.

These counterexamples of blogs that are not personal highlight the comfort and freedom users feel when curating their personal blogs. With the perception of anonymity within a relatively private blogging experience, the customizability of Tumblr, and the ease of reblogging, many users create personal blogs that they feel are truly expressive of their identities, posting what they describe as “whatever I want.” Because users feel this freedom to post any type of content on their personal blogs, users who follow personal blogs are exposed to whatever content the blog owners post, even if that content was not the content the users originally followed to see. This means that the content users encounter on Tumblr can vary widely and change over time as the blogs that they follow shift according to those users’ interests and whims. For many users this has meant exposure to content the users are interested in, but did not originally come to the site looking to find. In the next chapter, we apply this framework to three specific topics that the users I spoke with encountered on Tumblr.

Affordances and Norms in Practice: Applied Case Studies

Due to the affordances of Tumblr and the shared social understanding of the site, many users create personal blogs where they post a diversity of content according to their interests. Users that follow these personal blogs then have access to all of this content, and in this way encounter content they may not have originally been looking for. For some users, this has been an unexpected bonus of using Tumblr; they have discovered topics they were previously unaware of and stumbled upon content they later choose to seek out. Among those Tumblr users who responded to my survey, the most common reason for joining Tumblr was due to the influence of friends or peers, not to find specific content. Many users describe this pattern of gradual exposure to new topics as they spend time online.

Users are exposed to a wide range of topics through Tumblr, from new music or media to current events. Some common areas of exposure that I choose to focus on are political or social activism and marginalized identities. Among survey respondents, 70.5% responded affirmatively that their understanding of political or social issues had changed as a result of being on Tumblr. The survey respondents do not constitute a representative sample of all Tumblr users; a different sample might be encountering other content. However, the technical affordances and social norms that create an environment in which this exposure takes place are common across the site, so the pattern of gradual exposure that I identify applies, though the content users encounter may differ.

Here, I focus on content related to social or political issues and marginalized identities. Though very few respondents cited this content as something they were

looking for when they joined Tumblr, 59% of respondents reported viewing political content posted by the blogs they follow 'Frequently' or 'Very frequently,' and 67.7% reported viewing social content 'Frequently' or 'Very frequently.' One user followed others bloggers because they posted original art that she enjoyed, but those same bloggers also occasionally posted political content:

The artists I followed didn't just post art; they started posting about other things, and I was just like, 'Oh, I can learn about this kind of stuff too.' And then I would never actually like actively search for it, so I would just end up following people that also were interested in this and would like share the information.

Another user explained how this process occurs for them: "Even when I'm not specifically looking for certain issues or certain information, sometimes it'll just come onto my dashboard and I'll be like 'Oh, I hadn't thought about that, that's interesting.'" For some users, this exposure prompts new interests and inquiries; one user credits Tumblr as increasing their understanding of and interest in various social issues, and began actively searching out more of that content after being passively exposed to it:

When I started out I didn't follow any people that I knew of, I just followed like the big name blogs and the theme blogs and so forth. But here and there I found like personal blogs that would sometimes, you know, pause their usual content in favor of signal boosting some activism thing, and through there I got more interested in that and found more like activism focused blogs.

Other users, however, do not welcome the interruption of the content they intend to see. One user who derides political engagement on Tumblr as "fairly pointless" explains that she still encounters this content, "Because I followed the same people for years and I just never unfollowed them, I do see it...I don't follow any explicitly political blogs so if it comes up on my timeline it's because someone posted it to their personal blog." Another

user describes what they view as a “common progression” among the fandom blogs they follow:

[I was following] somebody who reblogs a lot of fandom stuff...and then it was a lot of fandom stuff and a little bit of social justice, and then it was like social justice with a little bit of fandom, and then it was like social justice and I was like, no. Because I don't want social justice stuff on my dashboard.

This user goes on to explain that before coming to a liberal arts college where they feel surrounded by “social justice stuff”, they were more open to seeing that content: “I was more okay with it in high school when I didn't really get a lot of that stuff but now that I'm at college... I don't want to see any social justice stuff on Tumblr.” Especially for those who may not be exposed to discussion of social and political issues elsewhere in their lives, Tumblr use can increase awareness of issues they might not encounter in their face-to-face social interactions.

However, this increased awareness is not without critique. Users had varied perspectives on the existence of discussions about political and social issues on Tumblr.

Some users characterized discourse on Tumblr as less nuanced and more extreme:

On Tumblr you get people who haven't really researched their opinions, who don't really know the facts, who haven't considered other sides of the argument, and they're just like quite extreme, they're key-smashing, it's just overwhelming.

Others took a slightly different perspective, describing conversation around social issues on Tumblr as more candid and emotional than the conversations they observed on other social media sites:

I feel like Tumblr is more like the authentic feelings of people, so not just like one person who's like thought about it...but like Tumblr is that very first thought process that a person has behind a post...these are their actual feelings about it.

These two perspectives, one depicting Tumblr discourse as extreme and poorly considered and one viewing it as authentic and unpolished, both stem from users' social understanding of posting on Tumblr as a low-risk endeavor.

Users find the prevalence of discussion about political and social issues to have varying levels of usefulness, and choose to engage with that content in different ways. When asked if they viewed Tumblr as a trustworthy source of information, users tend to convey a critical view of the information found on Tumblr. One user said,

If someone just like, makes a text post saying something and like doesn't back up their claim and doesn't have any sources then I'm not gonna take them at their word...but like I think there are people who have a lot of valid opinions on Tumblr and like I think it's kind of like a gateway to good sources.

This insistence on citing sources, normally in the form of links to other websites, was echoed by numerous other subjects. However, users also mentioned that misinformation is common on the site; according to one user:

I do know that it is important to look to outside sources, because in the end, at the end of the day, most of Tumblr is a bunch of 12--25-year-olds just yelling on the Internet, and they can't always be trusted. There are a lot of people who take things at face value, a lot of people who will lie to get their point across.

With these caveats, though, many users still maintain that Tumblr has increased their understanding and awareness of various topics, and in some cases influenced their beliefs, viewpoints, and identities. I highlight three areas that users mentioned as topics that have become important in their experiences on Tumblr: identity-based social activism, mental health, and sexuality or gender identity.

Current Events and Identity-based Activism

Tumblr use often promotes awareness of current events, especially those related to activism and injustice. Users who engage with that content describe Tumblr as a place where they learn about “stuff that isn’t covered in the mainstream media”, “things that the mass media isn’t going to report on”, and “a lot of different topics and different issues that are happening that have never hit Facebook”. For one user from Russia who joined the site to engage with bands and music that she liked, Tumblr became one of her main sources of news about American politics that was not controlled by the Russian state:

Some people I follow now, they post some things on the political situation in the USA and it’s really interesting to follow them, because in my country there’s only one point of view on the US politics, and it’s interesting to expand my view on the politics there...There are two blogs that post these news, and they also post some art, some game content I like and they also post that political information from time to time...I wasn’t looking for it but when it pops up I find it really interesting to read and then go on certain hashtags and read there...it’s a really great source of information on some things that are not popular in our country or just not really good to say aloud in our country.

Though the Russian case is an extreme example, it is illustrative of the broader theme echoed by many interview subjects that Tumblr is a source of information about events or movements that do not receive the same level of coverage in traditional media or on other online platforms.

The issues that users highlight as those they have learned about primarily on Tumblr often relate to identity-based activism. Users mentioned “queer and trans issues and other social justice issues and race issues...intersectional feminism”, “the Black Lives Matter movement and LGBTQ issues”, “natural disasters that happen in other parts of the world that don’t get a lot of attention on Facebook...and a lot of stuff about Black Lives

Matter I first saw on Tumblr before it kind of trickled over onto Facebook.” Because of the heightened social pressure users feel when posting to Facebook, as opposed to the lower social risk of posting to Tumblr, issues that are less popular, well-known, or otherwise likely to garner a positive reaction from one’s offline connections are kept from Facebook, where posting might lead to backlash from peers or relatives or just the simple ignominy of receiving too few likes. On Tumblr, both of these risks are lessened because users’ networks do not mirror their offline networks and because posting to a personal blog on Tumblr is not perceived as such a public, judgment-worthy act of self-presentation. Various issues that fall outside of mainstream discussion find traction on Tumblr, and even those users who choose not to post this content encounter it through the personal blogs they follow. One user whose blog is focused nearly entirely on the singer Taylor Swift credited Tumblr for her increased awareness of certain issues:

I would not know nearly as much as I do about these various social issues, LGBT issues, race issues, class issues, if I was not on Tumblr. And I mean that like, completely sincerely, because I was not getting that from my high school; you’re not getting it from the news, and honestly like there is no way that I would know maybe even half of the things I did if it wasn’t for this website.

Specifically, she mentions, “80% of the information I found out about [the unrest in the fall of 2014 in] Ferguson was through Tumblr”. Another user mentions Texas state senator Wendy Davis’s 2013 filibuster in protest of increased abortion restrictions as something she discovered via Tumblr, saying, “the only reason I went and watched this entire filibuster was because [I heard about it on] Tumblr.”

Users highlight Tumblr as a way to learn about issues from the people they directly affect. One user focused on this direct exposure as a valuable aspect of Tumblr, saying,

Personal experience is a lot of it I think, like people who are actively involved in those kind of movements, like social movements, actually sharing their perspective of it is really nice, because with mainstream or even academic things, it's not the perspective of someone actively in that movement.

Another user said,

I find [Tumblr] a very useful source for seeing diverse experiences, so like, I understand trans people through the lens of the commentary of the trans people I see on tumblr. When something happens in the world that's related to race, I look directly for how the people of the race that's affected by that respond on Tumblr. At [my college] there's not always people I can talk to who are of that affected race; there are not always like conversations about it, but on Tumblr you'll always find a conversation and you'll always find a diversity of opinions.

For these users, though they were not looking for this content when they first joined the site, Tumblr has become a space where they are exposed to and engage with social and political issues and activism, and learn about current events they might otherwise not have heard about. My respondents are concentrated in close social proximity to an elite liberal arts college located in New England; thus the issues they highlight tend to be progressive causes. However, the same process of exposure occurs for all types of content.

Mental Illness and Mental Health

For many users, the facelessness of interaction on Tumblr allows a space to share aspects of their lives that are more difficult to share offline, especially issues that may be stigmatized, including mental illness. Various users discussed their engagement with discussions of mental health and mental illness online, describing Tumblr as both a source of comfort and solidarity, and a source of negative thinking. One user found comfort in hearing others describe issues of anxiety that they identified with:

I followed a lot of people who would just talk about...like, 'Oh, I have this anxiety problem,' and they just make a post about it or they would reblog those, like,

informative posts that are like this is what this is...then it's like, oh hey this is really cool, I identify with this; like this is really interesting. And then just you feel a kind of discovery about yourself because no one talks about it just in everyday.

Another user credits Tumblr as introducing them to various coping strategies for their mental illness:

It was Tumblr where I first heard the concept that recovery doesn't have to be a straight line up... And things that for once told me it was okay to have a mental illness, not necessarily just that you have a mental illness, but it's okay... I see what works for other people and what doesn't work and I translate that into advice. And I see how much people struggle with isolation, which is hard to see in real life, but on Tumblr it's easier to see because people, the refuge of anonymity.

Though the perceived anonymity of Tumblr allows users to share their true feelings and identities, some users see others using the site to commiserate, but not get any real help beyond the site. One user described gaining comfort from seeing others with shared experiences:

It's made me think a lot about mental health problems because for some reason a lot of people that I follow, or maybe it's something about this community just like attracts people with mental health problems, and it's made me see that like a lot of people in our age group are just kind of mentally fucked up...it's been frustrating, it's been like comforting, but it's definitely made me think a lot about, you know, the fact that like, say you're having a problem or you feel anxious, you raise your hand in class and you say something and then for like three hours later you're still thinking about it. It's like nice to see that other people also have those things, so I guess it's made me understand that people our age are having the same experiences that I'm having.

This kind of discussion is far less likely to take place on a site like Facebook, where most of one's connections are peers, friends and relatives from real life. On Tumblr, though, users feel a degree of privacy necessary to post about more sensitive topics, leading their followers to unexpectedly encounter content with which they identify.

However, this user also expressed her frustration with discussion she perceives as unproductive:

My worry with it is that people go and they like talk to other people, and everyone's like, 'Oh me too, me too, it's so hard. Like it's terrible...our lives are so difficult.' And they just spiral around like that instead of getting out of it. But I think if you can use it as a springboard [to get help outside of Tumblr] then it's a positive but if you can't then it's a suck.

Another user echoed the idea that people tend to congregate on Tumblr to share negative feelings:

Lots of people were sad and like really depressed on Tumblr actually. I think that like, at least half the people are. I think Tumblr made me kind of sad at certain points too, like I never was like that but sometimes just seeing other people constantly sad would make you feel that way too. I think a lot of people went there as an outlet to like really talk about their feelings...On Tumblr people would actively post about it [mental health issues] and I guess some people would support them, but I feel like in other ways too it was kind of unhealthy, because you're just like, surrounded by all these people who escape to Tumblr to like, express their feelings.

Some users find solidarity, useful strategies, and positive thinking on Tumblr, but expressed that online interactions could not take the place of offline relationships; others see discussion of mental illness on the site as potentially damaging.

Sexuality and Gender Identity

For some users, unexpected exposure via Tumblr eventually leads to a change in their understandings of their own identities, beyond just awareness of activism or current events. Many users described how Tumblr was a place where they became aware of conceptions of gender and sexuality that they had not considered previously, or that Tumblr gave them more understanding of these ideas. For some users, this just leads to

increased awareness and understanding, but for others, these ideas help to shape their conceptions of their own identities. One user explained,

I also learned about my own sexual identity [via Tumblr], like I didn't even know asexuality was a thing and I identify as ace and so it was really interesting to find out, so it's a pretty weird place 'cause like, in real life...you can't really go around talking about that kind of stuff, and I think it's kind of a way to get it out there without having that kind of self-consciousness about it.

For topics that can be sensitive or stigmatized in real life, the privacy and anonymity of Tumblr creates a venue where users feel more comfortable sharing their personal details. In a world in which being cisgender and heterosexual are normalized to the extent that “you can't really go around talking about that kind of stuff,” users often find Tumblr to be a place where they can explore and come to terms with non-normative aspects of their own identities. A user who grew up in a rural area in the Southern United States explained, “[Tumblr] definitely gave me an avenue to explore a more queer part of my identity, especially in high school living in like a rural southern town where it's like, you can't do that. It also was the source of beginning to explore my gender.” Another user described how content on Tumblr gradually helped her to embrace being lesbian:

For a while I identified as bi[sexual]... And then like [I saw] more like lesbian blogs, and [I saw] them talking about their experiences of really holding on to that label of 'Oh, I guess I'm attracted to men'...so then I was like, 'Oh I think I'm actually gay', I kind of came to accept that more.

Among 260 survey respondents, 77 reported similar processes of developing their understanding of their gender or sexuality partly or primarily through Tumblr. It is important to note that very few of these users reported searching for material related to sexuality or gender identity as the reason they originally joined Tumblr. Indeed, users whose understandings of their own genders or sexualities evolve while on Tumblr often

report that they came out on Tumblr long before doing so in other online spaces or to those whom they interact with in real life. Users see Tumblr as a safer space in which to explore their identities without the potential consequences of offline interactions. The site's decentralized, less social user experience, the lack of public pressure when posting, and few connections to offline relations make users feel safe coming out on Tumblr, and the informal, infinitely customizable format of Tumblr blogs allows ample opportunity for users to explore and experiment with their self-expression on the site.

From serendipitous discovery of concepts they might not have previously encountered, many Tumblr users' understandings of their own identities change and shift. This is a far cry from the framing of the Internet as a space where actors' views are only confirmed and amplified; due to the affordances of the Tumblr site and the social rules that have developed, many users of Tumblr experience the site as a place of increased awareness, changing viewpoints, and even fundamental shifts in their own self-conception and identity.

Conclusion

My research demonstrates how users of the microblogging social media site Tumblr encounter new ideas, viewpoints and content they were not originally seeking. The technical features of the site, including customizable user-controlled blogs, the focus on curating one's blog as opposed to interacting with other users, no connection to an offline identity, and reblogs and tags, lead users to view their personal blogs as casual, low-risk spaces in which they feel comfortable posting about anything they want. The social understanding of Tumblr as an anonymous, informal setting where no topic is taboo contributes to users expressing themselves without constraint via their personal blogs. Because the Tumblr dashboard is not filtered, users are exposed to everything posted on the blogs they follow, even content they may not have intended to see. Through this mechanism of personal blogs and an unsorted dashboard, Tumblr's technical and social structures lead users to view and engage with issues, topics, and viewpoints that are new to them. This contradicts the popular conception of social media as polarizing, sorting people into filter bubbles within which their preexisting views are only reinforced.

These findings are limited primarily by the relatively limited population I drew from for survey respondents and interview subjects. Because many of these individuals are Wellesley College students, they are similar in many ways, and likely engage with similar content on Tumblr. However, the structural features of the Tumblr site that I analyze are common for all users, and it is reasonable to expect that the processes my respondents described are not limited to this population. The specific content that I

highlight in the previous chapter may differ for other groups of users but the process of exposure is the same.

My research has multiple and varied implications. For technical designers of social media sites, implementing some of the features found on Tumblr could further goals of increasing casual participation or decreasing polarization on other sites. However, most social media platforms are designed with the singular goal of increasing revenue through advertising and gathering user data, and these goals may be perceived as incompatible with the features of Tumblr that contribute to its users' feelings of perceived anonymity and solitary blogging. Indeed, Tumblr has not been as profitable as hoped for its owner, Yahoo! (Truong 2016). As social media continue to dominate our experiences online, what are the implications of most of our news and entertainment consumption being mediated by companies whose business model is predicated on gathering user data in an attempt to show us exactly what we want to see? I believe that there is value in people gathering in online space to express themselves, share with others, and learn; this value is not necessarily easily expressed in a system where page views and dollars are the only measures of worth. Thus, as we imagine possible structures the future Web might take, I suggest that designers, engineers, policymakers, and ordinary web browsers alike consider how technical features shape the social rules that develop online, and the complex ways these affordances and norms affect user experience. The features of Tumblr and the interactional norms that have developed on the site provide one model of an online space that promotes real expression and discovery, though it may yield less profit. Not all public goods can be monetized for profit, nor should they be.

I see multiple fruitful areas for future research that build from this work. Further research into how different populations use Tumblr would provide useful evidence of the influence that the technical features of the site and the social norms of various communities have on user experience. Just as actors experience social structures differently, social media users are constrained and enabled in various ways due to the norms of their connections. This research could also be extended to other sites, engaging with the way different technical affordances change use patterns and social rules. Finally, social media moves quickly: preferred platforms as well as modes of engaging with those platforms change every few years. Thus, many of the comparisons I make to other sites, as well as specific analyses of the Tumblr site as it exists today, may not apply shortly. This does not necessitate an update of this research every two years, just the understanding that the broader implications of this work are not limited to Tumblr, but rather relate to the wider question of how people understand their actions and interactions within an online social system, mediated by technological affordances and social structures.

Appendix I: Glossary of Tumblr Terms

Blog: A Tumblr account is manifested as a blog, or a specific online page that displays the content which the blog owner chooses to post. On Tumblr, the default URL for a user is *username.tumblr.com*. This is the user's "primary blog"; the user may also choose to create other secondary blogs among that account, these will have different URLs.

Dashboard: The home page of the Tumblr user experience, the dashboard is Tumblr's name for the page displaying prompts to create an original post, as well as the stream or feed of all of the content posted on blogs the user follows. This content is organized chronologically, with the most recently posted content at the top of the page. See Fig. 1.

Fandom: Refers to a community of people, not necessarily just within Tumblr, that collectively are fans of a particular article of media and come together to discuss and create content related to that media, often a TV show, movie, book, or video game.

Follow: Connections on Tumblr are made by following others. Once one user chooses to follow another's blog, all of the posts on that blog will be incorporated into the following user's dashboard. If two users are following one another, they are known as "mutuals". There is no widespread expectation for follower reciprocity on Tumblr.

Likes: The Tumblr like, signified visually via a heart icon, expresses appreciation for a post without sharing the post. When viewing others' posts via the dashboard, users can easily like these posts. The poster is notified, and the number of notes the post has accumulated increase, but the content is not shared more widely than it was before. Users can also look back on all of the posts they have liked.

Notes: A post's notes are its accumulated number of likes and reblogs, a numerical tally displayed on the post on the dashboard and on blogs. When reblogging, notes are not reset to zero; notes are accumulated across the Tumblr network, not individually. Clicking on the number of notes a post has reveals that post's reblog history, the commentary added by other users, and the number of likes and reblogs.

Post: A post is any single piece of content on a Tumblr blog that can be reblogged or liked. This can take the form of text, a single photo or set of photos, GIFs, videos, links, and audio.

Queue: When users are adding content to their blog, they can choose to schedule the time the content will be posted, instead of posting it immediately, through the queue, a customizable schedule that will automatically post the queued content for the user.

Reblog: Content on Tumblr can be reblogged, meaning the post will be posted to a user's blog with its notes and previous reblog history contained in that post, accessible via the notes. When reblogging, users can choose to post the content to their own blog just as they found it, or to add text or other forms of commentary to the post. If they add

commentary to the post when reblogging it, it will appear on their blog with that commentary, and any user that reblogs from them will also reblog that commentary by default. When reblogging, users can also add tags to posts. Users receive notifications when others reblog content they have posted to their blog. See Fig. 2.

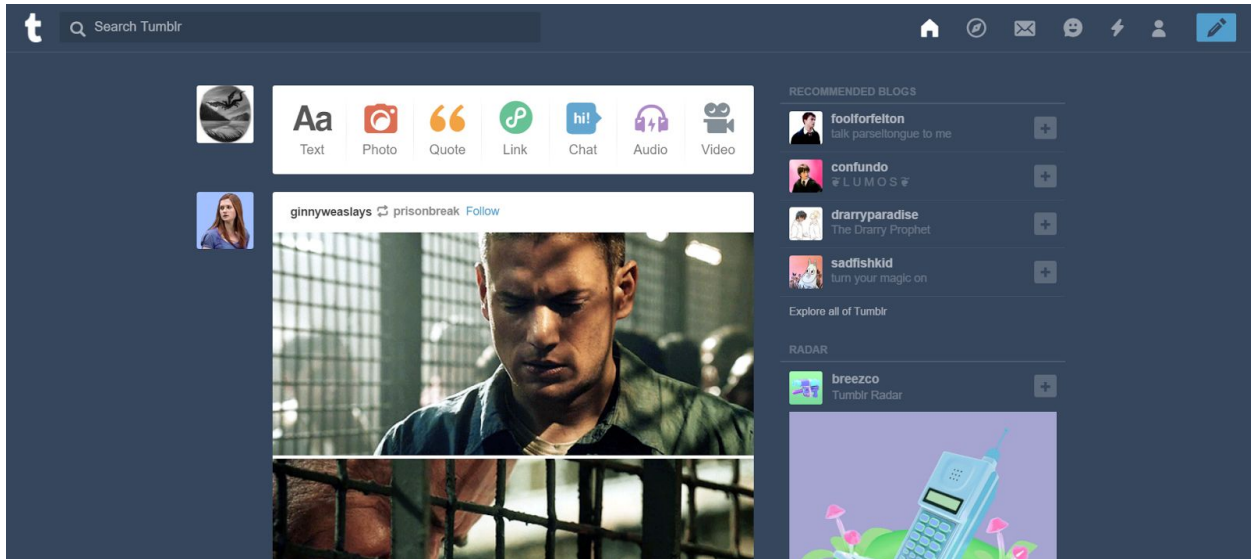
Tag: Any post on Tumblr can have tags added to it. Tags are usually short pieces of text that are not part of the body of a post, but are displayed alongside the post on the blog of the user who wrote them and in the dashboard of their followers. Tags, unlike commentary added directly to a post upon reblogging, are not carried with the post when others reblog it. Tags can be used to categorize posts, and Tumblr includes a search feature based on tags. Tags can also be “tracked,” meaning posts with the tracked tag will appear in my dashboard even if I do not follow the blog that posted them. Tags are denoted with the # symbol.

Theme: The theme refers to all of the design aspects of a user’s blog. Users can choose between themes created by Tumblr, free and paid themes created by others, as well as editing the HTML of their blog themselves. Users use themes to customize every aspect of their blogs, from the visual look of it through colors, layout, and fonts to the different options available on their blogs, such as links or different pages. See Figures 3-7 for examples of different themes.

Username: A username on Tumblr is both the handle through which users are known to others and the indicator of the URL of their primary blog.

Appendix II: Screenshots of Tumblr

Fig. 1 The Tumblr dashboard. Scrolling down on this page renders an endless stream of chronological posts posted by the blogs this user is following.



<https://www.tumblr.com/dashboard>

Fig. 2 When reblogging a post on the web version of Tumblr, the user is presented with this interface, within which they can add their own text or other content as well as tags.

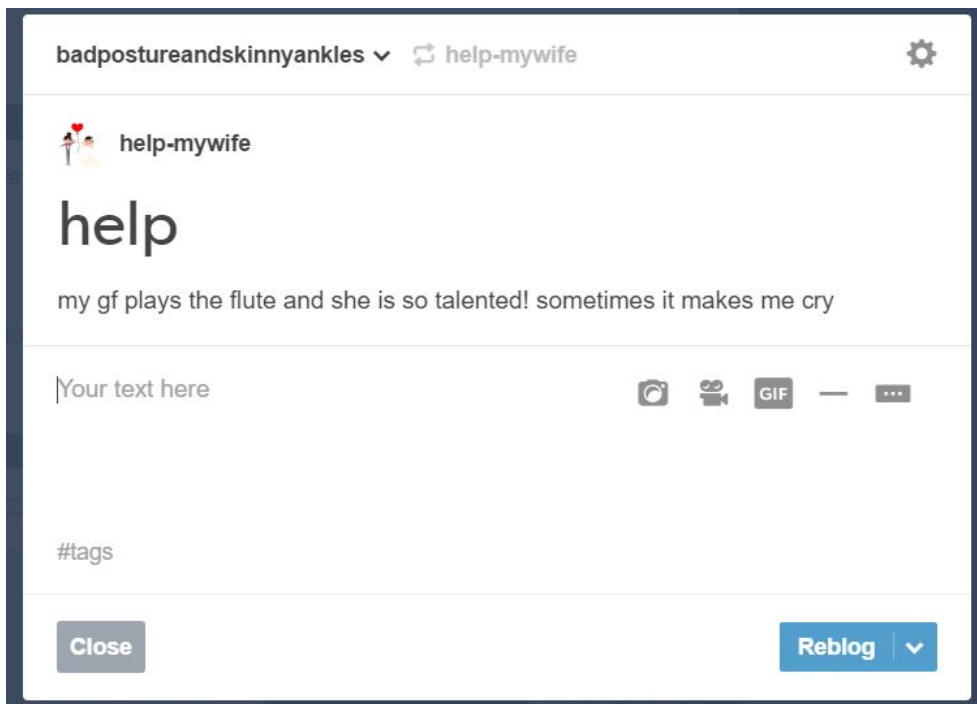




Fig. 3 A personal blog, described by the owner as “A lot of pictures and photography, personal thoughts, some social justice-y stuff, lots of music references”

Message Follow Dashboard

ya ya ya ya

ARCHIVE ASK SUBMIT ME MY PIZZ

(Source: [urlfavorechawedffoc23](#), via [knapplous](#))

29 Dec 2015 · 20,142 notes

Fun Christmas idea:

[edens-blog](#)

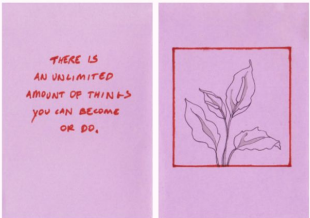
[edens-blog](#)

Hang mistletoe but instead of kissing you have to FIGHT whoever else is under it.

Mistletoe™

(via [trococollabipster](#))

29 Dec 2015 · 102,909 notes



[colongit](#)

things to remember in 2016

(via [westblander](#))

29 Dec 2015 · 84,641 notes

[gaycollt](#)

Tbh I'm getting increasingly suspicious of mainstream media's endorsements of social justice rhetoric.

I'm getting increasingly suspicious of how the media focuses its sj discourse around privilege and microaggressions (which suck, don't get me wrong, but they're symptoms of centuries of historical violence, they aren't the sources of the real problems).

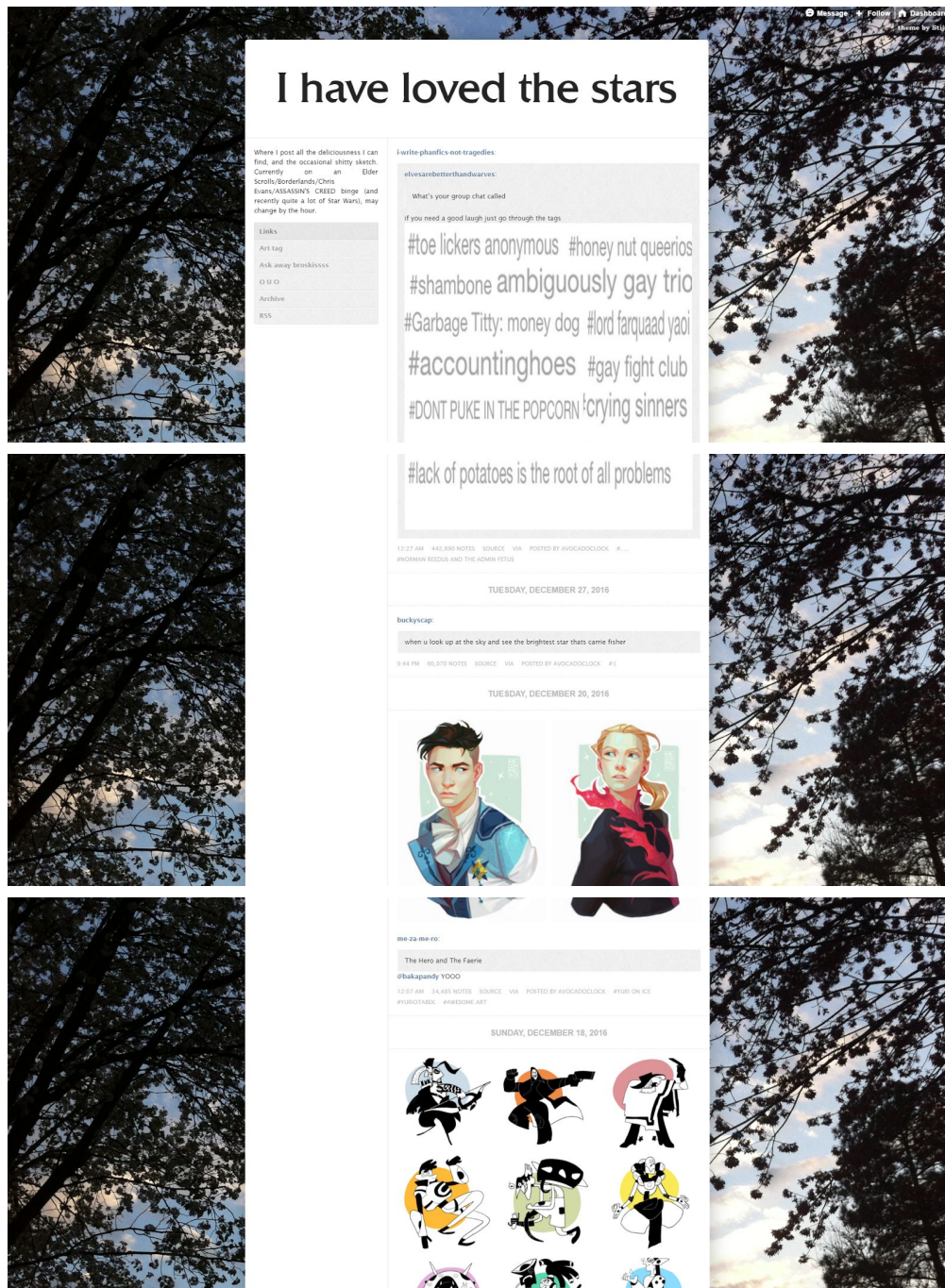
I see this, I see places like BuzzFeed and other avenues of pop culture fixating on "privilege" as a sort of luck system where society rewards people for being born a certain way, but in the explanations, the means by which this happens are always mysterious and vague. There's a refusal to name anyone as active agents within a system, or to admit that these systems materially benefit some at the expense of others... it's always treated as some weird ppg stat system where being white gives you x% ability to find a job, rather than an actual hierarchy of supremacy where people subjugate others for power and resources.

It's always compressed, made into easy problems with easy solutions. Here are 12 things you shouldn't say to a black person. Make sure to not say Racist Things. You may have been born into privilege but it's okay, just accompany yourself with POC, of color™ and don't say the Racist Things and by being nice, you can somehow(?) help weaken institutional racism... or something.

So it focuses on these small, specific manifestations of oppression instead of more direct forms of violence that would require a huge change to fix... stuff like, for example, the entire prison system. That's

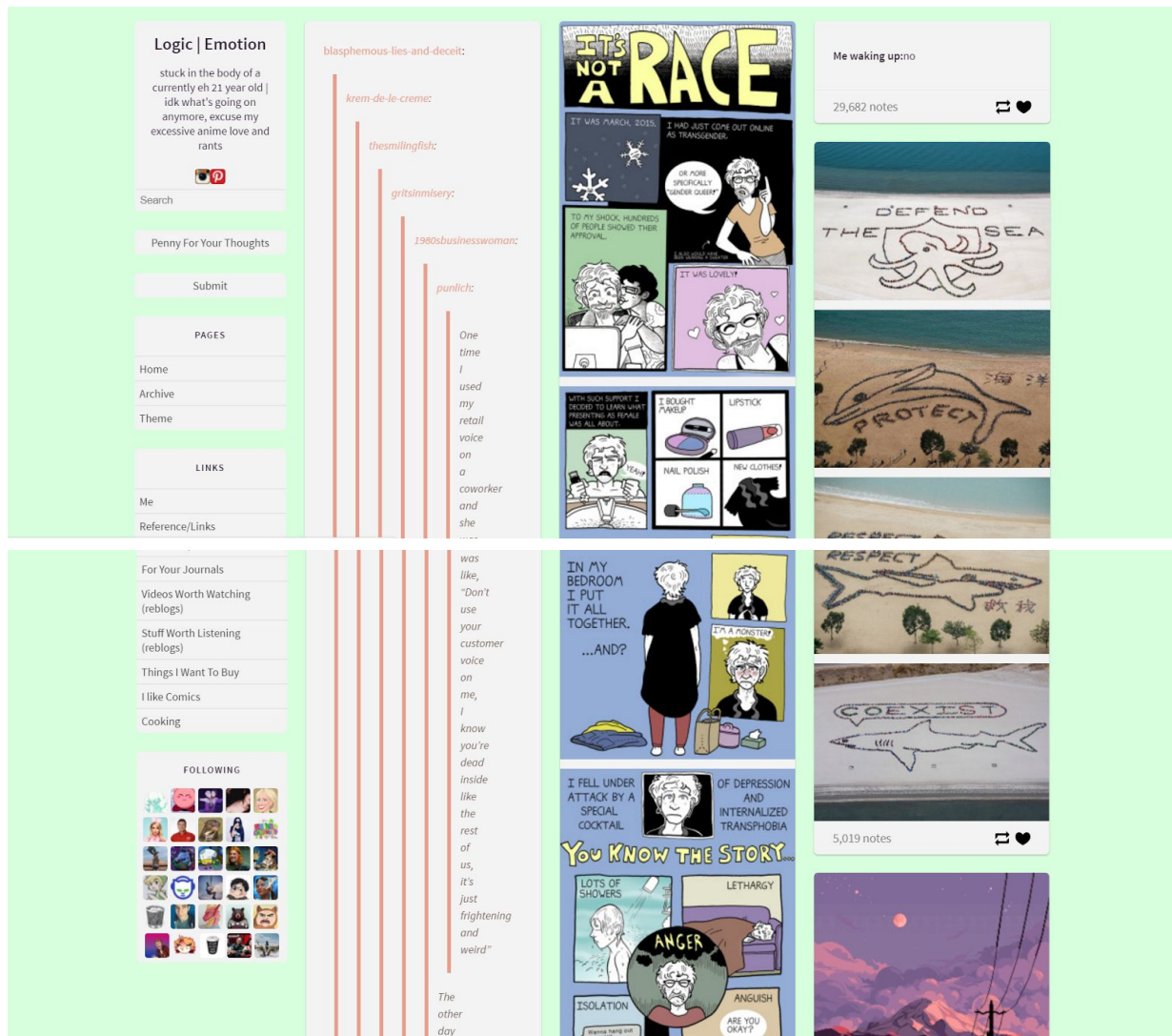
<http://vintageseahorse.tumblr.com/>

Fig. 4 A personal blog, described by the owner as “Mostly posting my art, and reblogging other art/memes/fandom posts.”



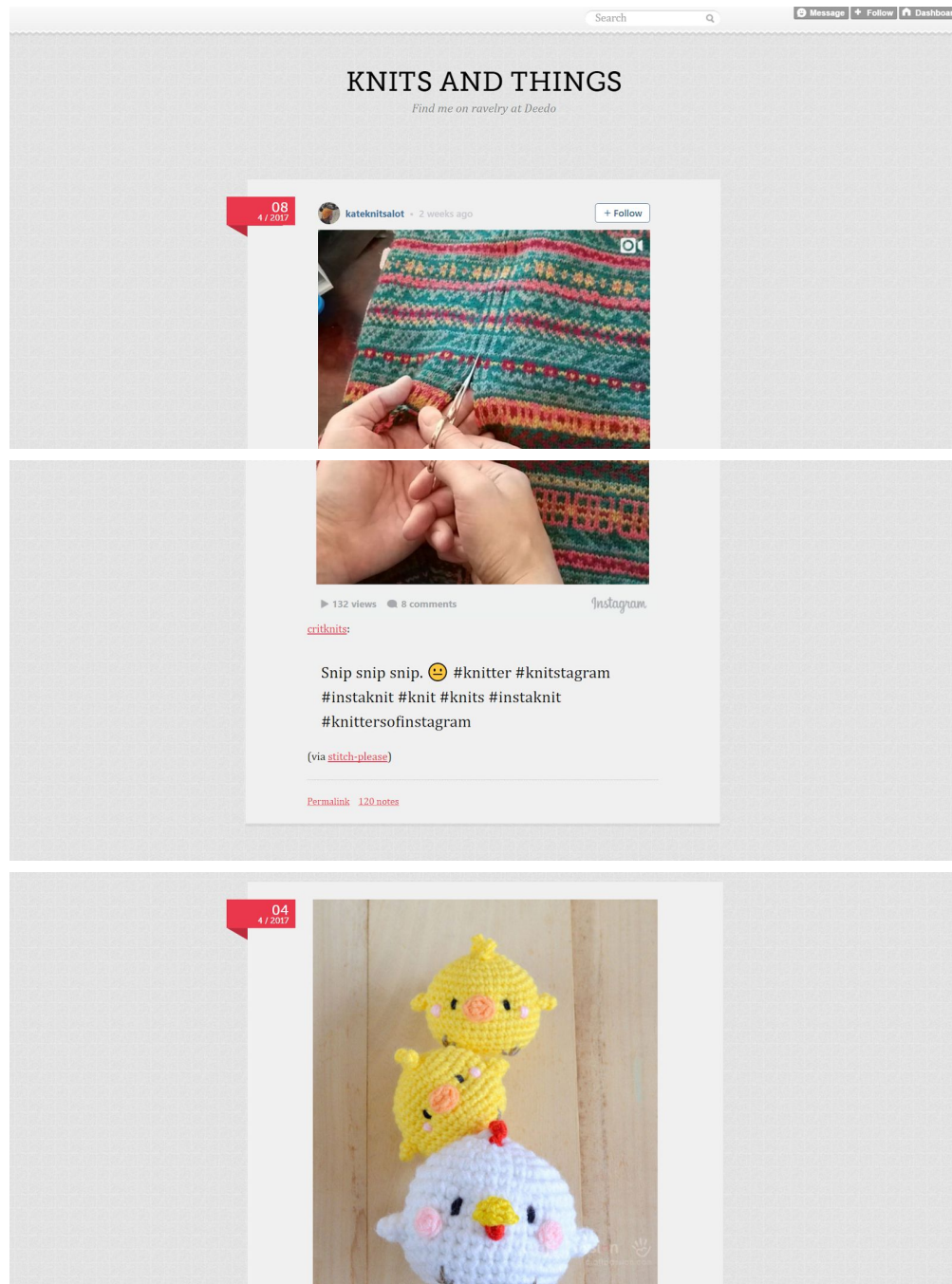
<http://avocadoclock.tumblr.com/>

Fig. 5 A personal blog described by the owner as “A lot of reblogging of content I connect with in the moment of blogging (landscapes, memes, whatever floats my boat at that time)”



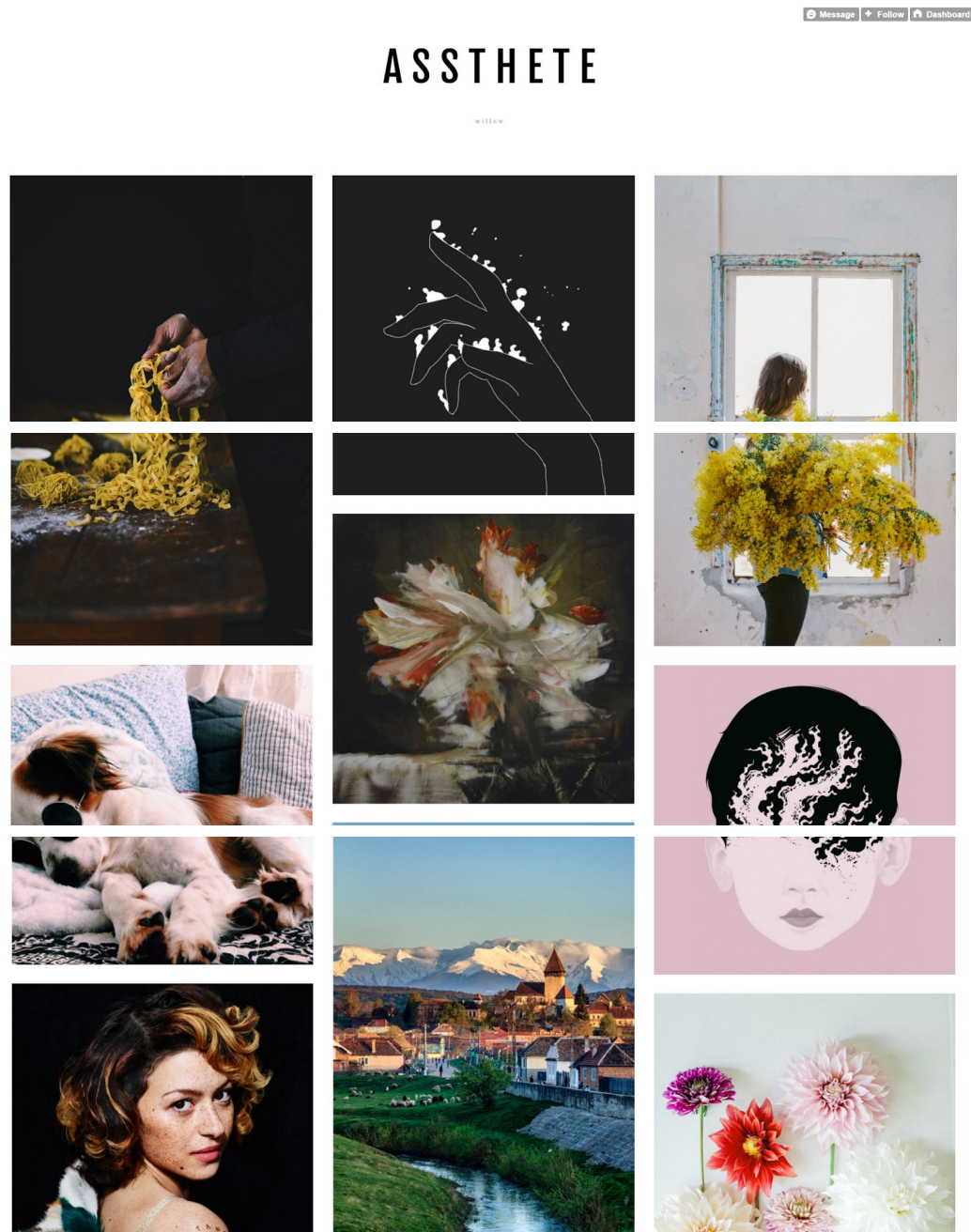
<http://pfbestfriend.tumblr.com/>

Fig. 6 A special interest blog, described by the owner as “Knitting pics and patterns”



<http://vknits.tumblr.com/>

Fig. 7 An aesthetic blog, described by the owner as “images I like, my aesthetic?”



<http://willowardrobe.tumblr.com/>

Appendix III: Survey and Interview Protocols

Survey Protocol

Page 1

This survey about Tumblr use is part of a senior thesis project being conducted by a student at Wellesley College.

This survey is completely anonymous and confidential. No identifying information will be collected without your permission. This survey has five pages, and should take approximately 5-10 minutes to complete.

Upon completion of the survey, you will be directed to a separate optional form that allows you to submit your email address, which will enter you into the random drawing for a chance to win one of three \$50 Amazon gift cards. Your email address will not be connected in any way to your survey responses. Thank you!

If you have any questions about this study, you can contact the researcher at jchmyz@wellesley.edu or her faculty supervisor at mrutherf@wellesley.edu.

How old are you?

What is your race/ethnicity? Select all that apply.

Which of the following best describes your gender identity?

Which of the following best describes your sexual orientation? Select all that apply.

In what country is your permanent address?

Page 2

At what age did you first create a Tumblr account?

Why did you first create a Tumblr account?

How many blogs do you have on Tumblr?

How would you describe the content of your primary blog?

If you have an alternate blog, how would you describe its content?

When you use Tumblr, how often do you engage in the following activities?

- Reblogging content posted by others

- Reblogging content and adding my own commentary to the post

- Posting original content

- Exchanging messages with other users

Page 3

Think about content on Tumblr related to political issues or current events. Thinking only about that content, how often do you engage in the following activities?

- Reblogging political content and adding my own commentary to the post

- Reblogging political content posted by others

- Posting original political content

- Exchanging messages with other users about political content

Viewing political content posted by blogs I follow

Think about content on Tumblr related to social issues, activism, or identity. Thinking only about that content, how often do you engage in the following activities?

Reblogging social content and adding my own commentary to the post]",

Reblogging social content posted by others

Posting original social content

Exchanging messages with other users about social content

Viewing social content posted by blogs I follow

What specific political and social issues do you engage with most frequently on Tumblr?

Has the way you interact with political or social content on Tumblr changed over time?

Page 4

Has your understanding of political or social issues changed as a result of being on Tumblr?

If you answered 'Yes' to the previous question', please describe how your understanding of political or social issues has changed as a result of being on Tumblr.

Has your understanding of your own identity changed as a result of being on Tumblr?

If you answered 'Yes' to the previous question', please describe how your understanding of your own identity has changed as a result of being on Tumblr.

Page 5

If you feel comfortable sharing it, please enter the URL of your primary Tumblr blog.

Enter the URL of your secondary Tumblr blog, if you have one.

Enter the URLs of three blogs you regularly reblog content from.

Enter the URLs of three other blogs that you follow.

Would you be interested in being interviewed about these topics in more depth? If so, enter your email here.

Interview Protocol

Tell me about when and why you first made a Tumblr.

Who did you follow at first? (and how has that changed?)

How has your blog changed over time? (Has your reason for using the site changed?)

How connected is your Tumblr to your offline identity?

Do you follow people you know in real life? Do they follow you?

(Estimate percentages of offline followers/following)

Do you use your real name? Do you post selfies?

How connected is your Tumblr to other online platforms that you use?

Tell me about your primary blog.

If you have a set 'thing', do you feel pressure to stick to it and only post that thing?

Do you follow only people that post about that, or not?

How much do you think about what your followers will think about what you post versus just posting whatever you want?

How do you think the structure of Tumblr has affected the way you use it?

How do you use tags?

How influenced are you by the way other people (people you follow, etc) use Tumblr?

If yes- you said in the survey that your understanding of political/social issues has changed as a result of being on Tumblr. Can you explain that to me?

Why do you think that happened?

What were other factors that affected this change? Other sites online, offline stuff?

How does your exploration of these issues on Tumblr compare to it on other sites, offline?

Do you talk about these issues offline, academically, elsewhere online?

If yes- you said in the survey that your understanding of your own identity has changed as a result of being on Tumblr. Can you explain that to me?

Why do you think that happened?

What were other factors that affected this change? Other sites online, offline stuff?

How does your exploration of these issues on Tumblr compare to it on other sites, offline?

Do you talk about these issues offline, academically, elsewhere online?

As you think about it now, how do you think your use of Tumblr (or other social media) has influenced where you are now and what you're doing?

For example, college selection, major, career plans

What changes, if any, have you noticed on Tumblr over the time you've used the site?

Tell me about the culture of Tumblr, as you see it.

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