Tumblr as Platform Architecture,
User Experience, and Interaction Artifacts

BY

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DISSEPTION
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<tr>
<td>ANT</td>
<td>Actor-Network Theory</td>
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<tr>
<td>CDA</td>
<td>Critical Discourse Analysis</td>
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<tr>
<td>IRL</td>
<td>“In real life”</td>
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<td>KLK</td>
<td><em>Kill la Kill</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>NB</td>
<td>Nonbinary gender (also referred to by participants as “enby”)</td>
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<tr>
<td>OP</td>
<td>Original Poster</td>
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<tr>
<td>SCOT</td>
<td>Social Construction of Technology</td>
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<tr>
<td>SJW</td>
<td>Social Justice Warrior</td>
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<td>STS</td>
<td>Science and Technology Studies</td>
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SUMMARY

A study of the digital social media platform Tumblr.com that adopts three distinct perspectives in explicating the affordances and constraints that the platform and account holders co-create in patterns of every-day use. These patterns of use are bolstered by the perceived autonomy Tumblr account holders experience when they use the platform when compared to the level of control they perceive when utilizing other “mainstream” social media platforms (typically Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram).

Using a social construction of technology framework, Tumblr’s “About Tumblr” pages, accessible at the time of signing up for a new account are considered as documentation of platform explications placed upon the potential platform user. These expectations are then compared to existing Tumblr features as they are utilized by account holders. Knowledge of platform features and their use comes from full-member auto-ethnographic immersion over the last five years. Analysis uses social construction of technology and actor-network theory principles.

Interviews were conducted with 14 Tumblr “fandom” users, individuals whose Tumblr practice is rooted at least partially in the production and sharing of fan fiction, fan art, or discussion of popular media objects. Participants were asked about their day-to-day Tumblr use and experiences, as well as specific questions regarding their initial decisions to join Tumblr and begin blogging, how they make decisions regarding who to Follow and what to share on their blogs, privacy concerns and conflicts with other Tumblr users, and their overall sense of “the Tumblr community.” While their answers were incredibly varied, each of these topic areas were seen as important to participants, even if their views on said topics differed.

Finally, discourse analysis is used to explicate three specific Tumblr posts that are demonstrative of a larger trend on Tumblr of combining fandom materials and feminist concerns. These posts, and the Reblogging behaviors associated with them, define what I have termed the “Arena,” an online space with particular technical and social boundaries, where the particularities of the platform constrain and shape the nature of conflict. In the case of Tumblr’s Arena, conflicts rarely involve proper turn-taking, with users instead adding commentary to a post, correcting or admonishing the user who commented before them, without the previous user ever returning to the same post to provide a counter argument. I further connect this particular mode of conflict to assemblage theory, arguing that users, instead of building static identity formations, construct unstable formations on Tumblr that are always subject to change or destruction.
1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Tumblr Patterns of Use, All the Way Down

“What are you doing?” my husband asks from his place in front of the computer. He has a replay of a Twitch stream from earlier in the day open on one of his two monitors; four British men playing PlayerUnknown’s Battlegrounds for five hours straight. They’re not particularly good at the game. It’s their personalities that we both enjoy. On his other monitor, he plays RimWorld, a game he’s played for more than 2,000 hours since purchasing.

“Tumblr,” I respond, as way of explanation.

It’s seven pm. So I get up off the couch, where I’ve been laying down with my iPad nestled on my stomach. I feed the dog, who trots after me, slowly wagging his tail and trying to stick his entire face into the food bin when I open it. After measuring out his food, I set the bowl down. I empty and re-fill his water bowl, then fill the electric kettle to make tea. While I wait for the water to boil, I pick up my iPad again, and refresh Tumblr, pulling down with one finger to trigger the Dashboard\textsuperscript{1} refresh.

“Don’t you run out of Tumblr?” he asks, “I run out of Reddit.” Working in technical support, he has long periods of downtime during the day that he usually spends hopping from subreddit to subreddit to find bits and pieces of useful and useless distraction. But he also uses the site before work, on the computer connected to our television screen, which we effectively use as a giant monitor. He browses after work too, as he thinks about what video game to play.

I admit, “Kind of,” and refresh the page again. I don’t follow enough Tumblr blogs for my Dashboard to move that quickly. There are four new posts since I last refreshed, one of them

\textsuperscript{1} See Appendix A for a brief Tumblr glossary.
I’ve already seen today. Three of them aren’t very interesting. I can tell without really reading them.

“You could play a game?” he offers.

The kettle pops and I finish up making tea. The dog is done eating and while the tea brews I play with him. “Meh,” is all I really offer. I’m in between games at the moment, having just finished *Final Fantasy XII: The Zodiac Age* and not yet wanting to get sucked into *Yakuza Kiwami*. I still have a lot of work to finish on my dissertation. So, while I might still stop working after dinner for the sake of my sanity, I don’t want the nagging pull of a narrative game where I’m desperate to find out what happens next. “I was re-playing *Dark Souls 3*, but I got up to my least favorite area.”

The tea is ready and I play with the dog for another ten minutes before he takes his stuffed sheep in his mouth and curls up on his blanket with it tucked between his paws. He’s ten years old and very clear about when he’s finished playing.

Picking up my iPad again, I refresh Tumblr. There are about twenty new posts. It takes me only seconds to scroll through them. None of them are compelling enough to Reblog. Really, though, I’m just killing time waiting for one of my friends to respond to my Message. We’ve been going back and forth about a storyline in a fictional Victorian London inhabited by a mix of humans and humanoid magical creatures. It’s not quite a role-play. Neither of us act as if we’re embodying our characters. It’s more like a pitch meeting, where we throw ideas back and forth, narrowing down plotlines and events and character arcs. Over the next few weeks, I might write out a few portions of our conversations as short stories. They might produce digital art of our characters. We’ve worked on projects like this before. They’re not so popular as to garner a ton
of Tumblr notes, but we have fun and a handful of people told us they really enjoyed the content we produced the last time.

They still haven’t responded, so I navigate out of the Tumblr app and return to my iOS home screen. Going to Discord instead, I find don’t have any new messages there either. Back out, into Tumblr, where I only refresh my Activity, not the Dashboard, and check to see roughly what other people are Liking and Reblogging from me. The rate of Reblogging on the viral post I ended up saddled with at the end of 2017 has slowed down. I only get about twenty notes a day on it now. As opposed to the couple thousand I was getting in the first few days, then a couple hundred as the weeks passed.

The post is not even something I made. One of my other friends used Tumblr’s Submission feature to send me the post. Submissions allow one user to “submit” an entire Tumblr post (whether it be a text, photo, video, quote, or link post) to another user to publish to their blog. Later, after the post went viral, I would accuse my friend of being an “activity dodging coward.” By Submitting the post to me, and having me post it to my blog, instead of posting it themselves, my Activity Feed was flooded with Notifications, instead of theirs.
Figure 1. The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim (2011), dragon shout (mis)translated.

Now, with the popularity of that post having petered out, I’m not really seeing much Activity at all. And as much as I complained about it at the time, I kind of miss the thrill of realizing I was receiving dozens of Notes a second when the post was at its peak.

Leaving the Tumblr app again, I open Safari, which has already loaded my Archive of Our Own (a repository of fan fiction operated by the non-profit Organization for Transformative Works) stats page. I refresh my statistics there as well, checking to see if I’ve received any additional kudos. There’s nothing. I try to search for something to read on the site. Navigating to
a fandom and inputting search parameters. I get results, scan through summaries and tags. I end up going back to Tumblr. My friend has responded to my Message. I tell them what my character might do in response. They also tell me that they tried to trip their brother as he walked past their computer, and now they’ve pulled a muscle in their leg. I respond to that too. “Oh noooooo.”

A Skype message pops at the top of my screen, folding down from the edge before vanishing again. It’s from one of the group chats I belong to. I met the two women in the chat through Tumblr over three years ago. There used to be six of us in the group chat, before a conflict caused the group to splinter in a matter of hours. One of my friends in the chat just got back from her Birthright trip. We’re also gauging the attractiveness of various film and video game monsters.

“What are you doing now?” my husband asks again.

“Tumblr.”

“Still?”

I have Skype open, I type “S C R E A M I N G,” in response to a comment one of my friends in the group chat makes. I’m actually silent on the couch.

“Yeah, still.”

### 1.2 Tumblr’s Socio-Technical History, Social Media, Blogs, and Community

My use of Tumblr, on the typical evening above (really, an amalgamation of evenings, but a composite that represents a number of different behaviors I find myself engaging in frequently), is indicative of how using Tumblr translates into engaging in a constellation of behavioral patterns, switching into and out of the platform strictly speaking to engage with other, socially connected resources (Skype and Discord for chat features; Archive of Our Own for publishing long-form written fan works; even the discussion of what games I’ve just played or
am thinking of playing that I carry out with my husband, which will inform what social ties I might develop moving forward, as I branch into reblogging and discussing different fandoms). Tumblr can be thought of as single platform, with defined architectural boundaries. Yet, *using* Tumblr is something broader, more complicated.

Tumblr.com is an online blogging platform established in 2007 by founder David Karp. As of the March 2018, the platform boasts over 400 million blogs and over 158 billion posts. Karp, in his initial development practices, positioned Tumblr as an alternative to existing social media options, particularly Facebook. Facebook was rapidly gaining popularity at the time, as it expanded from college-only networks to a more inclusive user base (Walker, 2012). After observing behavioral trends on these existing social media sites, Karp has said that he made particular design decisions with Tumblr as an attempt to curtail competitive and aggressive behaviors that he had witnessed on other social media sites (Walker, 2012). This is not to imply that Karp was even vaguely aware of what the actual, long term consequences of these design decisions would be. However, he viewed “problems” with the existing social media platforms (competition for accumulating as many “Friends” as possible; leaving hate messages on other people’s Facebook Walls and MySpace pages) and proposed concrete “solutions” through architectural design decisions.

Karp also built upon the work of others developing similar media platforms, including German teenager Chris Neukirchen, who first coined the term “tumblelogs” (Alfonso, 2013c). And Marcel Molina, who saw Neukirchen’s work with tumblelogs, and reworked the format of comingling short text posts, images, and quotes into Projectionist, a more refined version of Neukirchen’s Anarchaia (Alfonso, 2013c). While Karp engaged in discussions with Molina
during the early development of Tumblr, they have since fallen amicably out of contact (Alfonso, 2013c).

Karp’s awareness of a history of social platforms and modeling his own platform in response is consistent with other digital platform creation myths, which are always a series of borrowings, transformations, and reimaginings of existing platforms and technologies. Research rooted in the history of design, particularly those studies adopting social construction of technology as frameworks, have long noted how the social and technological shape and transform one another (Bijker, Hughes, & Pinch, 1989; Bijker & Law, 1992; Gillespie, Broczkowski, & Foot, 2013; Latour, 2005). New technology becomes part of our social world through use, and goes on to influence the next technological construct. Furthermore, the technologies we produce are shaped and constrained by our current paradigms. Only very rarely do we encounter information or technologies that lead to dramatic shifts in our social and technological worldview (Kuhn, 1962).

At a more visceral level, copying, pasting, editing, and emulating code has long been a practice of amateur (and professional) web developers. Through the mid-90s, viewing another website’s source code, copying it, and making adjustments as necessary, was considered standard practice as both a way to design a website and learn new skills (Papacharissi, 2002a; Siles, 2011). In-person gatherings of “tech pioneers” at seemingly unlikely events, such as Burning Man, also act as industry catalysts for creative development, though the altruism of such events is always in question, given the large sums of money that can be generated from successful collaborative projects (Turner, 2009). The practices and self-professed morality of hackers can vary widely, but those characterized by their investment in free and open source software (F/OSS) are committed to “the source code of others [being] easily available for use or
reuse” (Coleman & Golub, 2008). Large firms such as IBM also have a vested interest in F/OSS, as it can be used to enhance their profile, reputation, and profits (Coleman & Hill, 2004).

Seiemens (2005) refers to similar systems of digital learning from the in-progress and final results of others as connectivism, “the integration of principles explored by chaos, network, and complexity and self-organization theories,” where “learning is a process that occurs within nebulous environments of shifting core elements – not entirely under the control of the individual.” While Seiemens is primarily concerned with how we learn in an internet-saturated environment, his concept of connectivism is equally useful in understanding how we learn about engaging with the internet. Students often find linear instruction of a coding language such as HTML difficult (Mauriello, Pagnucci, & Winner, 1999). And self-driven, ecology perspectives to learning with and about computers simultaneously seems to foster long term interest in technology (Barron, 2006). Learning to code and create, and fostering a sustained interest in development, is more or less assumed to rely borrowings of past and existent technologies. So while neither Neukirchen nor Molina received direct, economic benefits from Tumblr, nor are they widely acknowledged as being stepping stones in the development of the platform, neither expressed much animosity towards Karp following Tumblr’s billion dollar purchase by Yahoo! In 2013 (Alfonso, 2013c).

Additionally, Tumblr exists in a larger history of “blogs” and “blogging” which began in the early days of the Web as personal diaries, though the term “blog” would not be adopted until later (Siles, 2011, 2012; Walker Rettberg, 2014). Eventually, online diarists and bloggers would come to define themselves and each other as separate groups, with differing priorities and filling different online niches (Siles, 2011). Reducing her own definition of what a blog is for the sake of encyclopedic clarity, Walker Rettberg (2005, cited in 2014) defines a blog as “a frequently
updated website consisting of dated entries arranged in reverse chronological order so the most recent post appears first” (p. 30). Tumblr blogs follow this same basic format. If you go to http://staff.tumblr.com (the official Tumblr Staff blog) the post at the top of the page will be the most recent. However, Tumblr users who are logged into the platform can also access their Dashboard, which shows the reblogged and original posts of all blogs that the user follows in reverse chronological order, similar to a RSS feed (that is, until the Tumblr mobile app introduced the “Best Stuff First” feature in October 2017, which used an algorithm to move some posts to the top of the mobile Dashboard, then all other posts would theoretically follow in reverse chronological order. This update only affected the mobile app, and could be turned off). By Tumblr’s launch in 2007, the concept of what a blog was had largely stabilized (Siles, 2012) and in the revised edition of her book Blogging, Walker Rettberg (2014) cites Tumblr as a blogging platform.

Siles’ (2011; 2012) bloggers were primarily people working in technology sectors, who tended to use their blogs to share tech news links with their own commentary. Walker Rettberg (2014) casts her net more widely, discussing personal, filter, and topic-driven blogs as three possible types of blogs. She concerns herself primarily with content as the defining feature of each of these types, rather than structural or architectural limitations (or the blogging platform used to support the content). Tumblr, however, branching from Neukirchen’s “tumblelog” format, more strongly emphasizes visual content, that can stand on its own without commentary, and the co-mingling of content from different users on a single platform. Walker Rettenberg (2014) notes that she finds the constraints of Tumblr’s ecosystem rather restrictive compared to other available blogging options. However, these constraints come with their own possibilities, as many Tumblr blogs lack a central theme (particularly discussed in chapter 3) and Tumblr’s
emphasis on reblogging content results in sharing content across blogs, rather than crafting a singular, personal perspective on identity in a coherent fashion. Furthermore, interview participants in the present study do not see Tumblr as an alternative to blogging sites like Wordpress, but rather in contrast to social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram.

While existing research into Tumblr practice has only just begun to appear in academic discourse, researchers recognize that Tumblr users do share a particular affinity with one another that is unique compared to other social media platforms (Bell, 2013; Chang, Tang, Inagaki, & Liu, 2014; Cho, 2017; Hillman, Procyk, & Neustaedter, 2014; Thelandersson, 2014). For most of Tumblr’s history, the platform lacked a visible mechanism for articulating the links between users, which Ellison and boyd (2007; 2013) cite as central to the definition of a social network site, and there is nothing approaching a “community” page, as was an architectural feature of LiveJournal (Kendall, 2007; Neill Hoch, 2014), Tumblr users do display cohesive behaviors in reblogging practice (Chang, Tang, Inagaki, & Liu, 2014) and frequently reference other users with whom they feel they share a relationship (Bell, 2013; Cho, 2015; Tiidenberg, 2015). Tumblr plays host to many different social groupings and users, including but not limited to queer social justice (Bell, 2013), queer aesthetics (Cho, 2015; Fink & Miller, 2014), and NSFW/pornographic photography (Tiidenberg, 2015).

As academic studies of Tumblr continue, specific attention has been paid to its extensive use by fandom participants (Morimoto & Stein, 2018). In a lineage of online fandom spaces (see Jenkins, 2006 for an argument on the importance of fans to new media adoption), Tumblr is an odd website to adopt as a place of fan participation. There are some things that Tumblr, the platform, supports incredibly well, particularly viral sharing through reblogging. But it is a
difficult platform to manage discussion, unlike prior fandom spaces like Usenet, Yahoo! Groups, mailing lists, and LiveJournal (Baym, 2000; Bourlai & Harring, 2014; Bury, Deller, Greenwood, & Jones, 2013; Honeycutt, 2005; Lothian, Busse, & Reid, 2007) designed specifically to foster discussion. As demonstrated by Pearce (& Artemesia, 2009), once a user base vacates one space, moving to the next, there may be little choice but to follow. Yet, even as Tumblr users exclaim “let me leave this blue hellscape,” they do not depart (jokingly, their intended, but never reached, destination tends to be absurd platforms like Neopets or Club Penguin, never conventional ones like Facebook or Twitter).

In a 2014 survey by Cowen and Company (“Younger Users,” 2014) users reported spending more time on Tumblr than any other social platform, barring Facebook. This statistic was heavily skewed by users in the 18-29 age group, with a sharp drop-off in time spent (from 50.6 minutes to 18.1 minutes by 30-44 year olds). The number of posts made to Tumblr has been declining since its peak in 2014, possibility signaling a decline in popularity (Barredo, 2017). But recent data from Verto Analytics (2017) of users 18 years and older indicate that the average mobile session duration on Tumblr by American users remains high, at 5.81 minutes per session, second only to Reddit at 9.59 minutes per session. When asked when during the day they used Tumblr, my interview participants reported having Tumblr open “all day” in a browser window or app, and frequently switching back and forth between Tumblr and other applications and tasks. Patterns of use similar to those in my narrative above appear to be somewhat typical of Tumblr, with frequent visits, amounting to relatively long total durations per day, and also longer session durations than other social platforms.
But what are users actually *doing* on Tumblr for such extended periods of time and with such frequency? And why, as well will see, do they keep doing “it” despite how persistently and vehemently they critique the Tumblr itself for being “broken,” both technically and socially?

Ultimately, I will argue that Tumblr account holders seek out a sense of *perceived autonomy* in their relationship both with the Tumblr platform and with other Tumblr users. Actor-network theory (Latour, 1996, 2005) posits that true autonomy is functionally non-existent, as human actors and non-human actants all function in relation to one another, exerting and ceding influence as they exist in the social order. Even objects that appear to be autonomous, are revealed to be highly interconnected at points of stress or failure (Latour, 2005, p. 81).

Tumblr, is a technological actant that is quietly frequently observed by users to be broken, to the point that additional augmentations, in the form of browser extensions or additional programs and platforms have to be used in conjunction with Tumblr in order to make the platform functional. Ultimately, the possibilities offered to Tumblr users to tailor their individual experiences through these additional recourses, coupled with their knowledge that the platform is less than a pristine, flawless technological actant, gives account holders a sense of control over their experiences. In comparison to platforms like Twitter, Facebook, or Instagram, where account holders feel beholden to the platform, the other people who populate the platform, and often both simultaneously, Tumblr’s messiness in execution actually makes participants feel more in control of their experience, and less like the platform is influencing their behaviors.

Their experiences on Tumblr are unique in comparison to other social platforms, and they by and large prefer Tumblr, despite its obvious faults.
1.3 Research Study Parameters and Methods Overview

In this study, I adopt a three-method approach to explicating the technical limitations and affordances of Tumblr.com as a social media platform, and account holders’ interactions on and with the platform that bolster, retool, and attempt to transform Tumblr through patterns of everyday use, resulting in an ultimate sense of perceived autonomy. The way account holders use the platform frequently conflicts with the expectations articulated by the platform itself and generate conflict on multiple, shifting fronts.

Conflict remains a central theme throughout the three main chapters. These conflicts are multiple, and often coexist with one another as users attempt to navigate the technical platform and harness its affordances while grating against its limitations. Conflict, at its most basic level, “centers on incompatibilities, and expressed struggle, and interdependence among two or more parties” (Putnam, 2006, p. 5). Conflict studies in the field of communication has a rich and varied intellectual history (Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2006), which includes a host of theories and sub-theories for understanding how conflict arises, becomes manifest, and is then negotiated via available communication tools and techniques (Putnam, 2006). More specifically, studies of conflict online are equally varied. Electronic communication can be considered a tool that was added to an arsenal of possible communication channels, over which conflicts both arise, or existing conflict is mediated (Carnevale & Probst, 1997; Galin, Gross, & Gosalker, 2007), while other research trajectories have focused more specifically on digital communities as sites where behaviors must be socially negotiated and controlled, leading to eruptions of conflict that are specifically constrained by the digital space that hosts the argument (Chau, 2009; Danis & Lee, 2005; Honeycutt, 2005; Smith, McLaughlin, & Osborne, 1997).
Another approach is to consider conflicts online more broadly as a feature of the multiplicity of interpretation on the internet, as do Phillips and Milner (2017), who conceptualize the difficulty of understanding “weird internet” phenomena as one of audience. What might be humorous to one group online may be offensive to another, because the social layers that shape the interpretation of the “weird” object are inconsistent. These inconsistencies allow the same object to be labeled a “troll” in one context, while in another, the same behavior might be more benign or serve to build community solidarity. Tumblr users may have a collection of ideas and concepts regarding what Tumblr is used for and how it should work, which is markedly different than the way Tumblr as a corporate entity presents itself through promotional and self-service help materials, and the architectural realities built into Tumblr’s code. And herein lies the conflict.

Conflicts on and with Tumblr thus include users versus platform (or ideal platform, as user’s desires for Tumblr fail to match the reality of what they can actually accomplish), users versus users (most often exacerbated by platform features), and platform versus platform (in the case of obvious coding errors leaking through to where they can be publically seen and mocked by users). In the case of conflict and Tumblr, one of the involved parties is quite frequently the limitations (and working-as-intended features) of the platform itself, even if the more obvious conflict is between two human actors communicating through Tumblr. In cases of “platform versus platform” conflict, Tumblr itself starts to break down as features fail to operate in predictable and consistent ways, and it is these coding and feature breakages being visibly exposed to the user base that allows for the documentation of technical actors conflicting and failing. Such was the case in the Autumn of 2016, where for a hilarious few hours, users could go to their own Likes page (literally, just a page that will show a Tumblr user every post on the
site they have ever clicked the Like button on, mine currently contains almost 20,000 posts), and instead view the Likes of some random, unidentified user. Refreshing the page then brought up the Likes of someone else. It became a game to find the most outlandish collection of Likes (usually pornographic) and blog about what you found. Tumblr is “broken,” and events such as the randomized Likes pages, exposes that brokenness. It is exactly this brokenness that additionally allows for account holders to feel as if they can wrestle some control over their social media experiences back from the platform, and in light of other platforms they feel are even more restrictive that Tumblr.

In this study, I argue for the specificity of conflict behaviors on Tumblr as being intensely tied to the singular architecture of the platform and the account holders who make use of it. While specific features may bear familiarity to other social media platforms, such as Reblogging being somewhat similar to Retweeting on Twitter, or multiple online platforms now allowing for a form of direct messaging between users, the specific combination of affordances (Evans, Pearce, Vitak, & Treem, 2016; Gibson, 1979; Norman, 1999) and limitations created on Tumblr produce a greater sense of autonomy in relationship to the platform than many other available social media platforms.

The objective here is therefore twofold. The first is to provide an in-depth, triangulated analysis of the Tumblr platform and how human actors make use of and co-construct the technical platform in every-day interaction. These interactions are often characterized by feelings of frustration with the limitations of the digital space. The second objective is to outline a process of inquiry, through a combination of three methods, that allows for future, similar analyses of digital spaces that seek to understand the way in which users and technical platforms co-construct one another through every-day patterns of use and conflict.
In chapter 2, I begin with a social-construction of technology (SCOT; Bijker, Hughes, & Pinch, 1989; Bijker & Law, 1992) informed analysis that uses Tumblr’s “About Tumblr” pages, accessible at the time of signing up for a new Tumblr account, as a starting point for unpacking particular affordances that the platform claims to promote (diversity of content, personal creativity, ease of use) and the tangible, feature-oriented affordances that arise when the platform is utilized by a typical blogger (one who is able-bodied, technologically literate, with an internet connection that is stable and fast enough to load images and video).

In chapter 3, I use a blend of auto-ethnographic, full-member immersion (Anderson, 2006) and qualitative in-depth interviews with 14 Tumblr “fandom” users to consider every-day patterns of use by Tumblr bloggers. Interview participants range from 19 to 34 years of age and, other than no participants identifying as straight, includes users from diverse backgrounds and experiences, including users from outside the United States (Argentina, Turkey, the UK), varying education levels, American users who identify as White, Black, Taiwanese-American, and Mexican-American, and a spectrum of non-binary and trans experiences, in addition to differing sexual orientations (excluding straight). Interview participants discuss the reasons they joined the Tumblr platform, privacy frustrations they’ve experienced both in terms of the functionality of the site itself and conflicts with other users, and their overall feelings regarding the Tumblr “community.” Subcultural fandom participants have been noted as early adopters of digital technologies, often trying to push up against the boundaries of the platforms they occupy, just as they take the source text of which they are fans as a starting point, rather than a definitive conclusion (Booth, 2008; 2009; Bury et al., 2013; Busse & Hellekson, 2006; Jenkins, 2006; Lothian, Busse, & Reid, 2007; Neill Hoch, 2014). I found their contributions to this project to be invaluable, as they were able to provide rich histories of their own platform use, screen shots of
Tumblr’s user interface breaking that they had witnessed themselves and saved for posterity, thoughtful critiques of both Tumblr as a platform, and the social behaviors they witnessed as Tumblr account holders.

Finally, in chapter 4, I use discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1995, 2009; Meyer, 2009; Van Dijk, 2009; Wodak, 1996) to explicate Tumblr posts that combine fandom content with feminist concerns. These posts are heavily reblogged by users, and often change in tone and analytic content as the post progresses from user to user. Through the reblogging feature, Tumblr bloggers add new content to the original post, taking what might have started as a joke and turning the discussion to more serious matters; transforming aesthetic posts into intersectional debate, or taking serious concerns and dismissing them to return the conversation to a previous discussion point (or introduce a new topic altogether). These posts characterize the Arena, where social and technical norms combine in such a way that interaction on Tumblr may turn combative at any moment, but the seriousness of these skirmishes is highly variable and equally unpredictable. This is not to say that discussions of feminism(s) on Tumblr are not serious, influential, or undertaken sincerely (or that other posts and patterns of behavior exist on Tumblr). Simply that the limitations and characteristics of the conflicts themselves make it difficult to parse what these specific, repeated interactions mean to users, the extent to which these interactions have repercussions outside of Tumblr, and how seriously anyone engaged in the argument really is.

This ambivalence, that internet culture artifacts can be read by participants and observers in multiple, conflicting ways that make intent and seriousness difficult to parse, and the multiplicity of engagement is rather the point of the object in the first place, has been discussed in depth by Phillips and Milner (2017). I link this interest in multiplicity and identity formation
to Puar’s (2005) application of assemblage theory to feminist concerns, arguing that participation on Tumblr is always-on-the-verge of exploding online self, which can be both terrifying and liberating, but at the very least gives users the feeling of exerting control over how they interact with Tumblr and other Tumblr users and contributes to their sense of perceived autonomy.

In the following chapters, I outline my three methods in greater detail, as each one takes prominence in a given chapter. However, data collected and analyzed from each of the three methods is interwoven throughout all three chapters as supporting materials for understanding how Tumblr’s technical features and social behaviors reinforce one another or result in conflicts that frustrate user engagement.

Despite the conflicts and frustrations that interview participants routinely cited in interviews, virtually all interview participants reported that their time on Tumblr was largely positive, and they had more positive experiences with other Tumblr users than negative ones. However, they were also quick to note that their experiences on Tumblr were in their own hands, being able to decide who to Follow, who to Unfollow, and who to ignore. Tumblr’s own privacy features, most notably the ability to Block another user, were considered largely ineffectual, with users having to control their Tumblr experience in ways that were more socially constructed and digitally altered than technologically maintained by the “vanilla” Tumblr platform without browser extensions and add-ons. Though there are long-standing social and technical issues that have plagued the Tumblr platform for years, my participants (and dozens, probably hundreds, if not thousands, of posts on the platform) express that there is currently no better online platform that provides them the features and perceived autonomy they are searching for. So they make do with what Tumblr offers, often while being vocal in their criticisms.
This study keeps this perspective in mind: that Tumblr’s users are well aware of how the platform fails to fulfill their needs, yet simultaneously Tumblr offers them the best compromise currently available. This conflicted stance, and the sometimes quite literal conflicts present between users on the platform, presents a unique online experience markedly different than anywhere else on the social media landscape. And it is an experience difficult to penetrate as an outsider.

1.4 Platform Updates and User Awareness

Like many digital spaces, Tumblr code, features, and user interface are being updated and modified consistently, and users may not notice the alterations immediately, especially if they are algorithmic, modifying aspects like post placement and search results (Butcher, 2012), rather than more distinct interface changes. It is thus nearly impossible to even attempt to document every technical transformation that the site has undergone. Or, even to document the routine changes the site undergoes over a set time period. There are simply too many, and some are more commented upon by users than others. Some of the “invisible” changes may likewise alter behaviors, without users ever registering that a change occurred. Instead, I try and focus on key moments where Tumblr(‘s Staff) attempts to define itself, and how users seek to use and define the platform.

Despite the challenges of trying to track an active social platform “in motion,” Tumblr users themselves do notice when particularly invasive updates are made to the site. And rarely are initial reactions positive (Alfonso, 2013a; Orsini, 2012; Romano, 2014 as early examples). Tumblr users tend to be extremely critical of updates they perceive, creating multiple commentary posts on changes to the site in a short period of time. See figures 2-6 as examples of
high circulation posts commenting on technological changes to the Tumblr platform that invoke a direct concern with the ability to communicate with other users.

Figure 2. Post from time period after Replies were removed. Replies would later return.
just an fyi if you start randomly hearing sounds like a chainsaw, beating heart or screams, in your chat function because Tumblr randomly changed the sounds without any warning.

Update:

you can turn it off by opening any chat window, clicking the three dots, and clicking "Make the spooky sounds stop." This should restore the normal notification sounds.

It will then look like this:

Figure 3. A step-by-step, user generated post describing how to turn off Halloween (2017) noises.
Figure 4. A detailed explanation on how to alter settings of the Tumblr Dashboard locally to circumvent the introduction of “Safe Mode.”
Figure 5. A detailed explanation on how to alter settings of the Tumblr Dashboard locally to circumvent the introduction of “Safe Mode.” (cont.)
Figure 6. A detailed explanation on how to alter settings of the Tumblr Dashboard locally to circumvent the introduction of “Safe Mode.” (cont.)

Typically, these posts will taper off as time elapses. Either because Tumblr users become accustomed to the new features, or they find their protests to be futile. In some cases, the third outcome has been that Tumblr developers actually roll back the change, only to introduce yet another feature or adjustment to the site’s coding, as was the case when Replies were introduced,
removed, then reintroduced. Still, some themes persist in Tumblr users’ criticisms and similar concerns are raised time and time again: the lack of privacy features; the mobile apps for Android and iOS smartphones being riddled with bugs; and the presence of Nazi/White Supremacist blogs on the platform (as well as the related issue of Tumblr’s “suggested blog” algorithm being based on frequently used tags, meaning that bloggers who post content such as anti-Nazi news, family histories of oppression, or commentary about Nazis, are then recommended to follow pro-Nazi blogs; see Noble, 2018 for similar algorithmic failings, particularly as pertaining to Google’s algorithms and the pornification of racial and ethnic minority women).

Ultimately, understanding the affordances and limitations Tumblr is key to understanding the loyal, but fraught, attachment that Tumblr’s account holders have to the platform. Their daily visits to the “blue hellscape” are unavoidable, despite their frustrations with Tumblr. One post, seen in figure 7, likens visiting Tumblr to opening the morning paper; even when you know all the news is bad.

![Image of a Tumblr post](image)

**Figure 7.** The Blue Hell Gazette.
In the following chapter, I use SCOT to explicate specific Tumblr affordances and constraints as they either reflect or contradict Tumblr’s own “About Tumblr” documentation, accessible at the time of signing up for a new Tumblr account. I use the tension between the “About Tumblr” pages and the actual functionality of Tumblr’s active features as a way of discussing Tumblr’s particular inability to reach a state of socio-technical closure (Bijker & Law, 1992), where user expectations and technical restraints continue to cause interpretive conflict.
2. ABOUT TUMBLR: SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF TECHNOLOGY AND PLATFORM FEATURES

2.1 Introduction: All the News is Bad and so is Tumblr

In this chapter I use a social construction of technology (SCOT) framework, combined with an auto-ethnographic account as a “full member” (Anderson, 2006)\(^2\) to explicate architectural features of the Tumblr platform that encourage and constrain social behaviors among users, and between users and the platform itself. In particular, I am interested in Tumblr’s own presentational rhetoric as expressed through the “About Tumblr” pages that potential users can access when signing up for a Tumblr account. The text and layout of these pages are Tumblr’s own curated introduction to what the site aims to be and how account holders should utilize the platform. The “About Tumblr” pages act as a calling card to potential account holders, who are often framed as already Tumblr *users* even if they do not yet maintain blogs of their own. Through text, animations, and images, the “about Tumblr” pages communicate to the potential account holder why they should complete the process of signing up for the site, rather than just continuing to browse individual Tumblr blogs or follow links from other sites into Tumblr, without maintaining an account. They also serve to prime new account holders for what they should come to expect from the platform, and what the platform expects from them. However, I argue that both my experiences, and the experiences of my interview participants (discussed in greater detail in subsequent chapters) do not align neatly with the vision Tumblr attempts to dictate. This conflict between how Tumblr conceptualizes its own use and how account holders interact with the platform in their day to day experiences contributes to the

\(^2\) For a more detailed account of auto-ethnographic positioning, see chapter 3.
account holders’ sense of autonomy, as they frequently realize they are in conflict with the platform that they use, and must be proactive in shaping their experiences.

I take assumptions presented on the “About Tumblr” pages as jumping off points to articulate additional features and restrictions present throughout the platform, against which the user base struggles, attempts to modify, and adjusts social behaviors around technological affordances and limitations. As Tumblr is a digital platform, those technical limitations are subject to change at unforeseen intervals, as there is only sometimes an announcement or warning from the Tumblr staff blog (@staff) that a change is anticipated. That being said, Tumblr’s “About” pages offer a glimpse into how Tumblr is advertised towards potential users that is relatively static. These pages may not wholly reflect the position of individual developers, those who write copy for “official” releases regarding platform aspirations, or even founder David Karp, before his departure from the company in late 2017. However, they do constitute a somewhat coherent, easily accessible statement that acts as part of Tumblr’s public face, even as other statements across Tumblr-run Tumblr blogs, FAQs, or statements to the press may contradict these pages. These “About” pages present only one possible foil against which the active reality of the platform-in-use can be set. But as they exist on the platform themselves, and in a location that is easily accessible to new account holders, they are particularly apt as a basis for comparison.

2.2 Method: Social Construction of Technology

The social construction of technology (SCOT) framework focuses on how technological artifacts stabilize through a process of use, eventually reaching a closure point, where the artifact’s standard use is socially and technically defined through a balancing act between the technology and users (Bijker, Hughes, & Pinch, 1989).
As opposed to broader science and technology studies (STS) approaches, which tend to be “humanistic in [their] focus on real, acting human beings” (Spiegel-Rössing & de Solla Price, 1977, in Hackett, Amsterdamska, Lynch, & Wajcman, 2008), and are concerned with the intersection of science, science policy, and social ramifications, SCOT places a stronger focus on “conflict, difference, or resistance,” as technologies are shaped through the process of their construction and ultimate closure as they engage with human actors (Bijker & Law, 1992). While the consequences of the conflicts that precipitate as the technological artifact approaches closure are considered important, as are the policies and realities that made the technology’s development possible in the first place, there is less of an overt concern with future policy decision making in SCOT than in other STS branches.

While economic factors may play a role in the overall SCOT narrative, they are important only insofar as they limit or expand the possibilities of the socio-technical relationship. Keeping corporate actors in mind is, however, particularly important when considering online spaces, as monetization may prompt changes in which users have little say, and technology does not necessitate (Butcher, 2012; Gehl, 2015; Puschmann & Burgess, 2013).

However, SCOT studies are most deeply interested in the interaction between the social and the technological, and are anti-technological determinism (Bijker, Hughes, & Pinch, 1989). Drawing distinct lines between (“pure”) science and (“applied”) technologies is ultimately unproductive, as the categories themselves are messy and indistinct and both pure and applied sciences are socially constructed (Bijker, Hughes, & Pinch, 1989). Furthermore, “the social environment…shapes the technical characteristic of the artifact” (ibid, p. 12). Bijker, Hughes, and Pinch (1987) outline three broad categories of SCOT approaches that they found present in their initial 1984 workshop: the social constructivist approach, “systems” metaphor, and the
rapidly developing “actor-networks” which Latour in particular would later expand into Actor-Network Theory (ANT), where distinctions between human actors, natural phenomena, and technical object broke down. The actor-network approach is thus seen as a possible underpinning theory for the completion of SCOT work, though it is only one of several approaches that could be used to produce a SCOT analysis. Bijker and colleagues (1989) see the common thread between all three approaches to be their “emphasis on ‘thick description,’ that is, looking into what has been seen as the black box of technology (and, for that matter, the black box of society).” It is thus a perspective that all but requires at least some level of ethnographic immersion (Geertz, 1972; van Maanen, 1988), or qualitative interviewing procedures, in order to produce these thick descriptions.

Ethnographic methods, furthermore, are particularly adept at finding moments where the technical and social grate up against one another imperfectly, as participants express frustration, anger, and exasperation with the limits of technology (Hine, 2000; Markham, 1998; Watkins, 2009). Important actors within the system become visible through these conflicts. Online social platforms promote and constrain behaviors, shaping the social processes that proliferate.

2.3 Framework: Actor-Network Theory

Actor-network theory (ANT) refuses to divide social actors and technical actants (Latour, 1992) from one another, and allow them to carry equal weight within the techno-social system as appropriate (Bijker, Hughes, & Pinch, 1989; Latour, 2005). Always about the relationships between actors in the system, ANT emphasizes process, looking at the deployment, stabilizations, and procedures of technical and social actors (Latour, 2005). As such, ANT allows for finer analysis of technological artifacts that may be going through a process of stabilization, as well as understanding the interaction between artifacts that have reached closure and the
humans who make use of them. We tend to create technical actors to fill in the gaps within our world where humans fail (Latour, 1992). Quite often, these failures are those of reliability. A technical door groom, that ensures a door with swing back shut after it has been opened, is better at doing its job than a human, who may forget, have to go on break, or simply be feeling vindictive that particular day (Latour, 1992).

Actor-network theory shies away from attributing total autonomy to either human actors or technical actants (Latour, 2005), as the analysis produced through ANT is one of understanding connections and interrelations within a system. Latour (1996) cautions against equating these actor-networks too closely with engineering networks, where connections are tangible and self-evident. But instead likens them more closely to Granovetter’s (1977, 1983) “loose ties,” where aspects of the network may be invisible until that connection becomes relevant or important, such as in times of mechanical failure or human crisis (Latour 2005).

2.3.1 Closure

Closure in SCOT and ANT is never absolute, but it is a state where the use and place of a technological artifact is widely agreed upon. Even more so this is the case with digital technologies, which often can be manipulated on the “back-end” in response to both user feedback and developer whim (Gillespie, Boczkowski, & Foot, 2013). Still, Gillespie and colleagues caution against allowing the physical reality of technologies from dropping out altogether, when focusing on digital artifacts. There remains a material trail of development practice, as well as the environmental consequences of the technologies we use to interact with digital spaces (Jackson, 2013). Stabilization is a process of compromise, keeping in mind that technological development is characterized by conflict. Bijker and Law (1992) characterize stabilization as when “the network of relations in which [technology] are involved—
with the various strategies that drive and give shape to the network—reach some kind of accommodation” (p. 10). The conflict or tension has not disappeared, it has merely quieted down for the time being. Pinch and Bijker (1987) use stabilization and closure largely interchangeably, though express a preference for stabilization. Closure is borrowed from “Empirical programme of Relativism” (p. 26), which was foundational to their development of SCOT as an approach. Closure, however, can also refer to the “end product” of the process of stabilization, by which problems that were considered conflicts in the development of the technological artifact “disappear,” rather than are solved (p. 26). The social groups that raised the “problem” of the technology in the first place must be content with the proposed solution, or the problem can be redefined so that these groups no longer view the problem as necessitating an answer.

2.4 Framework: Affordances: You Can(‘t) Do That!

Before more deeply considering the affordances and limitations of Tumblr as a dynamic, transforming and transformative digital platform, I wish to address the concept of “affordances” directly, as it is a useful term for describing the set of possibilities available to the user base of a social platform in a given cultural context as technical and social actors move towards a state of closure. Gibson (1979) develops the term “affordance” as a way of conceptualizing the relationship between a physical object in the environment and the animal that makes use of that object. An affordance is thus both physical and psychical. Affordances are what a particular animal can accomplish with the given object, and thus are both specific to the animal, while also being multiple; not all affordances will be immediately visible or utilized. Affordances are both mutually constructed and more expansive than what we can observe.

Gibson’s classic example is that a fallen log may afford a bridge over a gap for a tiger, but not for the heavier elephant. Norman (1999) sees the concept of affordance as being over-
and imprecisely-used in design studies (and by extension in the academic field of communication). He argues that a user interface cannot “afford clicking,” rather, placing an icon that is meant to be clicked is more precisely defined as a convention. We learn that icons are meant to be clicked. For the most part, software cannot create affordances. Instead, they draw upon and create conceptual models, impose constraints, and work with conventions (Norman, 1999). A true affordance in computing, by Norman’s reckoning, would be that the cursor cannot move beyond the edge of the (hardware) screen. Or that one must touch within the physical boundaries of the iPad screen in order to interact with the device. It is impossible for a software designer to break these affordances, they cannot create a UI with off-screen space where the end user cannot click or touch.

While Norman is perhaps a bit overzealous in his specificity, remembering that an affordance is a relationship between physical object and psychical characteristics, reminds us that when speaking of affordances and constraints, not all researchers, participants, and online spaces are equal. As a crude example, the deaf researcher will engage in a different set of affordances than the hearing researcher, when writing about an audio-visual platform like Tumblr.

Communication researcher generally does extend the term affordance to software/websites, despite Norman’s declarations, (Gillespie, Boczkowski, & Foot, 2013; Papacharissi, 2009; and indirectly Bowker, 2013) and make compelling cases for “affordances” as an apt metaphor for how online and technological structures work to create possibilities of use. Still, one cannot speak of Tumblr, or ASmallWorld, or a Galaxy phone, as having an affordance, rather the relationship between the user and the platform produce affordances. Evans and colleagues (2016) outline specific thresholds for “affordances” in communication studies,
writing that: “We advocate for conceptually defining communication affordances in terms of the multidimensional relationship between the object or technology and the user, and how that relationship offers possible (and actual) outcomes (i.e., what emerges from the user's interactions with the object).” Keeping in mind that an affordance is a relationship between technology and user, many able-bodied, able-minded, researchers and users share many of the same (or nearly the same) affordances that I do. And thus we can speak in generalities (just as most tigers are going to be able to use that log to cross the gap, and most elephants cannot. But a particularly rotund tiger break the bridge or a very young elephant might be able to cross).

For the remainder of this chapter, I will be using the term “affordances” in the looser sense as adopted by design studies and communication. While they may not be true affordances as emphasized by Norman, the concept is useful for underlining the relationship between technical object and user.

### 2.4.1 Affordances and Self as a “Typical” User of Tumblr

Unless otherwise noted, I take myself as the Tumblr account user encountering the platform, and my own corporeality and history become relevant to my ability to navigate the site, make use of social and technical conventions, and build bonds with other users. While I wish to maintain some generalizability to my comments, there are personal idiosyncrasies that are worth noting, as they situate my relationship with technology (Haraway, 1989).

At the time of writing, I have been a Tumblr user for about six years. Though I have done little with custom design of my Tumblr blog, I have a background in web design, that includes hand-coding personal websites in the 2000s and I maintain a firm grasp of HTML and CSS. I have very, very limited experience in other coding languages. I’ve been a heavy user of the internet since childhood, and digital social media virtually since its invention. I was an early
adopter of LiveJournal, Twitter, and Facebook (though I no longer actively maintain a Facebook page or Twitter account). There are very few software or platform “problems” I can’t figure out with the aid of Google, an attribute that has allowed me to work professionally in technical support on a number of occasions. At the time of writing I am 32 years old, situating me among the oldest “Millennials.” I am a native English speaker. Given Tumblr’s strong association with queer communities (Bell, 2013; Byron & Robards, 2017; Cho, 2015; Fink & Miller, 2014), it is also relevant that I have openly identified as queer (bisexual) in my interactions on the platform, and display apathy towards gender. Other Tumblr users most frequently refer to me using they/them pronouns (my blog states that my pronouns are “any.”)

2.5 Additional Procedures

I use one of four devices to regularly access Tumblr: A six-year-old 15 inch Windows 7 laptop, where I use the desktop site and have the “new xkit”3 extension installed; A one-year-old iPad Pro, where I use the Tumblr app and rarely the “mobile version” of the website; A three-year-old iPhone 5 (transitioned to iPhone SE in December 2017), where I use the Tumblr app; and a Mac desktop that belongs to the state of Illinois, where I access the desktop site without xkit. The majority of the content and screen shots for this research project were taken from the Windows 7 laptop in Firefox. Exclusions are noted in figure captions. Except in the case of unrelentingly public images selected by Tumblr to be used as backgrounds for landing pages, I have removed all user names from screen shots throughout the entirety of this study. Users are instead referred to by the color used to conceal their identifying information. Colors are consistent within a screen shot and inconsistent between screen shots

3 See Appendix B for note on xkit
(i.e., “Red” in figure 3 is a different user than “Red” in figure 4. But if a red box appears twice in figure 3, it indicates the same user participating multiple times in a single exchange).

2.6 Signing up for a Platform: You are Already a User

When considering the presentation of Tumblr through “About” materials, it remains relevant that Tumblr founder, David Karp, spoke directly about early Tumblr functionality as a direct response to conflicts between users that he witnessed on other platforms (Walker, 2012). While the lack of a “Wall” feature (such as Facebook uses) has not prevented vicious arguments on Tumblr (Bell, 2013), Karp’s own statements emphasize that the socio-technical past becomes coded into today’s platforms. That arguments, insults, and harassment persists on Tumblr, emphasizes how users participate in the social shaping of emerging online platforms. Intention on the part of the developers cannot wholesale dictate responses by actual users. Tumblr’s path towards stabilization is built in response to existing social and technical conventions that Karp could observe on platforms that debuted before Tumblr. While Karp was able to “learn” from sites like Facebook, Facebook equally adjusted and reformed based on users’ behaviors given current technical boundaries, transforming the site over time.

Signing up for a Tumblr account looks quite unlike joining another social platform. In reality, it looks different every time it is attempted. The backsplash of the sign-in page changes each time that it is refreshed, offering a photograph, an animated gif, or a piece of artwork, all sourced from trending posts on the platform. In the lower right hand corner, the original blog’s username appears, pointing you back to the “source.” But the nature of memetic and viral content is such, that there is actually no structural guarantee that the original poster has very much at all to do with the origin of the image (Shifman, 2014).
Figure 8. Tumblr’s landing page, with user generated artwork as the background.

Figure 9. The same page, refreshed within two minutes of previous screen shot. Different art from a different blog.
From this first moment, Tumblr presents itself as a place for creatives. Your work can become the literal landing page of all potential new account holders, putting countless eyes on your personal creative output.

2.7 “About” Page 1: Making Smart and Dumb Jokes

From the sign-in page there are four additional pages that explain what Tumblr is. The small circles on the left-hand side of the page visible in Figures 8 and 9 allow for navigation between them. The first circle is the sign-in page, and the sixth is the sign-in page again, with four “About” pages sandwiched in-between. These “About Tumblr” pages communicate a particular perspective to new account holders, who are already expected to have some familiarity with Tumblr, but may be looking for additional guidance on how to make use of the platform and the expectations put upon them as account holders.

![Figure 10](image)

**Figure 10.** Hard to explain.
Tumblr is so easy to use that it’s hard to explain. We made it really, really simple for people to make a blog and put whatever they want on it. Stories, photos, GIF’s, TV shows, links, quips, dumb jokes, smart jokes, Spotify tracks, mp3s, videos, fashion, art, deep stuff. Tumblr is 362 million different blogs, filled with literally whatever.

Key to Tumblr’s differentiation in the online platform “market” is that it is aggressively multimodal, allowing connection to multiple resources from a single interface (Bourlai & Herring, 2014; Chang, Tang, Inagaki, & Liu, 2014; Cho, 2015). Tumblr allows for the uploading and hosting of audio, video, and image files. Text posts do not have a specific character or word limit, though the limit for “pages” was, at least at one time, 500,000 characters (Unwrapping Tumblr, 2015). From this first about page, Tumblr emphasizes that people can put “whatever they want” onto a blog. Not only that, there are 362 million other blogs already in existence containing “literally whatever.” Tumblr initially bills itself to potential account holders as an open, flexible digital space that can support many different types of shared content.

What Tumblr’s own “About” material on this first page most strongly highlights the fact anything can be shared; it prioritizes a diversity of content. Drawing from the history of media studies, van Djick (2009) cautions against seeing the shift to user generated content as a significant break with past media engagement and contests the passivity of users in the pre-digital era. Important here, however, is that Tumblr itself is invoking notions of participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006) and produsage (Bruns, 2008). But what that anything on Tumblr is, at least in this first formulation, does not have to originate with the user. Presumably, those producing television shows are not using Tumblr to share the finished product. Instead, Tumblr users have the ability to link out to television shows hosted on other platforms, or upload video files they have saved and may or may not have the right to distribute. Both “dumb jokes” and “smart jokes” are included among these higher-effort creative practices. The shared content does
not have to take a great deal of effort on behalf of the blog maintainer. And on Tumblr, delineating between the smart and the dumb joke can be a challenge in itself, but one that emphasizes that while diverse content can be shared on Tumblr, successfully sharing content relies on specific patterns of social interaction through Tumblr’s Reblog feature. In the following section, I discuss Tumblr jokes and the structure of Tumblr jokes as a means of exploring Tumblr’s claims towards the diversity of content that can be shared across the platform and the importance of reblogging as an affordance that makes sharing content worthwhile. The jokes that proliferate on Tumblr are often times neither “smart” nor “dumb,” but instead are referential (often to other posts or jokes or outside news stories), rely on exchange with other users, and cannot be fully separated from the architectural affordances of the Tumblr platform. Jokes aren’t a form of content one brings to Tumblr, but rather an interaction built on Tumblr.

2.7.1 Shitposting

Both “smart jokes” and “dumb jokes” may fit under the larger Tumblr content category of “shitposting.” Often times, a shitpost will appear to be low-effort, concise, and absurd. Salter (2017) defines a shitpost as “slang for an online comment or blog post deemed deliberately offensive and without value,” though as will be discussed, Tumblr users largely do not define shitposts as being offensive by default. Of my own posts on Tumblr, the most Liked and reblogged posts I’ve managed to create are almost all shitposts. They are never posts I took time and effort in crafting, or my creative output such as fiction writing. My most reblogged post is simply a title line that reads, “This blog is pro salt and vinegar chips.” The post took me seconds to write, and was in response to another post I had just reblogged that asked users to list their star sign, their Hogwarts house, and their opinion of salt and vinegar chips in the tags of the original post. In this case, my “shitpost” was at least in part reliant upon the flow of the Tumblr
Dashboard on that particular day. Many of the people I reblog from and who reblog from me were seeing lots of content about preferences in potato chips being connected to star signs, Myers-Briggs Type Indicator results, or sexual orientation. And a lot of that content was nonsensical.

Figure 11. Shitposting versus Nightblogging.

The post in figure 11 above does more to explain what shitposting is, in relation to the concept of nightblogging. By 2017, “nightblogging” has largely left the Tumblr vernacular, but
the post above illustrates that the two terms are not, in fact, interchangeable. The text from the pink-boxed user is repeated below.

**ok there is a difference between nightblogging and shitposting**

**nightblogging is like “what if apples screamed when we bit them?**

**shitposting is like “a crisp one donger bill” nightblogging has more of a focus on theoreticals, especially in stating absurd thoughts in normal ways. shit posting is more the opposite, stating normal things in ways that make them absurd. “a crisp one dollar bill” isn’t funny or unusual, but replacing “dollar” with the absurdist internet word “donger” is what makes it funny & thus a shitpost. it’s not necessarily that one is more coherent, but that they’re differentiated both by form and by lexicon. nightblogging is surrealism, shitposting is dada**

Shitposting here is incredibly specific in format, while remaining open to diverse content being plugged into the available spaces within that format. What both formulations, shitposting and nightblogging, share is a focus on the absurd, a key facet of Tumblr humor. Moving away from formulations of humor that are derogatory towards any specific marginalized group, absurdist humor that does not depend on a particular human referent circulates frequently on Tumblr.

In classic, widely cited literature on comedy, women are shown to prefer “absurd” humor over overtly sexual humor (Groch, 1974; Henkin & Fish, 1986), though these results could not be reproduced consistently (Brodzinsky, Barnet, & Aiello, 1981; Henkin & Fish, 1986; Wilson & Molleston, 1981).

Palmer (1987) posits that virtually all “gag” humor (and thus humor more generally, as humorous narratives are often reliant upon a series of situations with embedded gags) consists of two moments, peripeteia and syllogism. Peripeteia “is the moment when the fortunes of the principal character are reversed” (Palmer, 1987, p. 39) while the syllogism is the logical sequence of events moving from the known state of affairs, to an observation, and finally a conclusion. This major premise, minor premise, conclusion structure is similarly used in many

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4 Throughout this text, I have preserved the original language and typographical decisions of both Tumblr posts and interview participants’ responses.
lines of reasoning and logic. But in humor, the conclusions reached are contradictory, as they must remain both plausible and implausible. The outcome of the gag is unexpected in order to be funny, but is not so outrageous to be entirely unfeasible according to laws that govern the world in which the joke takes place (so what might be unfeasible in a modern setting, might be improbable, but still possible in a sci-fi setting). Likewise, in their appraisal of “weird internet” humor more generally, Phillips and Milner (2017) use the concepts of polysemy and ambivalence and the layering of images and ideas that are “antagonistic and social, creative and disruptive, humorous and barbed [...] too unwieldy, too variable across specific cases, to be essentialized as this as opposed to that” (p. 10) to understand satirical play in online spaces where the joke might not always be obvious, or may garner widely different reactions from different audiences.

While shitposting may fall into this categorization as well, the particular technical and social structures of reblogging on Tumblr become part of the joke, where multiple users’ interjections and additions are visible and at least partly attributable, as the username stays connected to the post, as opposed to some other forms of memetic content that becomes detached from its creators (Shifman, 2014). While Tumblr’s first “About” page acknowledges that account holders can share both smart and dumb jokes, it posits jokes as primarily being a joke that “you” share, rather than a process of referential co-creation with other account holders across the platform. In the following example, I explicate how one particular joke is co-created by multiple Tumblr account holders.

2.7.2 Attack of the Clowns and the Co-Construction of a Gag

Reblogging on Tumblr lends itself to the structure of the syllogistic gag, and likewise often plays with the boundary between probable and improbable.
The above post, figure 12, began circulating in the Fall of 2016 in response to a series of clown-related attacks in North America and Europe (“Attacken in Rostock,” 2016; Mackay, 2016; and Rogers, 2016 as examples of coverage), and was still in circulation a year later. This series of reblogs has three separate Tumblr users in conversation with one another.

The user in Red originates the post, writing, “yall like “I wanna die” like a broken record but a buncha clowns come over wanting to kill you and youre all shitting your pants. hypocrites you are[.]” The user first refers to the common Tumblr refrain of wanting to die, often at the smallest inconvenience or social mistake. While there certainly are users on Tumblr who use the site to vent about their mental illness, and this may include serious suicidal ideation, it is more likely here that the original poster is referring to more benign calls for death in the face of smaller mistakes. The syllogism here begins with two known quantities on Tumblr by the time...
the initial post debuted: the clown-related attacks that were heavily circulated on social media at the time, and Tumblr users’ frequent postings about wanting to die.

When I initially encountered this post on my Dashboard (a full year before my research began), it was only the original posting by the Red user. In a sense, I only saw the major premise of the final joke. Several days later, the post reappeared on the Dashboard in the same format I have reproduced above. Yellow added, “the day i let bozo stab me to death is the day i fuckin die, pal[.]” This response follows similar textual conventions as Red, using some proper punctuation and dropping other proper formatting rules (correct use of quotations by Red, a comma between die and pal by Yellow, Red typing “youre” which is the correct form of the your/you’re homonym but without the necessary apostrophe). Early studies of internet netspeak or chatspeak emphasized technological reasons why stylistic changes occurred between standard written languages and the way people wrote to each other online (Crystal, 2001; Androutsopoulos, 2006). But research soon expanded into a wide variety of approaches that worked to unpack the socio-linguistic processes occurring online that lead to particular patterns of written communication, both synchronous and asynchronous (Androutsopoulous, 2006) and in specialized communities such as hackers (Coleman, 2013). Squires (2010) argues that the use of netspeak may be greatly exaggerated compared to the reality of how people speak to one another online, finding that in a corpus of about 10,000 words, “u” and “r” as substitutes for “you” and “are” only account for 7.4 percent and 2.8 percent of occurrences respectively. In comparing uses of “i” and “I,” both Squire’s data set and that of Tagliamonte and Denis (2008) find the lowercase i to be more prevalent, with 86.9 percent and 74.07 percent respectively. But this is a capitalization difference, rather than a spelling change. Tagliamonte and Denis’ (2008) corpus includes over a million words of instant messaging text from 71 participants who were 17-20
years-old from 2004-2006. Less than three percent of the total text was made up of chat speech variants (ttyl, brb, hahaha, etc.) and the vast majority of these instances were variations of laughter. Netspeak, as it may exist as a popular mindset, may be a fairly rare occurrence. Soffer (2012) calls the practice of netspeak performative, demonstrating how misspellings and grammatical errors online are in fact quite systematic.

While I cannot provide the kind of detailed Saussureian analysis Soffer offers with any authority, it is sufficient to say that the original post reads as deliberately casual and oral in its delivery, and Yellow matches the oral tone of the original post. The combination of correct and incorrect grammar and colloquialisms demonstrates a knowledge of correct grammatical forms and a desire to circumvent them for the sake of humor or social signaling to other Tumblr users.

But still, the final punchline, or reversal of fortunes has not yet occurred. Green, a third user, reblogs the post again, playing the “straight man” of the joke. While the first two posts rely on the contemporary news event of the clown attacks, Green sends the joke down a different path. “[W]ell yeah thats how being stabbed to death works[.]” When you are stabbed to death…you die. This response has little if anything to do with clowns anymore. Instead, it points out the error in Yellow’s logic. You cannot die after you are already stabbed to death. Green returns in the final reblog, writing in bold text, “don’t make fun of me dude what if a girl sees this[.]” This is the final peripeteia. No longer is the exchange about clowns, or death, but instead it is about impressing a hypothetical “girl” who might see “this.”

While the total notes count displayed at the bottom of the post accounts for every variation of the original post, and thus not all users contributing to the 50k+ notes seen here would have encountered the entire exchange between all three users, it is fair enough to say that thousands of “girls” have likely seen the exchange at this point. In trying to impress “girls” and
putting on a tough act (*the day i let bozo stab me to death is the day i die, pal*, implying that one would fight back against bozo and not let the stabbing continue) has failed. The publicness of the execution of the joke means, in fact, “girls” have seen it.

I use “girls” here in quotes, because from the post itself, and the circulation of this post, the genders of the participants in and observers remains unclear. “Girls” here as a punchline may have very little at all to do with sex, gender, or any form of specific identity, tying the joke into Tumblr’s prevailing queerness. “Girls,” in this specific context, describes any individual who now finds Yellow uncool or unattractive. Anyone, regardless of gender, can be part of the collective “girls.” Likewise, “pal” and “dude” are equally gender ambivalent in context and thus the reader of the final joke is able to occupy any position within the framework of the exchange. All three roles (Yellow who is potentially now embarrassed, or at least pretends to be embarrassed, Green playing it straight, and the hypothetical “girls” witnessing the take down) can be occupied by the reader fluidly.

Is this joke smart? Is it dumb? Did it originate as a joke at all? At minimum, it required combined effort on the part of at least three individuals in order to reach its final form. The particular flow of the interaction was made possible by reblogging, allowing users to set one another up in order to complete the gag. This is not the only comedic turn the post could have taken. Likewise, the same post had the potential to take a more serious turn, drawing attention back to those injured or traumatized in clown attacks, or the way some Tumblr users my trivialize suicidal ideation (see chapter 4 for more detailed analysis of Tumblr reblog chains that combine feminist commentary with fandom materials).

While much of Tumblr humor utilizes reblogs in the structure of jokes, the “About” page we began with presents humor as either dumb or smart, but originating with a hypothetical “you”
rather than a process built through interaction with others. What is “shared” through Tumblr’s interface is presented as a singular creative act (or the act of sharing someone else’s creative output through Tumblr’s features), rather than an acknowledgement of how content circulates and changes after that initial act of sharing. And it is this circulation through reblogging that is the actual source of jokes, both “dumb” and “smart,” or neither. Tumblr in this sense affords humor, or at least provides the building blocks through which jokes can be communally formulated. This initial “About” page gestures towards the types of content that can be shared across the platform, but in a way that presents the creative process as one that exists largely in isolation, when, humor in particular, often stems from engaged, though low-effort, interaction with others.

2.8 “About” Page 2: Preferences for Visual Artists

Figure 13. Tumblr is blogs.
The image above, figure 13, displays the second “About Tumblr” page. Each colored box represents a different post pulled from Tumblr as an example of the content found on Tumblr blogs. I have blocked them out here, as the specific content is less relevant than the idea that this content rotates, is user-generated, creative, and exclusively visual in nature. All five posts are image posts, a combination of illustrations and photographs. One of them is recognizably fan art of an American cartoon, the other four do not appear to have any specific fannish connection. This page is not scrollable (at least in Firefox) and so the orange, blue, and green art pieces are clipped, and part of the post obscured, including information regarding how many notes the posts have. Both the yellow and red art pieces are fully visible and have over 1,000 notes. The blue image, which is mostly obscured, appears to be animated.

The accompanying text reads:

_Tumblr is blogs._

_Turns out that when you make it easy to create interesting things, that’s exactly what people do. All those great, random blogs your friends send you, those are Tumblr blogs. We’ll help you find and follow blogs like that, and we’ll help other people find and follow yours._

Like the previous text, a number of assumptions about the platform are built into this statement. However, the intent here contradicts some of what was articulated in the previous “About” page. The emphasis here is distinctly on creation and Tumblr’s place in the individual creative process, whereas the previous page more obviously highlighted “sharing,” even if the sociality of sharing was curiously absent. The use of multiple artwork posts coordinates with the text. People on Tumblr create interesting things, and the platform invites you, the potential account holder, to participate in this exchange by consuming the work of other creatives. But in fact, Tumblr doesn’t “make it easy to create interesting things,” none of the artwork displayed below the text box was made in Tumblr. They were photographed and then perhaps edited in the
case of the Red image, or drawn/animated in any number of image editing programs in the case of the other images. Tumblr may make it convenient to share creative output (as suggested in the previous page), but it has relatively little to do with the actual process of creation, while still relying on user generated content and labor in order to maintain a user base (Terranova, 2000).

In contrast to the first “About Tumblr” text, which emphasizes the diversity of high- to low-effort content that can be shared from a single interface, the second page highlights the high-effort creative (particularly) art content hosted on Tumblr. This is content that many users would be unable to create, even given the tools to do so. No digital program can make you an artist. Time, training, and practice makes a competent visual artist. Tumblr either promises on something it cannot deliver, or, more likely, is making an assumption regarding the individuals who would seek to make Tumblr accounts in the first place. A “you’re not like other social media users,” implication. You’re already a creative.

In contrast, the “quips, dumb jokes, smart jokes,” text from the previous page which highlights more easily accessible forms of participation possible on Tumblr, this second page is a curious step in a different direction, which may be off-putting to those who wish to engage in textual formats, rather than those of the plastic arts. The valuation of visual art versus textual or narrative contributions to fandom (Bacon-Smith, 1992) and other amateur creative (Eichhorn, 2001) spaces predates the widespread adoption of the internet for distribution. And it is a debate that continues on Tumblr, with visual art often receiving more Notes than textual contributions (Neill Hoch, 2018).

Furthermore, this text presumes a familiarity with Tumblr that precedes making a Tumblr account. Potential Tumblr account holders have already been users of the site. When a friend sends you to a specific blog to look at an interesting piece of art or amusing gif set, Tumblr hosts
it. Of course, there are lots and lots of blogs hosted on platforms other than Tumblr, but this “About” page draws on the assumption that the potential new Tumblr account holder has already interacted with someone else’s Tumblr blog at some point. Tumblr is ever-present online as a source for creative content, particularly as users of social platforms, including Twitter, Facebook, Reddit, and Tumblr screen-shot and repost art and content from each other. Becoming an account holder on Tumblr, however, adds your own creative content to the mix. Tumblr will act as an intermediary to connect you to additional blogs that serve your interests, and allow you to find Followers who will be interested in your creative output. In this formulation, Tumblr is a sort of middle-man for helping the account holder reach an interested, engaged audience.

Important here is that the “About” page is not pointing towards any sort of built-up, pre-existing community, organized into tidy groups. The ties on Tumblr are considered in terms of the consumption of creative content, rather than fostering relationships between and among people, as is most typical on Facebook, which remains the most prominent social network by a wide margin (Social Media Fact Sheet, 2017). In Tumblr’s formulation, other user accounts on Tumblr become your Followers because they enjoy your output. They do not become your friends who take a particular interest in you personally. In their assessment of teenagers’ conceptions and negotiations of online privacy centering on Facebook use, Marwick and boyd’s (2014) respondents primarily focus on the complexities of navigating audiences online made up of either off-line friends or people they expect to one day form off-line ties with (as is the case with a high school student athlete friending college athletes in his chosen sport). Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe (2011) make a point to say that while making new friendships through Facebook is possible, it is less often utilized in this way, and primarily used for “relationship maintenance.” Ellison, Vitak, Gray and Lampe (2014) further consider the distinction between
“real” friends and those users who are “friends,” and give their survey respondents no precise definition of what makes a friend “real.” This would not exclude friendships which were developed and maintained exclusively online, but they go on to write that while Facebook’s category of “friends” can include many more people in 2014 than in 2011, when accounts were limited to collegiate users, these possible friends consist of “individuals from many dimensions of a user's life such as family, friends, coworkers, and neighbors.” The implicit assumption remains that the majority of a Facebook network is made up of in-person connections, rather than relationships begun and maintained exclusively online.

Bell (2013) argues that beginning with shared interests on Tumblr may lead to developing personal relationships, with those posting frequently about social justice topics becoming close to other users posting about the same topics, building up community structures. Interview participants in chapter 3 express a similar sentiment, where talking about fandom and/or social justice topics have led to developing relationships on Tumblr. However, the ability to forge these friendships is at least partially based on the ability to produce creative content, broadly defined, that attracts the attention of other people. One interview respondent, Doan,5 shared that he stopped posting original content and personal posts about himself because of his small follower count. He now uses Tumblr mostly just to reblog content from other people. While another, Anuli, spoke about Following multiple Tumblr blogs who were Mutuals with each other, but not with her, as a mode of entertainment similar to watching a television show. Tumblr use can encourage making new friendships through shared interests, but this is often

5 See Appendix C for basic demographic information regarding interview participants.
predicated on the creation of some form of new content, whether it be images, fiction writing, jokes, etc.

However, in this “About” page, Tumblr particularly privileges visual art as a way of growing an audience and expanding social influence. It does not directly or indirectly acknowledge the time and energy spent in developing and maintaining social relationships with other users through communication features built into Tumblr (Asks, Submissions, Messages, the first of which will be discussed in more detail later in the chapter). Nor does it acknowledge the work that goes into promoting creative content on Tumblr, beyond the singular act of posting. As was the case in the first “About” page, this second page continues to underestimate the socially-minded features of Tumblr, and the importance of interaction between users. While it may mention Following other users, and other users Following you, it does little to touch upon what actually happens after the Follow. Curiously, sharing is actually positioned as something done outside of Tumblr, “all those great, random blogs friends send you,” suggest that outside connections lead into Tumblr. Many interview participants agreed that they ended up joining Tumblr on the recommendation of a friend, either online or in-person, but then went on to clarify that the majority of the people they Follow now or Follow them are new connections that they made through the Tumblr platform and share no off-line experiences with them.

While the first and second about pages take slightly different perspectives, the first highlighting the diversity of content available, and the second emphasizing specific, high-effort personal creative output, they both downplay the social aspects of Tumblr, and instead advance Tumblr as a blogging platform, where control rests with the singular blog maintainer. However, in the next section, I focus more specifically on Tumblr Asks, a particular communication feature of the platform that is unlike other one-to-one and one-to-many communication features
deployed on other social platforms. In its effort to present Tumblr as remarkably similar to other social platforms, Tumblr’s About pages fails to mention any of the specific communication features available on the platform (Asks, Submissions, Messages). Asks in particular were widely used by interview respondents as a way of initiating relationships and connections with other Tumblr users.

2.9  “About” Page 3 Pre-sign-up Expectations of Use

![Figure 14. How does this work?](image)

You already know how this works.

*Once you follow a blog, all of its posts show up in your dashboard, just like you’d expect. See something great? Reblog it to your own blog. Add commentary if you like. Make it your own. Other people will do the same to your posts. That’s how you meet people here.*

The third “about Tumblr” page finalizes two themes introduced on the second page, diversity of content and expectations that the potential user is already somewhat familiar with Tumblr, and finally introduces the social aspects of Tumblr more concretely. Here I will focus on Tumblr’s assumption that the potential user already understands how to interact with Tumblr and
by extension Tumblr users. The headline literally reads “You already know how this works,” though offers no reasoning for why the potential account holder would know. Presumably, it is because Tumblr is neither their first nor their only social media experience. This claim may not refer directly to other blogging platforms, but to those features of blogging that have been taken up in social media more broadly (Siles, 2011; Walker Rettenberg, 2014). Rather than strictly assuming a familiarity with Tumblr, the text here positions the potential account holder as already social media-savvy, and demographic data from 2015 suggests that 20 percent of internet users between the ages of 18 and 29 use Tumblr, as opposed to only 11 percent of internet users between the ages of 30 and 49 (Duggan, 2015). In comparison, Pew Internet’s composite survey found that 32 percent of 18-29 year old internet users and 29 percent of 30-49 year old internet users use Twitter, along with 82 percent and 79 percent of internet users in these same age groups using Facebook, suggesting that proportionally, Tumblr’s user base may skew younger (Duggan, 2015). In 2014 training materials meant for National Public Radio employees, Danielle Strle, then Tumblr’s Director of Product for Community and Content, shared that 41 percent of all Tumblr’s users were between the ages of 18 and 34, with an additional 15 percent under the age of 18 (Gorman, 2014).

Tumblr does operate in a similar way to Twitter, in that reblogging, like retweeting, is a significant architectural feature that allows for sharing across accounts and for interesting or relatable content to travel across the site, appearing on additional Dashboards. Also the Tumblr Dashboard functions in a way that is similar to a Facebook News Feed, though with key differences in how content is arranged and how users can interact with that content, relying less on algorithmic positioning and, except in a few cases, almost entirely on chronology.
Figure 15. The Tumblr Dashboard, all extensions disabled.

The Tumblr Dashboard is a reverse chronological listing of all posts both originating with and reblogged by the blogs that a user follows. A number of “suggested” posts are also inserted into the Dashboard based on tracked tags and interests selected at the time of signing up for an account. Unlike the Facebook News Feed, that operates by algorithm (Butcher, 2012), the Tumblr Dashboard does not take into account other users’ interactions with a specific post when it is posted or reblogged by someone you follow. Tag searches, keyword searches, and suggested posts do calculate prominence using time and notes, but in both tag and keyword searches, the option exists to view content reverse chronologically as well. While it is tempting to see this as a democratization of digital prominence that excludes pre-existing popularity as a contributing factor to where a post appears on the Dashboard, it remains that the majority of Tumblr posts
never achieve viral status and only garner a handful of notes (Chang, Tang, Inagaki, & Liu, 2014). And if a post does not receive attention quickly, it likely fades into obscurity.6

However, while Tumblr’s About pages assume that prior social media exposure will inform potential users who join the site how to actually make use of the available features, Tumblr’s Ask feature, which was for years was the primary way of Tumblr users contacting one another directly on the site prior to the introduction of Messaging in 2015, is largely unlike communication features present on Facebook, Twitter, or other social platforms.

Asks allow one Tumblr account holder (or non-account holders as well, if the blog owner turns on Anonymous Asks) to send an “asynchronous” message to another account holder. This Ask can then either: 1) be responded to privately, or 2) posted publically to the receiver’s blog. The sender has no control over whether or not the receiver publically posts the Ask or keeps the Ask private. If the Ask is sent anonymously (“on anon”) the receiver cannot answer privately, and when posting the Ask, only has the option to do so publically. While other social media platforms may offer private, direct messaging (and in 2015, Tumblr would introduce a Messaging feature) none replicate the affordances of the Ask, which hinges on the blog maintainer’s desire to either publish or keep the interaction private. When direct message conversations are made public on Twitter, for example, it is because one of the involved parties took a screen shot of the private conversation, rather than an architectural feature where concealed interaction (as the Ask sits in one Tumblr user’s Inbox) is easily and directly made public (by clicking “post”).

6 “Best Stuff First” and “In Your Orbit” are mobile app-exclusive features that were applied, tweaked, and disappeared only to reappear during data collection. Though operating slightly differently, these promoted posts broke the strict chronology of the Dashboard for some users on the mobile app. However, even when these features were turned on, the majority of the Dashboard remained in reverse chronological order.
Figure 16. Screen shot of Inbox page, colored blocks conceal text of anonymous messages sent. Top Ask is shown with response and ready to post. Bottom Ask is currently not being answered.

If the Ask is sent on anon, the receiver can only post their response publically, though this does not mean the identity of the Ask sender is completely obscured within the system. Anon asks can be sent by Tumblr account holders by marking a slider that reads “send anonymously.” While this removes their username from the Ask, it does not break the tie between the Ask and the sender’s user account fully. If the Ask receiver “Blocks” the anon Ask, the account that sent the Ask in the first place will appear in the receiver’s Blocked list, revealing who sent the Ask. Anon Asks sent from non-account holders (or those not logged into their accounts) cannot reveal information about the sender.
Asks can be used for a variety of different reasons. As the name suggests, many people send questions to other users, but they also send comments, suggestions, and threats. Asks have a 500 character limit, meaning that the potential text is quite short. Though, to get around this restriction, Tumblr users may send several Asks in a row, numbering each so that the receiver knows the order in which they should be read/how many messages are to come. Only text can be sent via Ask, and links are not permitted.

One way that Asks are used are in “Ask Memes” which can function as publically displayed one-to-one communication. While posted Asks are viewable by everyone on the site, this does not mean the interaction between the sender and receiver opens up to the broader audience. In this way, Ask Games function as a sort of pseudo-broadcasting mechanism, where
users can share information about themselves, without necessarily engaging in equitable social exchange with their audience.

Ask Memes are typically prompted by a rebloggable post that instructs Followers or Mutuals or both to send specific questions or prompts to the person who reblogged the post. These questions might be themed around shows, games, opinions, personal confessions, etc. Some call for the person who reblogged the post to shuffle their music playlists to come up with answers, or to share opinions on other people. Many times they follow a format that requests that senders send x to receive y. Such as sending a heart emoji to receive a name of a favorite video game.

![Ask meme](image)

**Figure 18.** Ask meme based on assumption of having an original character.
In the example post in figure 18, sending a triangle and a specific question nets an answer about the receiver’s character. There are many such “OC” (original character) ask memes that circulate through fandom spaces that facilitate creators in sharing information about either their original stories, or characters they have developed to fit into existing media narratives. Opinions towards OCs in fandom have long been negative, labeling them as “Mary Sues” or “Self-Inserts” who distort the canon plotline and cause existing characters to behave in ways they would not normally (Bacon-Smith, 1992; Chander & Sunder, 2007; Willis, 2006). But several video game fandoms popular on Tumblr require the creation of OCs in order for the narrative to function, as these are customizable characters within the original digital game mechanics (Condis, 2015; McDonald, 2012; Neill Hoch, in press). Many of my interview respondents belong to one or more of these fandoms, and my own experience with Tumblr is rooted deeply in pro-OC practices, and used Ask Memes as a way of encouraging interaction with their Followers and Mutuals.

The Ask Meme above gives the sender some guidelines on how to format their ask, potentially relieving some pressure regarding 1) whether or not the receiver wants to answer questions, and 2) help in figuring out what to even say to a person they may have not spoken to directly before. Other Ask Memes provide entire questions in numbered lists, allowing the sender to simply send a character name and number, further reducing anxiety and effort.
This excerpted post in figure 19 (the complete post is quite long, with fifty questions total) provides an example of these more specific Ask Memes.

Once questions are sent to the receiver, the receiver can then respond from their Inbox. By clicking “reply” in their Inbox, a text box opens up underneath the sent message. However, inside this text box, the receiver can also insert images and/or video as part of their response. Answers to Asks do not have the same strict character limit as the Ask itself, and responses can be virtually as long as the receiver wishes, and include embedded images, videos, and links. The receiver can then post their response to their blog. “Asks” constitute their own post type on Tumblr, separate from the seven initial types promoted on About page, and can be searched for
specifically from a blog’s archives. Artists also have their own Ask Memes, that let them produce artwork for characters in response to suggestions from their followers, but often adopt the practice of making a new Photo post, then inserting a screen shot of the original Ask below. This allows their art to be sorted as a Photo in Tumblr’s search mechanism and their own blog archive, rather than an Ask.

Unique to Tumblr, and perhaps not adequately or entirely comprehensible based on prior social media use, Asks and Ask Memes serve as a way for Tumblr users to both develop and display social capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Bourdieu explains that “the volume of the social capital possessed by a given agent thus depends on the size of the network of connections he can effectively mobilize and on the volume of the capital (economic, cultural or symbolic) possessed in his own right by each of those to whom he is connected,” (p. 249) and the demonstration of social capital allows the individual within the network to accrue additional capital, as non-connections may try to enter into their network. Early, internet-specific studies of social capital indicated that use may be associated with higher involvement in politics (Wellman, Haase, Witte & Hampton, 2001) while later studies of social media find that use tends towards increased social capital and life satisfaction (Ellison, Steinfeld, & Lampe, 2007; Lee & Lee, 2010) and positive responses to support provided through social media (Oh, Ozkaya, & LaRose, 2014).

The first conceit of Tumblr Asks is that an account holder has enough social presence and connections on the platform that other users would want to ask them questions, and more so assuming that other users might be interested in the answers to those questions. Publishing the Ask acts as a digitally materialized reminder that some people are worth speaking to and developing relationships with. Interview participants (particularly Amy and Randy) mentioned

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7 While this system of accruing capital may have similarities with notions of subcultural social capital (Thornton, 1996), it is important not to overemphasize Tumblr account holders as belonging to a cohesive subculture.
Asks specifically when questioned about developing relationships with other Tumblr users. For both, sending another user an Ask was an early step before using Messaging or exchanging Skype or Discord information. Asks gave them the opportunity to feel out certain social connections with other users, trying to gauge how interested they might be in carrying out a more in-depth conversation. Sometimes, they also simply sent out Asks to friends because they knew the other person would be happy to receive a message in their Inbox.

Consistently, when I answer Asks, I receive more Asks in return. Signaling my social presence online, and my willingness to respond, garners more attention. I routinely go for long periods of time, days or even weeks, without any Ask activity, only to receive a dozen in a row after answering one. Asks are positioned as an asynchronous system, where responses can be measured and multimodal. However, they do not always function this way in practice.

While I describe Asks as asynchronous, it is important to keep in mind that some of the behavioral norms of Tumblr turn asynchronous communication into near synchronous, and synchronous architectures into more asynchronous ones. If I respond to an Ask quickly, I often get many more follow-ups in a short period of time, as compared to if I wait to respond. The same user may send multiple Asks in a row, carrying on a public conversation via the Dashboard, instead of the more “private” Messaging feature. Also, publishing an Ask indicates that I’m currently online and going through my Inbox (as opposed to reblogging content, that might be queued and thus posted when I’m not actually online), and follow-up Asks on the same or different topics tend to follow.

Tumblr Asks constitute one architectural feature of Tumblr’s interface that has no clear analogue on other popular social media sites. While the ability to post publically on someone’s photo (Instagram), Wall (Facebook), or exchange private comments back and forth (Twitter,
Facebook, and Instagram) are present on other platforms, Tumblr Asks build in the ability for the receiving party to decide what to share publically and what to keep as private correspondence. Sometimes, knowing when not to publish an Ask takes a level of social finesse. I rarely publish anon Asks I receive that are explicitly hateful, and sometimes in the initial stages of exchanging Asks with other users, I choose not to publish what they have said, and typically they also do not publish my Asks to them.

While the third “About” page emphasizes the idea that a potential account holder already knows how Tumblr works, presenting Tumblr as easily accessible to anyone who has used social media before is optimistic at best. Some aspects of the Tumblr interface may be familiar, but as will become clear in interview respondents’ commentaries, Tumblr’s sometimes opaque, difficult to understand mesh of social and technical knowledge is rather the point of using the platform. Asks in particular have no clear analogue, yet are considered an important Tumblr feature by Tumblr users themselves when it comes to developing and maintaining relationships with other users. Nowhere in Tumblr’s about materials are Asks so much as mentioned. But, then again, neither are Messaging or Submissions, other available features that allow users to chat with each other, and send entirely new Tumblr posts to another user to publish (see example of “Move I’m Gay” post in introduction, which was sent to me via Submission). In introducing new account holders to the platform, Tumblr’s materials are conspicuously non-social in their presentation.

2.10 “About” Page 4: Post Types and Social Transformation of “Chat” Posts

The fourth “about Tumblr” page, figure 20, displays the seven buttons for the seven possible post types on Tumblr. Text, photo, quote, link, chat, audio, and video. Text, quote, and chat are all text-based, but format the post differently on the Dashboard. The remainder of the text reads:
Seriously, put anything you want here.

Seven post types to get you started. Your brain can do the rest. This thing is yours. Use it however you like.

Figure 20. Seriously, put anything you want here.

This statement recalls the ease of use brought up on previous pages, while more subtly addressing the creative aspect of Tumblr that was most prominent on the second page. “Your brain can do the rest,” is a more subtle, open formulation of creativity, that still relies on the blog maintainer’s input, but does not frame the directive in the sometimes more intimidating guise of “creativity,” which is often equated with “skill.”

This page, while listing Tumblr’s seven post types, does nothing to explain the function of or difference between them. Some are perhaps more self-evident than others. Text, audio, video, and link are decently differentiated at first glance. Quote and chat are common enough words, though the way these two posts function on Tumblr, as opposed to Text, are not so easily gleaned by an outsider.
Figure 21. Me versus My Brain.

Figure 21 above is an example of a typical Tumblr chat post. The format allows for the poster to place any word or combination of words before the colon, “:.” Those words are then auto-formatted to be in bold type. Each subsequent line can have a new speaker. There are no restrictions on how many “speakers” are in the chat post. It may be that the Chat post type was originally intended as a streamlined way to post chat logs from other platforms and programs, but on Tumblr, they are frequently used for conveying hypothetical conversations. Often between a “me” and some variation that is “also me.”

Figure 22. Me versus Me.
Above in figure 22 is a video game-themed chat post, which again uses both speaking rolls to refer back to the same “me.” One “me” is playing older games by the developer Bioware, a company known for producing action-adventure role-playing games that have significant relationship features that require the player to engage in conversations with non-playable characters (NPCs) in order to win their loyalty or engage in romances (Condis, 2015; McDonald, 2011). The second “me” is playing Bioware’s most recent release at the time of posting, *Mass Effect: Andromeda* (2017). Chat posts on Tumblr may be used to represent interactions between multiple people, but with some frequency they are used as a space of self-reflection and dialogue with conflicting opinions within a single speaker. And in that conflict, others see the post as “relatable.” The singular “me” of the chat post becomes multiple “me” who reblog the post and sympathize with the content presented. In this way, the chat post resumes its initial function as a conversation, though not between the speakers listed in the post, but with the sentiment expressed by the original poster. Unlike previous post type examples, where humor and creative output are more co-created on the Tumblr platform than Tumblr advertises, the day-to-day use of chat posts is often intensely self-reflective, although often intended to be “relatable” and thus spreadable (Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013; Shifman, 2014).

In yet another turn on expected convention, the Chat post, an architectural feature designed for the reporting on a conversation that has happened between two or more individuals, is often actually deployed as an internal communication between aspects of the self. Furthermore, the limitations of the Chat post actually prevent further social interaction, rather than encourage it. When reblogging a text, video, audio, photo, or link post, the user who reblogged the post has the option to add additional commentary below the original post (as is discussed in the clown joke above). However, when reblogging a Chat post, while the interface
suggests that additional text might be added by the reblogger, it is not actually possible to add additional commentary to a reblogged Chat post, and anything typed below the original Chat post will simply disappear when reblogged. It is unclear if this is a feature that functions as intended, or if it is simply one of many oversights that plague the platform. Occasionally, a reblogged Chat post will have additional commentary from another user that has been appended to the post, but this appears to be a bug or glitch that occurs occasionally,\(^8\) akin to other temporary glitches that result in odd posts that continue to circulate even after the glitch has been fixed (as an example, for a period of time during data collection, some users managed to make new posts that never displayed any Notes. These no-note posts persist, next to older no-note posts that may have glitched for entirely different technical reasons, such as a period of time when amassing over 1 million notes caused the notes counter on a post to simply disappear).

If Tumblr is indeed easy and intuitive to understand, why does only this one post type constrain further interaction, when the entire premise is that of documenting interaction? Why is it then that social interaction at all, key to engagement for many of the interview respondents in the next chapter, is not foregrounded, but only briefly alluded to in Tumblr’s “About” materials? Instead of highlighting how Tumblr offers something different from other social media platforms (something that respondents noted and appreciated; that the site wasn’t like visiting other social media platforms) Tumblr’s promotional materials instead emphasize consistency with other platforms. Tumblr’s “About” materials suggest that Tumblr itself has a clear idea of what it offers as a social platform. But this vision often stands in stark contrast to the impressions of its users, and how its features are utilized in every-day practice.

\(^8\) As of May, 2018, it now appears that Chat posts can be reblogged with additional commentary. This was not the case during data collection.
2.11 Concluding Remarks: Explaining Something Easy in a Difficult Way

Figure 23, below, shows the final “about Tumblr” page, although, really it circles back to the ability to sign up for the site. This time, however, the text retracts its earlier statement about Tumblr being difficult to explain. “Okay, it’s not actually hard to explain. We lied. But now you understand this thing. So come on in.”

![Figure 23. Is it hard or is it not hard?](image)

Do I understand Tumblr any better than when I started? Well, speaking as myself, I can’t say for certain, as I already know more about Tumblr’s nuanced cultural codes than the “About” pages could tell me. I know about the habits and flows of creative content across the site, frustrations, hopes, and expectations. I know how each of the seven post types are actually deployed by users, sometimes in unexpected or unintended ways. I know how to make friends and influence people. What the “About Tumblr” pages do articulate, in a piecemeal way, is how Tumblr’s caretakers view the site themselves, or at least, something about how they want the hypothetical me, who has used Tumblr before but isn’t yet an account holder, to view the
platform. Litt (2012) articulates the process by which we come to imagine social media audiences, and platform features, or “audience feedback mechanisms” play a role in shaping behaviors online. Yet, it is important to remember that beyond the features themselves, materials such as Tumblr’s “About” pages articulate the user the platform imagines. Tumblr may be a space of creativity, but one that doesn’t require too much effort as to be daunting. It will connect me to other people, although mostly through Following them and them Following me back, without even a passing mention to additional embedded communication tools. It wants me to share my work, and the works of others. And it wants to rely upon a particular feeling over already being at ease with how it works, while opening up as I become an account holder. All the things I’ve done with Tumblr before? The things I’ve seen and enjoyed without a Tumblr account? I can become more intimately connected to the content, by starting a blog. Tumblr asks a great deal of its potential account holders, while actually explaining very little.

Much of the dissatisfaction with the site (and the inability to “leave”) that the interview participants express in the following chapter may stem from these contradictory expectations. But in this contradiction, through the difficulties they face, they become keenly aware of how they must take their social media experiences into their own hands, if they are to enjoy their time on Tumblr. Tumblr promises the user very little unique to the platform, that cannot be found elsewhere, and in so doing, encourages users to reimagine the site as fitting their particular needs. When the platform fails to live up to perceived expectations, the users react.

In this chapter I have used Tumblr’s “About” pages as a starting point for discussing the social and technical affordances and constraints of the platform. In contrasting what is essentially a public relations guide, rather than a more in-depth FAQ or tutorial, I have remained focused on what Tumblr Corp has deemed to be the most relevant information for new Tumblr users, what is
meant to attract them to the platform and ultimately encourage them to sign up for an account. As my interview participants will more fully join the conversation in the next chapter, these positions and possibilities articulated by Tumblr often come in conflict with their actual everyday experiences of using Tumblr, in sometimes humorous, sometimes frustrating ways. I have contrasted these pages with particular features and affordances that reveal themselves through prolonged Tumblr use, including the centrality of reblogs to humor, an emphasis on creativity that neglects the importance of social interaction, assumptions about ease of use, and the way in which one post type, seemingly encouraging interaction with others, the Chat post, actually becomes both insular, but often highly relatable.

While this chapter begins with the technical architecture of the platform, and explains how social realities of use intervenes and transforms Tumblr’s architecture, often preventing closure as the platform seems to be poorly matched in some cases to the way users actually engage with Tumblr, the next chapter focuses more heavily on user experience, allowing interview participants to articulate what they believe Tumblr offers as a platform, where they believe it succeeds, and where it lets them down. The match between user and platform remains imperfect.
3. USER EXPERIENCE: FRIENDSHIPS, BOUNDARIES, AND CONFLICT

3.1 Introduction: Tumblr in Social Practice

In the previous chapter, Tumblr’s “About” pages served as a digital artifact of how Tumblr presents itself to potential new account holders, by and large already assumed to be Tumblr users, because of previous experience with Tumblr hosting a variety of creative content. Some of this content is low-effort jokes and shitposts, while some might be high-effort, high-skill artwork. In any and all cases, Tumblr’s “About” materials invite users to become account holders and encourage them to join Tumblr in order to share their creative output with potential audiences across the platform. However, the claims made in Tumblr’s “About” pages noticeably downplay the social features of the site, other than simple Following/Follower mechanics, including obfuscating the importance of being connected to other users beyond the Follow button, in order for creative output to be shared, or the way in which joke-telling often relies on communal, social processes mixed with Tumblr’s particular architectural features, such as reblogging. Nor do Tumblr’s “About” pages make mention of the communication features built into the platform, such as Asks, Submissions, Messaging, and Replies. The vision of Tumblr that Tumblr advances is one of creativity, rather than communication. However, Tumblr account holders themselves, as will be discussed in the current chapter, are much more attuned to the interaction between creativity and their communication practices. Tumblr account holders express dissatisfaction with the platform and with other users’ behaviors, while simultaneously acknowledging that, on the whole, their use of Tumblr has been positive when it comes to building relationships with other people and exerting at least some measure of control over their social media experience.
Tumblr inspires a particular comradery, even when the architecture of the platform itself is unconducive to community building. Amy in particular wondered if Tumblr actually intended to foster a sense of community around its various bugs and glitches. Unlike sites such as LiveJournal, which have Community accounts to facilitate group interaction (Busse and Hellekson, 2006; Bury, Deller, Greenwood, & Jones, 2013; Lothian, Busse, & Reid, 2007) or Facebook, which uses fan pages as a way of fostering engagement (Lin & Lu, 2011; Zaglia, 2013), Tumblr has no standardized architecture in place for grouping individual user accounts together, and responses from my participants echo this sense of ambivalence when it comes to narrating a cohesive Tumblr experience or community. And yet, while overall posting has declined over the last four years (Barredo, 2017) many users still visit the site consistently and for longer durations than other social platforms (Vetro Analytics, 2017).

In this chapter I use a blend of qualitative interviewing and auto-ethnographic immersion to explicate patterns of behavior on Tumblr themed around 1) first joining the platform and associated expectations, 2) users’ personal privacy decisions regarding what to share on Tumblr blogs, which are often unrelentingly public (Cho, 2017), 3) conflicts with other users and how Tumblr’s architectural features shape the nature of conflict on the site, and 4) their sense of shared community with other Tumblr users. Whereas the previous chapter began with Tumblr’s architectural features and expanded out towards the user base who ultimately has at least some level of flexibility in choosing how to adopt certain platform features (with others being forced upon them), this chapter begins with Tumblr users who, through in-depth interviews, narrate their experiences with Tumblr, often with a deliberate eye towards the affordances and constraints that shape their behaviors and the behaviors of other users who surround them. If the previous chapter was architecturally driven, taking human users along for the ride, this chapter
puts humans in control of the narrative, allowing them to speak about their failures and successes with Tumblr, articulating what they believe are consequences of human behavior, what they believe is encouraged by the platform, and when a mix of these two forces are at play.

3.2 Method: Ethnographic Immersion

My personal experience as a long-term, heavy (multiple hours a day over the last five years) user of the Tumblr platform is at times interwoven with interview responses in order to depict a broader understanding of how Tumblr fosters particular behaviors, patterns of use, and attitudes towards the platform and towards other users. Auto-ethnography is, in a way, difficult to avoid in constructing such a narrative, as my access to particular interview participants is a result of my participation and visibility on Tumblr. While I have been friends or acquaintances (sometimes for many years) with some of my interview participants, other participants I had never spoken to before beginning this project. And yet, their agreement (and sometimes outward excitement) in participating was often predicated on my own direct and indirect social reach, including who I was visibly friends with, and who chose to reblog the single promotional recruitment post I posted to promote the study. This is in keeping with prior research on niche social communities, both online (Kendall, 2002; Markham, 1998) and off (Bacon-Smith, 1992; Eichhorn, 2001; van Maanen, 1988; Visweswaran, 1994) where individual informants prove necessary in order to facilitate access into the studied community or introduce social practices that might otherwise be opaque to the researcher. In this case, I could act, in part, as my own informant, while drawing upon pre-existing social connections in order to reach additional participants outside my existing close circle of contacts. I knew who to ask for help. And I also knew who would help me without asking. This knowledge was at hand for me throughout the project because of my long-term exposure as a Tumblr account holder, and as an account holder
with some degree of visibility on the platform (primarily acquired through either my work as a decently popular fan fiction writer or a handful of viral posts), along with the greater visibility of other users who want my research to succeed (accounts with more Followers than I have!). Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe (2007) while primarily concerned with the maintaining of social ties through offline lifestyle changes, find that Facebook use has a positive relationship with social capital, particularly bridging social capital, central to Granovetter’s (1977, 1983) notion of “the strength of weak ties,” and access to resources. While I almost exclusively maintain online-only relationships with my Tumblr Mutuals and Followers, those connections directly facilitated my ability to complete this research project, as people in my weakly tied network shared the promotional post without direct intervention on my part.

Auto-ethnography as a practice has its detractors. However, particularly in feminist scholarship, the articulation of situated knowledges is considered basic to all research objectives (Haraway, 1991). By making the position of the researcher transparent, their own position vis-à-vis the subject matter is clearly defined, rather than working from an artificial position of “objectivity.” The objective is little more than a consensus position, which inaccurately portrays a perspective that does not actually exist. The “problem” of auto-ethnography dates to a transitional period of anthropological fieldwork, when Western researchers could no longer paint themselves as benign colonial observers and an increasing number of “minority” researchers began training for advanced degrees (Hayano, 1979). Students wanted to study their homes; homes that were frequently already written about by outsiders coming to observe them. Anderson (2006) sets out a definition of analytic auto-ethnography, the first tenant of which is being a full member in the group or setting. Tierney (1998) describes auto-ethnography as standing in opposition to ethnographies that position the marginalized group as coming under
control of dominant academic structures. Auto-ethnography allows members of a specific cultural group to speak from their particular subject position, and interweave their narratives with other member-informants (Anderson, 2006). While I hesitate calling myself marginalized (despite being both non-white and queer) vis-à-vis current dominant structures of ethnography, I do strive to make myself visible in my texts (Anderson, 2006). Though I still may be hesitant to share the entirety of my experience, holding back information that makes me vulnerable in particular ways.

Even in publications and environments where qualitative research is otherwise encouraged, auto-ethnographic work is often challenged, if its validity cannot be established through integration with additional qualitative data (Holt, 2003). My auto-ethnographic narratives here are combined with interview participants’ responses (or, in some discussions it is more accurate to say that my auto-ethnographic details are placed alongside their responses). While my descriptions of particular practices or events may come from ethnographic experience, they are substantiated as repeatable through their similarity to experiences shared by my participants, and are most often included at moments where my respondents and I reminisced about similar experiences, or experiences we had literally gone through together.

The argument may arise that no internet-centric project is ever truly ethnographic, because by and large, I remain at home or on campus with my computer, still “embedded” in my everyday life, and the boundaries between the “field site” and “home” are always blurred (Beaulieu, 2004). Markham (2017) argues that ethnographic research of digital connections has reached a point where research frameworks are ecological and understand the internet as a way of being. Miller and Slater (2000) adopted this approach in their ethnographic work on internet use in Trinidad and Tobago, and Markham quotes their study and the importance of their
argument that “we need to treat Internet media as continuous with and embedded in other social spaces, that they happen within mundane social structures and relations” (Miller & Slater, 2000, p. 5). Given the current embeddedness of the internet in our lives, quite literally being able to carry our connections in our pockets, Markham sees this perspective as perhaps the currently most relevant position for researchers. Of course, this almost deliberately muddies the distinction of “the field” as a separate space.

While placing precise boundaries on where my field site begins and where it ends may prove impossible, my objectives remain closely tied to ethnographic practice including becoming immersed in the communities’ specialized language, producing thick description, and understanding interaction by means of exposure and analysis (Geertz, 1973, 1994; Van Maanen, 1988). Furthermore, I view my status at least partially as belonging to the tradition of being a scholar-fan (Busse & Hellekson, 2004; Jenkins, 2006). Not as having “gone native,” but rather a complex of advantages and disadvantages of which I should always be aware. Indeed, there are very few places I could go on the internet and be truly an outsider, having grown up alongside the technology and having adapted to multiple online platforms in my 25 years online. Every user, regardless of their ultimate purpose in joining a new platform, undergoes a period of adjustment to the social and technical norms of the space they have joined (Danis & Lee, 2005; Honeycutt, 2005; van Djick, 2013). This moment of “entering” a platform is always informed by past experiences and current expectations. Every user goes through this process. Not just the ethnographer (Beaulieu, 2004; Honeycutt, 2005).

3.3 **Method: Interview Procedures**

After obtaining approval from the Institutional Review Board in September 2017, I began the process of following consenting blogs on a new, research specific blog on Tumblr. This
account was an entirely separate entity from my previous personal Tumblr account, registered under a different email address (rather than creating a side-blog under my current account information). After posting an announcement about the study to my research blog, I reblogged the promotional post to my existing personal account. This personal account had just over 1,500 Followers as of the time of distribution, and thus allowed me much wider publicity than would have otherwise been possible had I not utilized my pre-existing social ties.

In order to be included in the study, participants had to be over 18 years of age, and either Like the promotional post (by pressing the small heart button at the bottom of all Tumblr posts) or follow the research blog. IRB approved the use of this procedure in obtaining consent for the blogs I Followed. This procedure resulted in an initial group of 213 blogs added to the research pool. This same research blog pool was also used to draw posts for the discourse analysis presented in the next chapter.

In October of 2017, I reached out to Tumblr users, who had already consented to their blogs being followed by my research account, to engage in one-on-one interviews. I posted a second small promotional post, asking if anyone was interested in being interviewed. I asked for the advertisement post for the interviews to not be reblogged at that time, giving preference for interviews to users who had already consented to their blogs being followed for research purposes. Additionally, I contacted several users directly who had previously expressed interest in my research, including one individual who was no longer active on Tumblr by the time research began, but had been interested in my research and contributing previously. Obtaining information from non-users of internet platforms remains a tricky proposition, as it is easier to promote studies to current users of the platform, rather than identify people who have given up

\[9\] For more detailed procedures on blog creation, see chapter 5.
and purposefully withdrawn, or actively decided not to be a uses (Watkins, 2009; Hargittai, 2007) and much of this work focuses on older non-users (Lüders & Brandtzæg, 2017) and those who experience structural barriers to access (Wyche & Baumer, 2016). Non-use itself can be theorized as a collection of behaviors that do not exclusively refer to deleting an existing account, but additional intermediary steps of disengagement (Light & Cassidy, 2014). While current non-users make up only a very small proportion of my respondents, their insights are invaluable for how they gesture towards the “breaking point” of withdrawing from a social platform, something that Tumblr users might often threaten, but then don’t often follow through. And, in fact, many users who did consider themselves “active” on Tumblr made use of similar disengagement steps as those researched by Light and Cassidy (2014) including making adjustments to what they shared with others, withdrawing from posting for days or weeks at a time, and corralling their Liking and reblogging from other users. While Tumblr’s architectural options for disengaging may be limited, the ability to disengage at various levels, technical and social, contribute to the degree of control account holders felt they had over their Tumblr experience.

I completed a total of 14 in-depth user interviews in October and November of 2017. These interviews were completed through a combination of synchronous and asynchronous textual interactions, depending on the schedule of the interviewee. Participants were given the option of using Skype, Discord, or Tumblr Messenger to complete the interviews. These options were selected because Tumblr users publically discuss sharing Skype or, more frequently by 2017, Discord user information with each other. Tumblr’s Messaging feature was introduced relatively recently (2015) and continues to be somewhat functionally limited (not allowing for group

10 See Appendix C for brief demographic information on each participant
conversations and having no dedicated mobile app being the most obvious). Participants could choose which chat platform suited their needs best, with the majority of them choosing to be interviewed on Discord. All interviews were carried out using text functionalities on these messaging platforms, which allowed for maximum flexibility in terms of scheduling and participants being able to complete other day-to-day tasks while being interviewed. If the participant had the time to engage in a continuous back-and-forth discussion, the interview could be completed in a single sitting. Far more common were interviews that stretched over several days (or in a few cases, weeks) as I posed questions and they answered at their convenience. While a voice interview may have allowed for more non-verbal indicators, such as vocal tone and inflection, and might have resulted in more emotionally-driven exchanges, using text communications came with its own rich set of possibilities, including users being able to share their own screenshots and links relevant to our conversations.

While “instant” messaging services are often positioned as a synchronous form of online communication, they have grown increasingly asynchronous (Darics, 2014). Both Skype and Discord allow users to display whether or not they are “active” or engage “do not disturb” modes, on top of the online/offline binary, signaling levels of availability. Tumblr messaging only allows for “active” or not, though users can manually adjust their privacy settings to show them as always “inactive,” which many users choose to utilize. Many of my interview participants freely came and went from the conversation, often with no indication that they’ve left (brb is a thing of the past; the cultural assumption here is that I’ll answer when I can). This resulted in interactions that may have been be a flurry of back and forth activity for several minutes, followed by hours or days of nothing. Some account holders participated in between classes, tasks at their place of work, or for a few minutes each night before they went to bed.
While participants seldom told me they were leaving temporarily, they would sometimes explain, “I had to go to class,” or “I was making dinner,” upon return. In the case where I spent a week away from my research blog, I told the participants I was still working with, “sorry, I had to fill out job applications,” and in every case we chatted briefly about the difficulty of securing employment, no matter what the field. My absence was seen as totally justifiable, and did not detract to the flow of our communications once I returned.

After informed consent was obtained (by the participant reading approved informed consent documentation and then repeating via message that they had read the documentation and consented to being interviewed) participants and I moved through the list of topics. Interviews were semi-structured, following a set list of topics, but allowed participants to branch off into additional areas of personal interest. In some cases, participants who were my personal friends devolved into unrelated conversations, often ending with a humorous exclamation of, “I hope your committee enjoys this!” or “make sure you include we talked about this!”

Furthermore, by using online text-based messaging, users could send me screen shots and other images to illustrate their observations and responses, often sending me particular Tumblr posts that they found interesting or relating to the line of questioning, or screen shots of Tumblr architecture errors that they had previously saved for posterity. Some users continued to send me interesting posts after our interviews had concluded, telling me that when they saw the post, they thought of me and my research.

Upon completion of interviews, transcripts were copied from Skype, Discord, or Tumblr Messenger and transferred into MS Word documents. Usernames were removed from archived texts, including references to other users. Interview transcripts were read and re-read and color

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11 So, to make good on that participant’s request: We talked at length about the Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild (2017) character Prince Sidon, and why we found him strangely attractive for a giant shark-man-monster-thing.
coded with an eye for recurring themes. Using simple search features built into MS Word I could easily move between questions in multiple transcripts to compare answers for similarities and differences. Ultimately, not all users answered all questions, both because they were allowed refusal of topics they did not wish to discuss, and also because prior answers indicated that the question would be largely irrelevant to their experiences with the platform. Additionally, users who expressed greater comfort and provided more elaborate answers often were asked additional follow-up questions to clarify their responses. This led to situations where particular themes and topics only emerged in discussion with a single user. As my underlying objective with interview data is not to produce a singular, unifying narrative that undermines the particular experiences of users who chose to share their stories and experiences, I have included excerpts of these unique discussions where appropriate.

Rather than presenting a “typical” Tumblr user, I have instead arranged my analysis thematically, allowing for multiple, sometimes contradictory voices to speak side-by-side on the same topic, as interview participants did express a level of agreement on the topics they considered important, even if their views on said topic varied. As will be discussed in the final theme of “community,” users by and large felt that Tumblr lacked an overarching sense of community, and rarely felt as if they themselves belonged to a “Tumblr community,” but nonetheless felt as if there was a particular perspective, most often articulated through humor, that could be found across most of the platform visible to them.

The end result was a series of interviews that were highly engaging, dynamic, and visual that lead down paths not immediately anticipated to myself as a researcher, or the participants themselves. Their responses were diverse, sometimes even widely divergent, on occasion openly contradicting each other. Qualitative research most often strives for a “saturation point” in data
collection, rather than obtaining a representational sample of participants. No two of my interviews followed similar paths, though interconnected themes emerged relatively quickly. Tumblr is a distinct social media experience, one that is not comparable to Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram (which is not to say these platforms are comparable to each other!). Some participants did not use these other social platforms at all at the time of interviews, while others maintained a very limited presence, and often aimed their posts on these more “mainstream” platforms towards a very different audience. Tumblr use did not overlap with other social media use in terms of the content they shared (there was virtually no cross-posting of the same content to multiple platforms), and Tumblr was almost always their preferred social platform. Even with these similarities, their attitudes towards Tumblr varied from enjoyment, to resigned acceptance, to moments of outright hatred.

Figure 24. What else are we supposed to do? Leave?

The post above, figure 24, is a rather good summation of some of the attitudes interview participants expressed towards Tumblr. There are, indeed, terrible things about Tumblr, from the
way it is coded (Constance), inadequate privacy measures (Missati), the confrontational and immature users who inhabit the platform (Erin). But where else does this absurd Batman/Bruce Springsteen joke actually land? Where is this the expected brand of humor? Where is the meta post about the post acceptable? The answer could actually be many different online sites (Phillips & Milner, 2017). But for Tumblr users, it’s not a joke they would make anywhere else.

3.4 Friendship and Queerness

One participant, Elliot, made a careful distinction between friends and Tumblr users they interacted with in their sense of connection to other users. They responded that they didn’t feel as if they had made friends on Tumblr, but then later agreed that there were other fandom users who acted as part of their support system. “I like to think that I’m a part of that community because we all have a lot of things in common lol. It’s all about supporting each other as a group of nb and queer women.” Prior qualitative research on online fandom spaces have again and again noted the queerness of women’s interactions in fandom spaces (Lothian, Busse, & Reid, 2007; Busse, 2006) those these women have not always identified as queer themselves. There has certainly been a shift in attitudes over time, as Bacon-Smith’s (1992) early work on Star Trek fandom notes that male/male shipping practices in the 1980s were largely “underground” and met with some level of distaste by other female fans producing either non-romantic works or male/female romances. Female/female desires and fan works are never mentioned by Bacon-Smith, and continue to be relatively less attractive as research topics when compared to male/male fandom practices by women-aligned participants.

Still, as should be obvious from the identifiers participants shared at the beginning of our interviews (see Appendix C), none indicated they were heterosexual, and many indicated they were nonbinary or trans. Not all would identify as “queer,” as some find that particular word to
be contentious, but it is fair to say that none see themselves as belonging to the category of cisgender heterosexuals. There are certainly cisgender heterosexuals who use Tumblr. And the fact that none of my participants identify as such is most easily explained by my own social circles on Tumblr. While my participant pool contained some close friends, even those participants I had not interacted with previously found my study through my Mutuals, or Mutuals’ Mutuals, or Mutuals’ Mutuals’ Mutuals. The promotion of my research blog was inextricably linked to my own social spread on Tumblr, in a sort of modified snowball sampling. As other blogs reblogged my promotional post, they directly or indirectly endorsed me/my project, leading to additional participants. From this initial group of blogs that consented to being followed, I was able to find participants to be interviewed by simply reaching out to those who followed the research blog. This is perhaps the most consistent way my own auto-ethnographic immersion in the Tumblr platform permeates my research study: As a queer person, my promotional post predominantly circulated among blogs maintained by other queer users. And both I and my participants were aware of each other’s inclusion under the LGBTQ+ umbrella.

Snowball sampling (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981) has been found to be particularly effective for finding respondents in niche and/or marginalized communities (Atkinson & Flint, 2001; Browne, 2005) and allows for social mapping between participants (Noy, 2008). Furthermore, trying to “randomize” qualitative interview participants has not been found to produce richer results (Noy, 2008) as qualitative projects, particularly ethnographies that also make use of respondents contributions, necessarily aimed for rich, narrative engagement rather than largely generalizable results (Van Maanen, 1988). The present study does not use traditional snowball sampling, in which I would have asked participants to recommend additional Tumblr users who might be interested in participating. But nevertheless, the nature of recruiting
participants through existing social ties led to a group of participants who, while not always friends with each other, often had noticeable overlap in demographic categories and interests.

Several of my respondents were not only friends with me, but with each other, sometimes referring to other participants by name when asked if they had made friends on Tumblr (though I did not disclose that these friends were also participants. Sometimes a respondent would simply inform me that they joined my study because they were friends with another user, and they know that user to be my friend or Mutual). So while I had respondents in widely varying fandoms, with social ties far beyond my ability to map, who had incredibly varied experience with the Tumblr platform, it remained that I really only had non-heterosexual respondents. Looking through the list of the blogs I Follow, most of whom are Mutuals, I can’t say for certain if any of them belong to heterosexual, cisgender users. In some cases, I may not be able to tell you much about the identity of those I follow. Some don’t share much about how they identify, even if they do post about the day-to-day comings and goings of their life. The single user who, a year ago, I could have said, “ah! Yes! She’s straight!” has since discussed being bisexual, joking that she should have known all along. Everyone around her, both online and in-person, were queer. And we stick together.

Like earlier studies of female-aligned fandom participants (particularly Lothian et al, 2007), many (though by no means all) of my participants who are female shared that they are in long-term relationships or marriages with heterosexual, cisgender men. But, unlike these earlier research pieces, where fandom participants may have identified as heterosexual women who were simply interested in same-gender fictional relationships, those I spoke to retain their identity as bisexual, pansexual, or asexual, and see Tumblr as a social opportunity to continue to celebrate their queerness, in spite of the social pressures placed on them to be less vocal about
their queer attraction. This is not at all the only aspect of their lives that draws them to Tumblr, but it is an undeniable similarity among my participants that perhaps corrals my study and allows me to place boundaries around who did and did not speak in conjunction with my own text. I cannot paint a complete picture of why users came to Tumblr, the technical and social triumphs and tragedies they faced once arriving, and their sense of shared community. But I can describe a particular moment of frustration among non-heterosexual users with a platform that they sometimes hate, often enjoy, and refuse to leave. And none of those feelings are particularly contradictory. At least, not if you ask the users themselves.

3.5 **Tumblr Discovery: “I first made a Tumblr account 800 years ago, in 2009-2010”**

Participants were first asked to describe their earliest encounter with the Tumblr platform and recount how they ultimately made the decision to create an account of their own. Perhaps unsurprisingly, these reasons had little, if anything to do with the assumptions about use stated in Tumblr’s promotional materials discussed in the previous chapter. Given that most participants joined Tumblr more than 3 years ago, these materials would not have been the same in any case. However, most had some familiarity with Tumblr for weeks or months prior to actually joining the site, which Tumblr’s “About” materials did assume. Given my pre-existing social connections on the platform, virtually all participants had been using other online platforms for fandom participation prior to joining Tumblr, and fandom participation remained a key reason for either joining the platform, or continuing to use it with regularity.

A small number of users cited in-person friends and family members as their reason for initially joining Tumblr. Amy initially joined Tumblr to follow their younger sisters’ blogs, after they found creating a Tumblr account themselves was much easier than continuing to use an RSS feed to follow their sisters’ posts. Amy continues to use their blog to send interesting posts and
memes to their sisters, but also stated that the majority of their interactions with other users are now with people they have never met in person. By and large, even when participants cited in-person relationships as their reason for joining, the majority of their Mutuals, Followers, and the people they Follow now are not in-person connections.

Others recounted how in-person friends introduced them to Tumblr, and they joined in order to Follow their accounts (Anuli, Elijah). In these cases, it was always a singular friend or a small group, with whom they shared common interests, rather than a larger circle of friends or acquaintances. Even with the in-person connections facilitating their initial account sign-up, the goal was always to extend to a larger group of “online friends,” rather than keep close connections with people who they knew in-person. Anuli and Elijah, who explicitly mentioned in-person friends from high school as being a major contributing factor for their joining the platform, explained that they wanted to make new friends with similar interests online. Elijah in particular explained that making new, online friends, was entirely the point:

_Elijah_: oh jeebus. it was probably late high school. uh i was hanging out at my friends house and she had made an account i think she thought it was a good platform to talk to her internet friends. she's always had a lot of internet friends and because especially in high school i felt like ridiculously isolated i immediately was like cool i'll make an account right now and i did

Elijah immediately joined Tumblr for the prospect of making new internet friends, off of the advice of an in-person friend. Their friend’s success in forging connections with people online served as a confirmation that Tumblr was a good way to meet new people. Elijah had previously used sites such as Neopets and Subeta[^12], which they described as a “more mature” version of Neopets, as their primary “social media” prior to joining Tumblr. They had little experience with Facebook or more “typical” social media platforms. They had been introduced

[^12]: Online “digital pet” platforms, where users can adopt digital creatures and are expected to care for them. These platforms also contain “community” features such as message boards for interacting with other pet owners.
to Neopets earlier by the same friend who then later introduced them to Tumblr, and moved on to Subeta to continue the same type of interactions they had been participating in on Neopets, primarily creating art and participating in role-playing on message boards. They cite Neopets/Subeta as being crucial in their development as an author and artist, because of the detailed, constructive feedback they received from other members, and the availability of role-playing partners.

Elijah continued, that while Tumblr was not particularly good for either feedback or role-playing, they did find it a decent platform for publicizing their art, even if they received minimal feedback. They expressed a desire to return to regular use of Subeta in particular, but was currently unable because of reasons beyond their control. They wouldn’t give up Tumblr now if they had access to their Subeta. But they did miss their “lost” account and, if anything, their time on Tumblr reinforced their positive feelings about Subeta as a superior platform for the kind of social interaction they most valued.

More common than in-person relationships leading to Tumblr adoption were those users who followed other online friends to new platforms, after another platform had been shut down, depopulated, or their personal interests shifted to new topics. Many respondents noted they came to Tumblr when other online platforms began to fail them, either socially or technologically. What this “failure event” was varied from user to user, but given that the majority of my interview participants were engaged in fandom activities, broadly speaking (producing and consuming fan art, fan fiction, general discussion), it was expected that they had “tried on” a host of other sites before arriving at Tumblr. And many expressed that they anticipated having to move to a different online platform in the near future, as Tumblr had a number of drawbacks.
Pearce (and Artemesia, 2009) documents the social practices and community structures of a group of online exiles, who had been forced to vacate the online game space of *Uru: Ages beyond Myst* (2003) after publisher Ubisoft shut down servers in 2004. A group of *Uru* players then relocated to *There.com* (2003) to continue the relationships and social ties they had maintained in the game, although on a significantly different online platform with different affordances than what they had previously encountered in *Uru*. Pearce was able to embed herself in a relatively stable group of users who, by the time her study was coming to a close, had begun the process of a second digital migration to *Second Life* (2003). With each relocation, the group maintained some practices, while also creating new activities and adjusting their interactions to the possibilities allocated to them in the new space. Unlike Pearce’s informants, who at least in part coordinated their efforts to move their community from one space to the next, my respondents admitted that they lost track of many of their old online friends when moving between platforms, even if those friends had also “migrated” to Tumblr independently. Though a number of respondents cited LiveJournal as a social platform that fulfilled their desire for fandom interaction prior to joining Tumblr (particularly those respondents in their mid 20s-early 30s; see also Hellekson & Busse, 2007; Lothian, Busse, & Reid, 2006 for discussions about and with LiveJournal users who, by 2017, would be significantly older. While there are certainly Tumblr fandom users in their 40s and older, my oldest respondents are closer to my own age), none mentioned moving with a large, intact group of friends. This was my path to Tumblr as well, and I only maintain only a single connection to a friend from the last LiveJournal community I was heavily involved in.

Furthermore, was no single site emerged as the “origin” of these users, even if LiveJournal was the prior platform most frequently mentioned. Examples of sites mentioned as
previous locations of engagement included Clevernoob (gaming message board, used by Doan), Neopets (virtual pet simulation, also includes message boards, used by Vera, Elijah); LiveJournal (personal blogging platform with friends lists and community features; used by Mina, Amy, Randy, Missati, author); and Mugglenet (Harry Potter specific fan site; used by Vera, Constance).

Reasons for leaving previous sites varied from changing interests, changing user bases, and sites shutting down. Clevernoob no longer exists, having been shut down by its maintainers. Both participants who mentioned using Mugglenet (Vera and Constance) explained that their interest in Harry Potter had waned, and so they no longer felt compelled to visit the site. While LiveJournal is still accessible, it is somewhat more sparsely populated by English speakers. Missati, a LiveJournal transplant, explained that the popular Black women bloggers she had been following on LiveJournal made the transition to Tumblr en masse in 2009, precipitating her own transition to Tumblr. While she didn’t necessarily end up following the exact same people on both platforms, she saw little reason to continue using LiveJournal once the content she found most compelling was accessible on Tumblr. She signed up for a Tumblr account, but largely remained inactive while following others. It wasn’t until later that year that she discovered “how to shitpost” (see chapter 2) and became more active in producing content herself. Once she stopped worrying about her own contributions requiring a certain amount of depth of insight, and realized she could just post jokes or strange thoughts she had, she was more comfortable participating on the platform.

Mina also considered LiveJournal her primary social media platform for fandom activity prior to Tumblr. She discussed the LiveJournal “strikethrough” as a breaking point for her deciding to become more active on Tumblr in 2011. The “strikethrough” occurred in 2007, when
some 500 LiveJournal accounts were suspended simultaneously for items on their interest lists. Interests included in the “strikethrough” list included “incest, rape, child pornography, and pedophilia.” While presumably some of the blogs that were affected were promoting illegal activity, rape survivor groups and fan fiction communities were also affected (Fanlore, 2017). Even for those account holders not directly suspended by LiveJournal, the reverberations of the “strikethrough” left many fans with a sense of distrust towards the platform, and eager to depart for other sites (Romano, 2012). While Mina did not depart LiveJournal immediately, and returned to a LiveJournal Community briefly in 2014-2015, “strikethrough” remained clear in her mind as a reason for more or less replacing LiveJournal with Tumblr when it came to her fandom participation.

One final participant who left LiveJournal, Amy, gave a more personal reason: they were bullied by former friends until remaining was no longer emotionally possible. They shared that they had a history of being bullied in multiple contexts, responding:

Amy: Yeah, I do feel more comfortable talking about [being gay and nonbinary] on tumblr. I have enough difficulty fitting in/not being ostracised or bullied irl without giving people extra reason. I tell people I'm autistic irl because they know there's something non-normal about me, apparently it's obvious, and that seems to give them a reason, like, "oh that's why she's being/doing [whatever]" (even if the thing in question actually has nothing to do with autism lol). but, well, firstly I get the impression that telling people irl that i'm gay/nb would make them more uncomfortable with me, not less; but also I'm married to a straight man and for both our sakes I'd rather not get into conversations about how that works and then FB for me is all people I know irl. did I mention I got bullied off LJ in the end? lol

Indira: oh yeah, since marrying a straight man, I realize like, I can't go around yelling I'm bi to people who know both of us. Because people start to make these assumptions about....everything and I don't have the social stamina to deal with it wait you got bullied off of LJ?

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13 It is so completely beyond my ability to discuss here, but fan fiction works, for good or for ill, include some of the abovementioned themes with some frequency, particularly rape or “non-con” (non-consensual) fiction.
14 Edited by researcher for clarity.
Amy: Yup
I had pretty good friends there in the visual kei community for a while but then....I honestly don't know what happened, one or two of them started making posts about "oh Amy's a terrible person, i'd rather be dead than be like them" and apparently whatever it was was contagious
I have no memory of doing anything to cause it.

Amy’s initial choice to adopt Tumblr as their preferred platform was more closely tied with their younger sisters’ adoption of Tumblr for blogging, than to their leaving LiveJournal. But their reason for leaving LiveJournal was a social failure, one that was made worse by the technical features of the LiveJournal platform, which allowed for multiple back-channels to exist behind Friends’ locked posts.¹⁵ LiveJournal boasts a number of rather robust architectural features for controlling the flow of information between and among users (Kendall, 2007; Neill Hoch 2014). In addition to making posts that could be “public,” “private,” or “friends only,” users can also make sub-sets of Friends, a specific set of accounts that could view certain posts, while other Friends would be unable to see the post. This level of fine-tuning access to journal entries was generally considered a positive attribute of the site (Kendall, 2007; also my interview respondents, particularly Missati and Mina, echoed that they would like to see a similar feature on Tumblr). But in Amy’s case, they found that a number of other LiveJournal users had been saying malicious things in restricted posts, which only eventually bubbled up into public comments on shared Communities. This bullying led to their departure from Tumblr, when they no longer had the social energy to fight back or try and make new friends.

These narratives of leaving LiveJournal and eventually ending up on Tumblr trace how technical and social affordances of digital platforms mutually reinforce one another. In the case of “strikethrough,” the fact that LiveJournal could use Interests (which included traversable links that allowed users to view a list of blogs interested in particular topics) to delete hundreds of

¹⁵ “Friends” on LiveJournal do not have to be reciprocal.
accounts at once made Mina uncomfortable, while the exodus of bloggers Missati discusses may have been attributed to any number of factors, but one compelling reason may have simply been that new users stopped joining LiveJournal. By 2013, LiveJournal no longer publically listed how many active accounts (logins within the last month) the platform maintained, even though this information was previously accessible from LiveJournal’s FAQ (Neill Hoch, 2014). My own experience in departing LiveJournal was connected most tangibly with changing fandoms and no longer being able to find an audience on for my written work on the platform. While motivations differed between users, the overarching similarity was that LiveJournal no longer proved to be a viable space for many users, and that those who “moved” to Tumblr largely did so without maintaining the majority of their previous social ties. They simply assumed that they would develop new friendships and connections once they arrived on Tumblr. In all of these cases, participants also mentioned additional sites they used prior to LiveJournal (again, perhaps attributable to age, the LiveJournal transplants often had the longest history of internet use with multiple sites they had used and left behind), and that they did not maintain ties from those platforms either. Continuity of relationships did not arise as a priority.

3.6 Content Decision Making

Interview participants, regardless of prior social media platform experience, almost all described a period after joining Tumblr where they either did not post anything themselves and only reblogged (Ivan) or had very minimal activity on the platform, neither posting or reblogging for months before either starting to reblog or post for themselves (Missati and Randy). E recalls following a number of gender and sexuality based blogs and doing extensive research into possible orientations and identities while trying to understand themselves better. They shared:
E: i was tangentially aware of [Tumblr] in high school bc my sibling used it a lot, i actually made an account but quit after 3 days since i thought it was too addictive for me. i didn't start using it again until my first year of university which was late 2014. at the time i was becoming pretty sure that i was not just "a girl whos not like other girls" and beginning to suspect that i didn't experience attraction the same way other ppl did, and i was familiar with tumblr as a place where i could find more information on that so when i first joined i mostly just followed all of those advice blogs for trans/nb ppl and did exhaustive research on different labels for gender and sexuality

Indira: so you were using it as a resource to try and help you through that process of learning more about yourself and clarifying things you were thinking about?

E: yes exactly! i knew that what i was labelling myself at the time, a pan girl, was increasingly uncomfortable, so i figured if i could just gather a very big pool of possible alternatives i could sift through and find if there was a better answer, and tumblr was the place i thought i could find that kind of database

While E now uses Tumblr for a combination of fandom, humor, news, and identity-related topics, their initial participation was that of an observer, mining Tumblr for information about additional identity categories as they tried to discover more about themselves. Even now, they rarely share their own posts, and primarily consider themselves to be a reblogger of other people’s content. But the above quoted section in particular attends to the ways in which lurking can be a highly productive engagement with a social media platform (Han, Hou, Kim, & Gustafson, 2014; Preece, Nonnecke, & Andrews, 2004; Schneider, Von Krogh, & Jager, 2013). Though, when social media users are forced to lurk rather than participate, they note dissatisfaction and frustration in feeling as if they do not belong to communities in which they would otherwise engage (Tobin, Vanman, Verreynne, & Saeri, 2015). In addition to learning social roles and structures, which might not be immediately apparent and might not hold even between different communities on the same platform (Honeycutt, 2005), E explains the personal importance of their lurking in their own development outside of, but still connected intimately with, the context of Tumblr.
Doan and Mina both explained that they started out making more personal posts to their Tumblr blogs and only later transitioned into being more of a mix of reblogs and personal posts. Furthermore, Doan commented that he rarely makes personal posts anymore. He used to be more inclined to vent about issues affecting his life, post pictures of himself, etc. Though he has been on Tumblr for about 3 years, he does not consider himself to have very many followers (166 at the time of interview), and thus anything that he posts is unlikely to be seen by very many people. It is worth noting, however, that none of my participants considered themselves to have large Tumblr followings, though some had well over a thousand followers (Missati, Randy, Ivan). Though only a small percentage of Tumblr accounts reach such high follower counts, (Chang, Tang, Inagaki, & Liu, 2014) these users did not consider themselves to be particularly “popular” on the platform. Rather than attributing “popularity” to a simple Follower number, almost all users spoke in terms of the amount of engagement they felt they had with the blogs who Followed them and who they Followed. Those with a core group of Mutuals who interacted with them frequently via Asks, Replies, and Mentions, still felt as if they were not “popular blogs,” since it was only really their friends who interacted with them, and the majority of their followers remained largely silent. This is not to discount Doan’s experiences. His small follower count may very well have been the reason his personal posts did not receive many Notes. But rather, similar sentiments were expressed across most participants. No one felt as if they were “popular,” even if they had ten times as many followers as Doan. Similarly, my account is now nearing 2,000 Followers, and I do not feel more “popular” now than I did at 500 Followers.

In first joining Tumblr, the participants I interviewed shared stories of limited in-person and online friends introducing them to the new social media platform as a way of meeting new online friends and/or sharing interests with other people. The sharing of media was particularly
highlighted, with Elijah discussing the availability of gif sets and screen shots of the show
*Supernatural* that were easily accessible on Tumblr almost immediately after the show aired.

Anuli joined for *Legend of Korra* content, a show that they watched with their in-person friends.

Vera joined Tumblr at the suggestion of an online friend in order to find more news about getting into the *Pottermore* beta. For Vera, joining Tumblr was initially seen as a means to get into *Pottermore* faster, rather than as a social media end. That being said, she continues to use Tumblr even though she is no longer interested in *Harry Potter* fandom or a user of *Pottermore*.

Many respondents noted a similar trend of expanding out into increasingly diverse reblogging and posting practices. While they may have come to the site seeking content for a particular fandom, their interests spread over time and they began reblogging content from many different fandoms, rather than limiting themselves to just one. In addition, the content they reblogged increasingly contained non-fandom material, including social justice, humor, and current events postings. As they Followed more and more blogs, the content they saw on their Dashboards also expanded, and they tended to reblog anything they found interesting. Some users explained that as their interests changed, they would Follow and Unfollow different blogs in order to account for their shifting interests (Amy, Ivan, Constance, and Elijah). But more frequently, Unfollowing came after the other user had posted something that they found objectionable. Randy explained, “ahh, it depends. sometimes it's over something small and petty and I'm just like, you know what? i'm done and other times it's a red flag I missed and I'm like holy shit, you actually believe that? you think that? blocked.” (they then clarified by “Blocked” they mean “Unfollowed” as they rarely Block accounts other than obvious bots). While Randy made an effort to look through the blogs they chose to Follow with some care before deciding to Follow, stating “for fandom things, I only follow people that have a mix of personal/fandom
content on their blog I want that personal connection in fandom, because that comes through in the person's work,” they could still be surprised by the content they found on their Dashboards, and would Unfollow users if they found that content to be objectionable. Many other participants echoed similar sentiments, that sometimes other users would “reveal” themselves as holding views they were not comfortable with.

That being said, participants occasionally made exceptions for users they felt were their friends, or those who they found to be particularly engaging. Even if a blog changed interests, they may continue to Follow them if the participant felt a particular closeness to them. In one case, Elijah reported continuing to Follow a user because of their perceived relationship with them. In our discussion about Unfollwing, the topic of “purity politics,” or the idea that every fandom practice that someone engages in must be unproblematic in terms of the characters relationship dynamic, came up repeatedly as something they tried to avoid seeing on their Dashboard.

I have broken up this extended quotation in order to provide significant context for this conversation. It is worth noting that Elijah and I have been friends for nearly three years at the time of interviewing, when we were both members of a relatively small, somewhat insular fandom. As such, we are relatively comfortable with one another and they provided some of the most in-depth answers of all my participants.

Indira: what are reasons you wouldn't follow someone? or have you unfollowed people and why?

Elijah: on rare occassion actually i'll follow someone whos ff ive read on ao3 ? like if i can hunt down their url i might follow them but thats p rare i have low tolerance for purity politics for sure and any kind of anti behavior even if its not targeted at a fandom i care about like someone im following right now has been posting a lot of anti kylo/reylo stuff in the wake of the trailer and im super close to unfollowing them
its like borderline anti
i dont know if that makes sense like theres a fuzzy distinction between someone
complaining that they dont like a ship
and Really anti behavior that implies or directly states that people who enjoy that are bad
[…]

After briefly discussing one of the ways they find other users to follow (through reading
their fanfiction on either AO3 or fanfiction.net, they transition quickly into discussing when they
might Unfollow someone. The first reason given was a demonstrated participation in purity
politics. Broadly speaking, Shotwell (quoted in Beck, 2017) describes purity politics as
applicable to a wide range of behaviors, stating:

On the left, a lot of the time what happens is that people try to have only the right words,
the right views, the right lines. They develop a kind of party line that they try to hold to,
and then spend quite a lot of time disciplining other people’s behavior and speech. It’s
not that we want to say harmful things or have bad views. But this turns into purity
politics when that self-monitoring or disciplining other people’s speech or behavior is all
we end up doing (Beck, 2017).

In fandom specifically, the term encompasses a general attitude towards only consuming and
producing “unproblematic” materials. Only healthy relationships between characters should be
depicted, and fan works should not try to address controversial topics such as sexual abuse,
emotional abuse, depictions of racism, depictions of homophobia, internalized homophobia, or
violent conduct. What is on the list of “problematic” materials may vary from person to person,
but the idea of rigorously trying to control the speech and behavior of other people in fandom
spaces is consistent with Shotwell’s description of a broader purity politics. The enforcement
becomes the end goal, rather than trying to engage in dialog.

While perhaps not in this exact phrasing, I first encountered this type of aggressive
policing of behavior on Tumblr in the same fandom that Elijah and I shared. While the term
“purity politics” would not be introduced into the conversation until later, there was a number of
fans who would send anonymous messages to fan-creators (typically adults over 18 years old)
who were producing art and stories which were often dark, violent, and depicted unhealthy relationship dynamics between the leads. I was a writer in this fandom, and Elijah was both a writer and a visual artist. We both engaged with these materials in ways that were considered “problematic.”

While I have been deeply concerned with racism, homophobia, misogyny, and transphobia in fandom communities online, I found this specific policing of my written fictional work perplexing. Yes, I was writing about relationships that were contextually unhealthy or abusive in one way or another, but I wasn’t presenting them as healthy ones. I wasn’t (as far as I could tell) dressing up abuse as romantic. If I was, it was a failure of my skill as a writer, rather than my intent. I think it’s acceptable for fan works to write about racism. And another thing entirely for a fan work to be racist. But, those trying to curb my behavior via anonymous Asks on Tumblr, which for me personally never escalated beyond the occasional “You are an adult and should know better,” appeared to make no such distinction.16

Our shared experiences, and watching those around us receive much more pronounced harassment for their fan works, led to both Elijah and I being somewhat concerned with how far and by what means users tried to regulate each other’s behaviors and works, while still hoping to remain sensitive to the fact that there are fictional depictions of characters, relationships, and situations that are harmful. When Elijah uses the term “anti,” they refer to the individuals on Tumblr who engage in this sort of policing of other users. While sometimes it is a label that others attach to particular users who exhibit behaviors that aim to restrict or shame other fans into certain codes of behavior, increasingly some fans adopt the “anti” title for themselves, taking pride in the behaviors they utilize to circumvent the production of particular types of

16 While I have seen evidence of additional behaviors on Tumblr attempting to curtail particular behaviors or content production, discussing further goes beyond the scope of this project.
fandom materials (sending Asks to users, pubic call-outs, reporting users to Tumblr or AO3 to suspend accounts, crafting lists of usernames that should be Unfollowed and Blocked).

Again, this isn’t to negate the real concerns that should be addressed in fandom spaces in terms of the damaging stereotypes they may be perpetuating, or the risky behavior they may promote. Only, there is a qualitative difference for some Tumblr users (myself included) between “anti” behaviors and critique of long-standing fandom practices that are ultimately damaging to fans, particularly queer fans, fans of color, and otherwise marginalized fans.

*Indira:* no I mean, I think I get it because like, I honestly do not care about star wars, but I have a lot of mutuals who hate kylo/reylo. I also have a good friend who is very into Kylux, and I honestly I'm closer personally to the idea that reylo is...not good. But at the same time I can't be like "if you like reylo you personally are a bad person"

*Elijah:* i fuckin hate reylo i think some of the cause behind a large trend towards kylux/reylo is stemming from anti-black racism like i dont know but also i totally ship someone with someone who is largely antagonistic and could arguably be called abusive so i firmly believe in peoples right to have that ship if they want it lmao
i follow someone who ships reylo
i think they're a really cool writer and i appreciate their lack of tolerance for purity politics [...]

As we continue our conversation, I introduce a specific example of where I have trouble drawing the distinction on Tumblr between genuinely hurtful fictional depictions and content that I simply do not like, that of Reylo content. On the one hand, I have a number of Mutuals who absolutely abhor the practice of shipping Kylo Ren and Rey from the new trilogy of *Star Wars* films (2015; 2017; forthcoming). To the point that they reblog posts explaining that the ship is inherently abusive and that those who participate in “Reylo” shipping should cease to do so entirely. They actively Unfollow or Block Reylo shippers, and can be genuinely antagonistic towards them. On the other hand, a handful of my Mutuals ship Kylux (Kylo Ren/Hux; a pairing that has also received considerable critique because of its privileging of White male desire and
bodies in a film where the two lead male characters are Black and Latino, gesturing towards the prevalence and privileging of White cis-gendered male bodies in male/male slash fandom).

Elijah, similarly, notes that they continue to follow a Reylo shipper despite believing the ship to be a result of anti-Black racism.

Elijah states that while they too believe that both of these ships are “stemming from anti-Black racism,” they argue clearly that people are still allowed to have those ships. Having the ship isn’t the problem. Anti-Black racism is the problem. Furthermore, because their own shipping practices include antagonistic and/or abusive couples, they don’t necessarily object to Reylo content on that account.

_Elijah_: i have a hard stance on following people who are exclusionists. i super cant tolerate it […] but also all of this gets like blurry and messy when its friends people im friendly with like ive seen a few aphobic posts from this kid i follow but also theyre a kid, and i pretty aggressively reblog stuff about including ace people in queer communities and i hope that generates potential for learning? and the potential for them to see different arguments instead of sitting in an echo chamber

_Indira_: so like, you're less flexible with strangers and maybe more flexible with friends? […]

_Elijah_: more flexible with mutuals and even more flexible with mutuals who are children

In this final part of our exchange, Elijah contends that their “hard stance” is that they Unfollow (or do not follow in the first place) people who are “exclusionists.” Exclusionists encompass a number of different behaviors that a user might exhibit, including trans-exclusionary radical feminists (TERFs), those who exclude nonbinary people from belonging in the trans community, those who exclude bisexuals and pansexuals from queer/LGBT communities, and those who exclude asexual and aromantic people from queer/LGBT
communities. The last two are often seen as closely related, as the rhetoric of excluding asexuals and aromantic individuals from LGBT communities closely resembles the same rhetoric once (and still) used to exclude bisexuals from “gay and lesbian” communities. In most cases, Elijah would choose to Unfollow exclusionary users, and might also choose to either Block them (preventing the exclusionists from following them) or “Soft Block” them.

A Soft Block is when a Tumblr user Blocks a particular blog, then immediately Unblocks them. This forces the Soft Blocked blog to Unfollow your blog, while giving them the option to Follow again. Typically, however, the person who has been Soft Blocked eventually notices that they are no longer Following a user, and will choose not to Follow them again. In a way, the Soft Block is a maneuver to initiate the end of a mutual or asymmetric tie, without having to directly confront the other person. Blocking is considered particularly harsh, and appears reserved for extreme cases. As Randy discussed above, even when they say “Blocked” they usually actually mean Unfollow. Most users reported rarely having to Block “real” accounts. And the Block feature was most often utilized against automated porn bots. There were select reasons users chose to Block other Tumblr blogs, as discussed below, but these were extreme circumstances, and the Block itself was deemed relatively useless in controlling access to blogs and blog content if there was an actual person maintaining the blocked account.

In this final section of our exchange, Elijah emphasizes that while trying to control their own Tumblr experience, they are also willing to continue Following a user who they would absolutely Unfollow under different conditions. Asexual exclusion (here, aphobic posts) would normally be grounds for Unfollowing a particular blog. But, they note that they themselves are a frequent reclaimer of content that advocates for the inclusion of ace (asexual) people in the queer community. They hope that by remaining Mutuals with this user, who they know is young, they
will hopefully be able to indirectly persuade them to shift their views concerning asexuals. This isn’t a user that they speak to outside of Tumblr, or in any sort of one-on-one capacity. They simply Follow one another. And in this case, Elijah worries that if they cut off this underage user by Unfollowing them and Soft Blocking them, that this user who has views that differ from Elijah’s will only be forced into a stricter echo chamber, where they are only exposed to posts they already agree with.

This tolerance for what would otherwise be a “hard stance” is based both on the fact they are currently Mutuals, and also that the other user is young. Elijah goes on to explain their correction of my use of “friend” to their preferred, “Mutual.” Keep in mind Elijah is the same user quoted earlier in this chapter as having joined Tumblr explicitly on the advice of a friend who had “a lot of online friends.” They signed up for Tumblr right away with the intention of meeting new people, but have actually found it rather difficult to make new “friends” through the platform, though they do have “Mutuals.” They go on to cite myself, our mutual acquaintance from a niche fandom, and one other user as the only “friends” they have currently made on Tumblr and continue to speak to on a regular basis. They go on to list five other users who they say are “sorta friends” of people they know “irl.” And then friendships that they developed on other sites, like Subeta, which they then carried over to Tumblr. Tumblr itself has been largely unhelpful in their experience for developing new friendships, though they have certainly made social media connections through Tumblr.

Most users noted that while they might have come to Tumblr with specific fandom interests, their blogs now largely lacked a central theme and were a mix of various fandoms, humor, social justice, news, and other assorted content. While sometimes also ran “side” blogs that had more thematically organized content, most agreed that their blogs reflected what
interested them at the moment, rather than trying to curate, either for themselves or for other people. Sometimes, they would reblog specific content because they knew a particular Mutual would like the post (Amy, Missati, Randy) and would generally use the Mentions (@) feature to make sure the other person saw it. In these cases, they were hoping the specific person would enjoy this specific post, rather than some sort of larger “imagined audience” (boyd, 2007; Hogan, 2010; Litt, 2012; Marwick & boyd, 2011) that was difficult for them to conceptualize. Prior research has found that even when tools for restricting access to posts to certain audiences is possible, social media users tend not to utilize such features when posting (Litt & Hargittai, 2016), and the behaviors of interview participants was largely consistent with this trend. While Tumblr Messaging would allow them to send posts privately to the person they felt would enjoy it, without publishing the post to their Dashboard, they continued to use the Mention feature to send interesting posts to specific Mutuals or other people they Followed.

No participants showed any overt concern with determining what to post or not post depending on the tastes of their Followers, though occasionally they would mention holding back on originating posts that might either be controversial to the larger Tumblr audience, or might be stolen and plagiarized by others (Missati). Those who reported having largely positive experience on Tumblr in part attributed their contentment with their ability to avoid situations where they might come into conflict with other users (Anuli, Constance, Doan). However, while they may have not directly conceptualized their blog as being aimed at particular audiences on Tumblr, most acknowledged that other Tumblr users were distinct from the social circles they were “friends” with on Facebook in particular, but also Twitter and Instagram.

In choosing who to Follow and what content they selected to reblog from others, participants felt the pull of architectural limitations and possibilities. Regulating who they
Followed, who Followed them, and a system of interactions with other users influenced what they chose to reblog. However, they saw their own sharing behaviors as also being shaped by their interests, particularly the media they enjoyed, their sense of humor, and concern with current events. While they had little notion of curating their blogs for particular audiences, social connections did shape some of their sharing practices, but in ways that were indirect and fragmented. Keeping a coherently themed blog was not a priority, and decisions regarding what to share about their personal lives was highly variable between users. Yet, most expressed some degree of interest in wanting to share what they found most amusing or interesting at a given moment, and expressed delight that other users might be at all interested in Following them. In the next section, I continue the discussion of what Tumblr users choose to share and not share, with a shift away from content concerns, and towards personal privacy and comfort.

3.7 Conflict, Privacy, and Broken Code

In our discussions of privacy on Tumblr, most participants framed their privacy concerns in terms of the access other users had to their information and their relationships with other users. Interview participants varied greatly in how much information about themselves they were willing to share on Tumblr, though most agreed that they would not post their real names or exact addresses, sometimes giving examples of data they wouldn’t share that were almost ludicrous (not my social security number…). But, many users expressed that the relative anonymity of Tumblr allowed them to share more on their blogs than they might on their Facebook, Twitter, or with in-person family/friends. Elliot said that while they know Tumblr lacks many architectural privacy settings, and that everything the post is technically public, they still felt the Tumblr platform was more private than other social media platforms because of the small user base when they joined (in 2009), that only two people they knew in real life Followed
them, and that the platform could be largely anonymous because it does not require a real name. Amy, who is quoted at length above, discussed being bullied off of LiveJournal, and the amount they’re willing to disclose on Tumblr about their sexuality and gender. Amy specifically cites the social challenges that they already face in in-person settings, as a result of their autism. Their two sisters both Follow their Tumblr blog, and thus they do regularly see people in-person, who know that they are both gay and nonbinary, in addition to being autistic. But the complexity of explaining their marriage to a straight cisgender man, a question that somewhat inevitably follows if they disclose they are not a woman, is tiresome after already explaining that they are autistic. And their autism is the more frequent, unavoidable question during in-person interactions. Other users (Constance and Missati) expressed varying degrees of comfort and safety with discussing their sexual orientation with people they know in-person, but consider themselves to be much more open about their sexuality on Tumblr.

Almost all interview respondents spoke about similar patterns of checking out someone’s blog before Following them, trying to get a sense of the person who was running the blog. Randy explained, “I usually follow someone after scoping their blog and content out for a couple days, check for red flags, and I'll be more likely to follow if they make funny personal text posts.” Randy goes on to state that they take several days to decide whether or not they might follow someone. Making personal posts, here linked with humor, makes Randy in particular more likely to Follow someone. They expect some level of self-disclosure on other people’s blogs. While I don’t look for any specific red-flags when considering blogs to Follow, I do find myself gravitating towards Following people who share some personal details about themselves on a regular basis. Even if it’s simply to vent frustrations or make a silly joke. Many users strove to
find such connections with the people they Followed, even if they did not interact with them directly in any sort of regular fashion (or at all).

*Indira:* are there blogs you follow that you don't feel a particular connection to? why do you follow those blogs?

*E:* mm not really? i think every blog i follow i feel some kind of connection to, even if its just a familiar "oh hey this person finished knitting that laceweight shawl! good for them" when i see them on my dash they've all become part of the landscape of my dash i guess the exceptions to that would be the blogs i follow that are entirely informational and not personal, which i follow because they post things im interested in learning about

Some respondents also reported following “aesthetic blogs” that only posts pictures of particular topics or color tones (such as blogs dedicated to the color pink, or seascapes, or neon lights), and that these were largely the only blogs that they followed that they didn’t have a good idea of who the person behind the blog was (Randy and Missati). But by and large, even if the connection remained a weak one, some form of social connection to another individual remained a motivating factor when deciding who to Follow on Tumblr. This process of vetting people they were considering Following was considered a key factor in controlling their privacy, in what is otherwise an exceedingly open and public platform (Cho, 2017).

While Amy was extremely candid about leaving LiveJournal on account of bullying, other participants were equally thoughtful about privacy invasions and hostile behaviors they had witnessed or participated in since joining Tumblr. David Karp was quoted in 2012 as having designed Tumblr as a web platform that would make users accountable for what they said, hopefully reducing mean-spirited attacks on other users (Walker, 2012). By his logic, the lack of a “Reply” function (at the time) or a page similar to Facebook’s Wall would force users to reblog posts to add commentary. Thus, users who wished to say something nasty or unpleasant to
another user would be forced to put their comments on their own blog, rather than in the visual space maintained by the original poster. Trolls and harassers would be architecturally corralled into their own digital space. Since then, Tumblr has introduced Replies, which attach themselves to the notes of a post (and are thus still somewhat more hidden than they would be on Facebook). However, Karp’s design decisions and how the platform has developed since those initial choices has done little to circumvent harassment between users.

Missati, who said she had been involved in multiple conflicts on Tumblr, discussed some of the reasons why she believes arguments are so frequent between users, stating:

**Missati:** One of the aspects that makes conflicts worse and escalates they is the lack of a time stamp. So you can end up with seven year old beef on your dash because someone reblogged it out of a tag they stumbled on, etc. And also, the whole concept of telephone comes into play. Someone who isn’t even tangentially involved in the conflict will get involved and conflate the situation and end up escalating it by throwing gasoline on the flames. So need that could have been hashed out the same day gets dragged out for months or years because a user’s friends decided to cape without knowing the facts.

**Indira:** my favorite is when there is a whole ass reblog chain and no one knows who is fighting with who anymore

**Missati:** I’ll call a white girl out on her racism and her friend will step in on some “well on October 23rd 2003 so and so said a thing that could have been transphobic so my friend gets a pass at being racist” or some shit. It’s like Susan we are not discussing 15 year old tea. We are discussing why Helen is fetishizing black dick and writing slavery AUs that are hypersexualized.

Tumblr posts are not timestamped in a way that is easily accessible, though browser extensions such as xkit can add timestamps to the Dashboard. What Missati draws attention to here is how the Dashboard essentially becomes atemporal, as posts from years ago circulate next to posts that were made 30 seconds ago. For users who have been on Tumblr for a number of years, something they said 5 or more years ago can suddenly rise to prominence again, as posts are rediscovered and reblogged. For Missati, a former association with an infamous blogger who
has since been vilified for conning users out of money is sometimes raised years later when she
tries to address on-going racism in fandom. Her prior association with this “Tumblr famous”
account holder is used as ammunition against her critique of racist practices. She goes on to say
“Like one of my detractors’ favorite things to do is to bring up my former association with [user]
back in like 2011 and 2012 to try and discredit my callouts of their friends. And it’s like I already
went through my trial by fire and learned from my mistakes.” She has since cut all ties with this
controversial user, and, at the time of their initial falling out, already underwent criticism for
having been in this person’s circle of friends at all. This attack on her character and past
associations is still used as a bulwark against her calling out of racism in fandom practice.

Furthermore, she and others (Randy, Vera, Erin) felt that the reblogging feature in
particular actually contributes to misunderstanding and disagreements, rather than preventing
argumentative or abusive behaviors. reblogging arguments becomes performative (Vera and
Mina in particular highlighted the word performative in their responses) as users try to compete
with one another regarding how sensitive they are to a particular issue, but that the reblog
expressing concern is not visibly followed up with any concrete action. Participants used the
word “performative” by and large in context as a negative term to indicate displays online that
were not “backed up” by face-to-face or monetary participation or activism. It may be more
accurate to compare these perceived performative behaviors to studies of lying online, which in
some cases may be connected to maintaining civil relationships with others and avoiding conflict
(Van Kleek, Murray-Rust, Guy, Smith, & O’Hara, 2015). Much of the most compelling research
into online deception concerns online dating profiles (Ellison, Heino, & Gibbs, 2006; Hancock &
Toma, 2009; Stieger, Eichinger, & Honeder, 2009; Toma, Hancock, & Ellison, 2008). In a way,
the “performativity” of reblogging social justice posts can be interpreted as similar to deception
in online dating scenarios, as the magnitude of the “lie” is not considered particularly egregious, but more an annoyance. Practices of reblogging socially conscious posts is also keeping with research that considers profile pages and other personally constructed online spaces as performances (Cover 2012; Davis, 2010; Liu, 2007; Papacharissi, 2002a, 2002b) as well as concepts of controlling behaviors for imagined audiences (boyd, 2007; Litt, 2012; Marwick & boyd, 2011). It is not that interview participants denied that other users wanted to be viewed as socially conscious or interested in progressive politics, but rather that their commitment to such ideals ended at the act of reblogging, or a cursory comment. This made discerning another user’s actual beliefs and behaviors, often considered important in maintaining boundaries, a difficult proposition.

Vera, as an Argentinian, specifically connected performativity to a larger trend of U.S. centrism on Tumblr, were racial politics in particular are often discussed in a way that is irrelevant or sometimes outright hostile to users from other countries. She did not view this as exclusive to Tumblr, but reflective of U.S. attitudes online more broadly. In her work as a translator, she took a job translating a course module for a major U.S. university intended as part of a course specifically for Argentineans (but to be taught in the U.S.). The course discussed racism and current events, like the Black Lives Matter movement, and then asked students to apply the concepts in the module to the Argentinean context. She had difficulty with the project, because while Argentina has its own share of social issues, she found that the act of translation from English into Argentinean-specific Spanish didn’t account for the way the course was, at its core, non-analogous to the social situation in Argentina. She saw this story as directly connecting to attitudes she encountered on Tumblr. Similarly, she continued, “pro-socialism” posts on Tumblr strike her as deeply American and uncomfortable to read, given her own country’s vastly
different relationship to socialism. She summarized her feelings of conflation between performativity and U.S. centrism as such:

_Vera_: A lot of the posts that gain traction seem extremely performative and self-congratulatory, in that sense. Especially if you look at posts like those that go "Reblog if you think it's okay to punch nazis" or some other obvious statement. It gets to a point where posts feel... guilt-trippy, even. The more I am on Tumblr, the more I find myself going to the reblog button, reconsidering, then scrolling on rather than hitting it, because the content doesn't feel genuine.

Tumblr also suffers from what I like to call the "tupperware effect," especially in the way they pick and choose which issues to turn their attention to.

In general, the Tumblr population likes to think of itself as open and inclusive and aware of current social issues. But as someone born and raised in Latin America, who gets mostly an "outsider's" perspective of things, that's an enormous fallacy.

While she was not my only participant located outside of the U.S., she was the most vocal in addressing the cultural assumptions made by the majority of Tumblr users hailing from the United States, and how that positionality often resulted in social agendas where non-U.S. users could not adequately relate or participate. And, subsequently, non-U.S. users were judged by standards based on a different cultural basis than their own, leading to conflict between users.

Erin, on the other hand, admitted to sometimes inserting herself into ongoing arguments through the reblog function and participating in conflict willingly. She described her own interventions as “passive aggressive” and these conflicts often related to the atemporal nature of the Tumblr dashboard. She brought up a particular incident, where a different user was being “called out” for writing incest fiction in the _Team Fortress 2_ fandom. While at one time a fairly active fandom, _Team Fortress 2_, both as a game and as a fandom, rapidly declined in popularity after the release of _Overwatch_ in 2016. As a team-based shooter with little in-game narrative, _Team Fortress 2_ released “plot” and character details over a span of several years (_Overwatch_ now replicates this pattern, but with even more lore and character development than _TF2_ ever
amassed). The pairing of Spy/Scout was thus not always incestuous, as it wasn’t revealed at first that they were father and son (one only needs to think of the first Star Wars film in 1977, where Luke and Leia were not yet siblings to see the similarities). Furthermore, the video shorts released by Team Fortress 2’s developer, Valve, established only BLU Scout and RED Spy as father and son, meaning that BLU Scout/BLU Spy, RED Scout/RED Spy, and RED Scout/BLU Spy were all non-incestuous relationships. This ambiguity resulted in a series of arguments that were started and rehashed at several points over the course of Team Fortress 2’s fandom popularity, but by 2017, were largely both old news, and irrelevant as few people still produced fan content for the game.

Erin: From a recent disagreement, a person who was new to the TF2 (team fortress 2 video game) fandom was bringing up old drama that some old creators romanticize abuse/rape/pedo shit/incest, except they didn't realize that tf2 is dead, all of this crap had been argued, and all of those creators were gone, and that spyscout (a ship) isn't always incest and that shipping 2 people in an abusive situation isn't glorifying abuse especially when the creator talks about how gross it is. It's fiction and it's not black and white.

ANYWAY, I reblogged a post with the reply 'oh noe! im morally right and want you 2 DIEEEE' because the person making these callouts was telling the people they were attacking that they should die and was blocked.

She fully admits that her reblog was “passive aggressive,” but the person perpetuating the call-out post did not understand the fandom, the current situation, or was able to make a distinction between fiction and reality. Interview participants more broadly fell on both sides of this argument, with some advocating that Tumblr should ban blogs that blogs with pedophilic and Nazi content, and in one case, Anuli advocated that those blogs with pedophilic content should be reported to authorities by Tumblr.

The ability or inability to control information flows and arguments was more salient to some Tumblr users than others. Tumblr’s primary user-to-user privacy measure is the Block function, which allows you to keep other users from reblogging your posts or visiting your blog.
However, this is only applicable when logged into the Blocked account. Because of the intensely public nature of Tumblr, simply logging out and viewing someone’s blog as a guest circumvents the Block. Multiple users lamented the ineffectiveness of Tumblr’s Block function. Missati, who discussed having been stalked in the past, could not effectively prevent her stalker(s) from accessing her blog with any of the default tools available from Tumblr. While other users did not experience such intimate harassment, they wished that the Block would, at minimum, keep them from seeing content posted by the users they had Blocked, and keep Blocked users from seeing their posts on the Dashboard. Erin mentioned having Blocked a particular “popular” user because of repeated theft of other people’s content. But she still frequently saw posts from this Tumblr account on the Dashboard. When asked if there were additional privacy measures she wanted to see Tumblr implement, she lamented, “no. I wish what they had worked properly.”

Frustrations with Tumblr’s poor coding and broken features came up frequently in discussions of privacy, and were often the liveliest part of interviews, as users were able to vent their negative feelings towards a platform that they nonetheless continued to use daily. As a former art and design student, Elijah was particularly vocal in expressing how Tumblr’s layout and interface had a number of accessibility problems, but continued that this was not a problem exclusive to Tumblr, and many other social media platforms were in fact far worse. The accessibility difficulties they saw in the design of Tumblr were tied directly to the idea that account holders should be able to control access to their information. If the platform isn’t accessible, it makes it all the more difficult for users to control their experience. They connected this back to their own schooling in graphic design, remarking that accessibility was never even broached in their design courses.

*Elijah:* i think also this isnt a tumblr problem but a Most Social Media problem Most Websites problem
accessibility is a huge gosh dang issue. having settings somewhere that can like up font
sizes change colors or add contrast etc
i did 3 years of graphic design tho right at a nice university and granted it definitely
wasn't an arts focused university but the professors also did real actual graphic design and
not once did they EVER lecture about accessibility
they'll lecture about heirarchy and organization - things which can be used to aid
accessibility but never about accessibility itself
its Wild

The accessibility options that they advocate for including here (changing font sizes and
contrast) are relatively minor, and for some can be accomplished by changing browser or screen
settings locally. But their general observation that their design instructors cared little for
accessibility, or do not even consider accessibility standards, is a distressing one. Organizations
such as Tim Berners-Lee’s W3C and University of Washington’s Disabilities, Opportunities,
Internet, and Technology Center have produced guidelines for accessible web design practices.
But if these standards, or even the concept of web accessibility, are not being regularly
introduced to design students, their existence changes nothing. Standards are meant to be
implemented. Alper (2014) in particular focuses on day-to-day practices of youths with
disabilities and how technologies interact with disability, rather than merely focusing on
therapeutic uses of technology (Alper, Ellesson, Ellis & Goggin, 2015). While Elijah spoke
primarily from a position as a user with ADHD, they saw their concerns as more broadly
applicable.

Elijah shared with me a screenshot of their Tumblr dashboard, taken after installation of
xkit and adblock, and significant time on their part adjusting settings in both to fit their particular
preferences. The image below has been edited only to remove visible usernames from the image.
**Figure 25.** Tumblr dashboard after blocking elements. User-provided by Elijah, identifiers removed by researcher.

_Elijah:_ ohhh yeah for sure i have xkit and adblock god i love adblock ive BLOCKED the whole right hand column of tumblr as if it were an ad oh god its beautiful look at this. its clean its crisp a beautiful T page format

In contrast, a Dashboard that has not been adjusted by adblock or xkit might look like

Figure 26:
Right away it is obvious how much “extra” information is present when adblock and xkit are not utilized. Through my own disabling and enabling of features (I personally use ublock origin, Tumblr Savior, and xkit) I found that xkit is primarily responsible for blocking the content on the right-hand side of the page. This column includes “recommended blogs” and a feature called “radar” that shows a post currently in heavy circulation, that might be relevant to your interests, though it is not transparent how this post, or the recommended blogs, are selected for promotion. It is likely through a combination of what blogs you already Follow, the tags those blogs use, and the tags you use on your own posts. This system has led to troubling suggestions for some users, who may use the tag “nazi” to denote anti-nazi posts, or tags like “pedophilia” or “abuse” to allow other users’ third-party blacklist extensions (Tumblr Savior and xkit) to find and block discussions of certain. However, by using those tags, they may later be subjected to promotion of blogs that are using these same tags in widely different contexts topics (Noble, 2018 for similar

Figure 26. Dashboard layout without xkit or adblock enabled.
troubling patterns with Google’s algorithm). See figure 27 as just one example of Tumblr users trying to flag the attention of the @staff account in response to troubling recommendations.

Figure 27. Tumblr has a nazi problem.

When asked about increased privacy measures that Tumblr might incorporate, Constance was very clear that there was nothing Tumblr could implement that would make her more comfortable with sharing information on the platform. She simply did not trust Tumblr to keep any of her information secure.
Constance: It's less about privacy and more about just how Tumblr actually enforces their rules. I cannot even recall how many porn bots have followed me. Mind, I'm not talking about porn BLOGS. There's a difference. They're blogs that are about porn and not link-generating, porn-teasing, malware-infested bots. The blogs keep to themselves and I could care less about them. Like, how am I supposed to trust them with my stuff????? if they can't police themselves????? at all. There's no real attempt to get rid of them. [...] you can block and report all you like but hell if any of them go away

Indira: so your privacy concerns, or what you "trust" tumblr with has less to do with like, your ability to block people, or control access to your information. And more to do with the fact Tumblr can't even enforce the policies they already have in place?

Constance: It's the fact that they can't or won't police themselves. And from there I can only wonder how easy it is to hack in. Don't get me wrong. I understand it isn't easy to update your stuff in this industry. My husband works in video game development as a dev. Broken code will always live. But tumblr's foundation is nothing BUT broken code. And that's where my lack of trust comes from

Constance specifically cites Tumblr’s problem with automated porn bots (which she defines as distinctly different than actual human beings who run porn blogs) and her concerns with privacy and security circle back around to Tumblr’s inability to properly code a website, leading to frequent breakages and glitches, topics broached by other users, particularly in reference to the mobile app, which several users remarked was virtually unusable.
to elaborate: our good friend Mr Brightside never gives us the specifics of whether he is jealous of the man (who’s chest is being touched, now), the woman (who is taking off her dress, now), or both. Therefore we can draw no proper conclusion to our protagonist’s sexuality, and this is a revelation the entire world needs to know about.

There is an entire possibility Mr. Brightside isn’t straight, tell your friends.

the truth was right in front of our eyes the whole time.

Figure 28. Screen shot of the mobile app on Android provided by Amy. Identifiers removed by researcher.

The above image, figure 28, was shared by Amy and was taken while using the mobile app on Android. The post combines the text of one post and one reblog about the Killers’ song Mr. Brightside (which is often used in memetic content on Tumblr, for exactly the kind of homoerotic ambiguity mentioned in the posts) with a user image from an unrelated Tumblr user, in this case, one of my old (personal account) userpics stretched across the top of the reblogged text. I’m neither of the two people engaged in the text of the post here, and I’m not the person who reblogged the post so it would appear on Amy’s mobile Dashboard. But somehow, inexplicably, my user icon is there smack dab in the middle of the post that I have no
involvement with. Amy goes on to comment that it almost feels as if Tumblr is leaving their site broken on purpose:

Amy: I could add about that, all the little niggly things about the interface make me wonder if they do it deliberately to give users a sense of community about the bad infrastructure lol. They have fixed a lot of the more annoying stuff (lack of ability to comment, the scrolling tags) in the time I've been using it, but they don't seem as interested in optimising the user experience as most social media sites are.

Indira: can you think of a specific example that is still "broken?"

Amy: It's not really a broken thing in the coding sense but the ability to tag on replies to asks (without installing xkit) would be nice. Or a thing that's actually broken, when it screws up images and gives you, to use one example, pictures of cats in a post about *Metal Gear Solid*. The screen shot Amy shared with me is a similar phenomenon to pictures of cats ending up in a post about *Metal Gear Solid*, in that a persistent bug appears to be combining elements from disparate posts into an amalgamation that confuses what content belongs where. While users report this happening more frequently with the mobile app, there are instances of this occurring with the desktop site as well, though the period of time in which similar errors occur on the desktop site appears to be shorter. For approximately three hours during the fall of 2017, some newly generated posts did not have notes at all, despite other users Liking, reblogging and adding Replies to them. In a sudden flurry of activity, users who were present on the platform starting making posts to see if they could generate one that did not have notes.

Participants who did not use xkit in conjunction with Tumblr in an attempt to “fix” the site, tended to be those who either were primarily mobile users or those who had tried to install the extension but couldn’t get it to work properly/became frustrated with it. For many, xkit was an essential part of using Tumblr, adding in missing features like an Outbox for Asks, the ability
to block specific posts, and a blacklist. When asked what features she’d like to see incorporated into Tumblr, Tessa responded, “literally everything in xkit.” While participants also used less critical, but entertaining functions, like adding virtual pets to the Dashboard (Amy).

Privacy, conflict, and Tumblr’s “brokenness” were intimately connected in the opinions of many participants. They tended to feel that while Tumblr’s privacy measures were inadequate, they also could not envision a scenario where Tumblr could successfully implement new features, given how many current features continued to malfunction on a regular basis. Furthermore, architectural affordances such as reblogging, which resulted in largely atemporal Dashboards where content could continue to circulate for years, largely divorced from its original context, amplified arguments and disagreements between users. When considering privacy, users generally took the question as one of how they wanted to restrict access to their blogs, and in many cases this meant keeping users they had come in conflict with from continuing to view their blogs. The Block feature had already failed them, and Tumblr’s larger pattern of broken features gave them little hope for a solution, though they may have had ideas of features they may have liked to see implemented.

Overwhelmingly, the opinion was that Tumblr is broken. Why then, do these users choose to stay?

3.8 The Tumblr (Failure of) Community

Every time I’m asked by non-Tumblr users about “the Tumblr community,” I’m forced to bite my tongue. In an abstract way, I know what the other person is asking about. This mesh of “social justice” and “ambiguous” genders, a seemingly alphabet soup of sexualities that are

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17 Since the collection of interview responses, Tumblr has implemented a built-in blacklist to both the desktop site and mobile apps.
shifting and coming in and out of style, aesthetics and politics mixed together with memetic content, pale blogs and stimboards and young women who think sometimes they can change their world from behind the computer screen. But there are other layers too, the proliferation of call-outs, understanding the structures that make it possible for bloggers to appear and disappear seemingly into the ether and then are spit back out again. A messy, wild landscape of interaction that I have difficultly stepping away from, even when I have obligations breathing down my neck. It’s an intensity of presence unlike my prior social media experiences. And yet, I feel as if Tumblr is both a place and a non-place. A community that despises being called a community.

When I asked my respondents if they felt they belonged to a “Tumblr community” and what that community looked like, not one felt like they actually belonged to some sort of overarching Tumblr community. Each and every one of them said no. While they might belong to a sort of loosely structured “community” based around a particular fandom or pairing, Tumblr wasn’t a single, monolithic community. Mina, who no longer considers herself to be an active Tumblr user, much less a member of a community explained:

Mina: It's a set of communities which can and will vary greatly depending on what you use Tumblr for. Music fandom was friendly and supportive and humorous. Often we gave advice or we discussed works of music. I met other people of color in those communities so I can't say that they were less diverse than videogame communities. The fandom Tumblr community is much more invested in wank and discourse, and often it feels that for some subcommunities the desired capital is social justice and discourse posts. Oftentimes performative social justice and performative discourse posts. I joined Tumblr to look at fun Dragon Age posts and read stories, and wound up in things that I had managed previously to avoid through sheer ignorance. My circle didn't intersect with wank circles or anon comms or anything like that. So, in general, there's a certain sense of humor that pervades tumblr (i just typoed that as tumor and, well, APROPOS) which makes it attractive to people And I think if you wanted a general characteristic of Tumblr as a whole, shitposts and hilarious memes would be a good way to begin describing Tumblr. And aesthetic posts. Otherwise each community has its own characteristics.
She was not the only participant to zero in on the performative aspects of social justice on Tumblr. While participants saw the potential for social movements to gain traction on the platform in some hypothetical situation, more often than not, actual engagement was labeled as performative in nature.

Humor, rather than politics or identity was seen as the Tumblr-specific feature that differentiates the platform from other social media spaces. While shitposts and jokes may be related to political positions, identity formations, and a sense of group belonging, it is just as likely for Tumblr humor to be entirely incompressible and yet funny to Tumblr users. Missati described her relationship to the notion of community as:

Missati: I honestly don’t think I’m apart of a community in the traditional sense of the term. I’d say there is a culture on tumblr where everyone sort of understands the humor and jokes and the like. But I wouldn’t say a community actually exists. There’s cliques and shit but nothing so large as to be called a community. Most of the cliques and groups beef amongst themselves and then come together against a common issue.

Indira: with Tumblr culture, do you think there are some defining attributes, you brought up humor?

Missati: Well that whole neo-Dadaism shit and the deadpan humor. Also, dark humor as a coping mechanism for our depression and mental illness. I notice that it’s something unique to Tumblr, and even though I see it on other social media now I know it originated from there.

Mental health based humor in particular, more than gender/sexuality humor was cited by respondents as characteristic of the way jokes are constructed on Tumblr.

Randy: I think there's a very specific brand of humor on there that's inaccessible to anyone outside of the site

Indira: how would you characterize it?

Randy: millenial humor I guess? there's a lot of depression memes and very niche memes that are really only funny to people who are immersed in or grew up with the internet.
Randy and I went on to discuss the recent events surrounding the infamous “worst fic ever written,” the Harry Potter self-insert story *My Immortal*. From August to October 2017, one of the frequent discussions on Tumblr concerned the supposed discovery of *My Immortal’s* author (identified as author Rose Christo), the possible publication of her memoir (Bennett, 2017), and then her sudden discrediting and cancellation of her memoir (Canfield, 2017; Neill Hoch, in press). While I found the unfolding of events to be incredibly engaging and hilarious, my husband (a gen x’er, seven years my senior) failed to see what was so funny about the story. Randy responded, “wait, how can he not think that's amazing, that's the most gripping internet mystery drama of the past 15 years?? my immortal is literally iconic.” We went on to discuss the current progress of the “case,” building on each other’s amusement with unfolding events. To find humor in the story of *My Immortal’s* authorship required more than just knowledge of the original fan fiction and a familiarity with internet cultures. Arguably, my husband, an IT professional for the last twenty years and a frequent user of Reddit, YouTube, and Twitch, possesses just as much general knowledge about internet cultures as I or my Tumblr participants do. But this particular case didn’t make sense to him as a humorous event.

“Well,” I tried to explain to him, “I could have been the author of *My Immortal*. Then, very briefly, I couldn’t be anymore, but now it could be me again. And I hate it!” It’s funny because it’s about incoherency, the failure to identify the source, and the freedom of knowing, once again, that everything can change. While this trend towards ambivalent incoherency may be characteristic of online interaction my broadly (Phillips & Milner, 2017), Randy and I both associated the events as Tumblr-specific, even when in reality we were chasing threads left on Tumblr, Twitter, relatively mainstream news outlets, and the Kiwifarms forum (Neill Hoch, in press).
While humor was often discussed in conjunction with mental illness, sometimes mental illness and the accompanying displacement itself was seen as the unifying culture of Tumblr.

*Amy:* I don't have a sense of belonging to the community. I feel like there is one but I'm not a part of it. There seems to be some kind of culture stemming from the fact that tumblr is mostly people who for whatever reason don't fit in so well irl. Although maybe that's not all of tumblr, I'm not sure. And the culture seems mostly to be nihilism and existential despair. Maybe it's a reflection of how most millennials feel, they're just more open about it in the relative anonymity of tumblr.

While Amy does not bring up humor here, they echo the position that there is something dark and despairing and *millennial* about Tumblr. Earlier in the interview, when asked about what posts they originate (rather than reblog) on Tumblr, Amy closely aligned humor and angst, responding, “Sometimes I post stuff that either I think is funny or is me despairing with being alive but 90% of the time I immediately feel like an attention seeker and delete it.”

Virtually all respondents referenced humor, shitposts, or similar in the content they reblogged. Some of them invoked a “laugh rule” that if a post made them actually laugh, they were obligated to reblog the post. This dark humor, largely opaque to outsiders but gaining traction on other social media sites, served as the linking bond between disparate sections or communities present on Tumblr.

While still not ascribing to a larger Tumblr community, some respondents did report that they felt as if they built up their own circle of friends/Mutuals on the platform, and were able to carve out their own space, even as it remained porous and accessible to outsiders (Randy). These smaller circles of friends could be immensely supportive of each other, with one participant discussing how after her marriage and moving, gaining friends on Tumblr helped her adjust to the sudden lifestyle change:
Constance: There's also the fact that without several of my tumblr friends, I never would have known that I'm as queer as I am. They introduced me to the terms bi-, pan-, and asexual. They were friends who checked in with me during grad school and helped me keep my head on straight.

Constance was able to build a support system using the platform, which was difficult for her to find in-person when contending with so many simultaneous lifestyle changes. While direct references to gender and sexuality were largely absent from the discussion of Tumblr humor, those who felt most connected to the smaller communities they found on Tumblr, did tend to reference queerness as a shared experience.

Respondents, while discussing architectural features that helped them share content with Mutuals and develop friendships in one-on-one contexts, found few available architectural features that fostered a larger sense of community with other Tumblr users. Humor, which was the most frequently mentioned defining characteristic of the “Tumblr community” could be circulated via reblogs, but functioned more as a shared tone for the platform, rather than something that facilitated drafting ties between users. However, despite the lack of community, many users felt with fellow Tumblr account holders, they still maintained a positive perception of their time on the platform, if not positive ideas about the functionality of Tumblr. Despite the conflicts, the broken code, the lack of community, and difficulties regulating content, they still viewed their time on Tumblr as largely positive, attributing their feelings to the friendships (Missati, Randy, Amy, Mina, Constance) or looser connections (Elijah, Elliot, Anuli) they managed to cultivate, despite the platform standing in the way.

3.9 Displeasure and Pleasure in Platform

The Tumblr users who shared their histories and experiences with me were incredibly open regarding their conflicting feelings about using the platform. While they had managed to
forge friendships, find support, or simply view funny content and share it with little regard to a specific audience, they also saw clear fault lines in the architecture of the site, either in terms of temporary but dramatic breakages, or features that remained non-functional or only semi-functional over a long period of time.

In places, their observations echoed Tumblr’s own “About” materials, they could share their own content with other users, or share content made by other users that they found interesting or amusing in some way. However, even those who didn’t feel as if they managed to deliver full-fledged friendships via the platform did emphasize some degree of involvement with other users, even if it was just casual chatting about shared interests. In Elliot’s case, they articulated that while they would not consider their relationships with other users to be friendships, they still served as an important support system at various times in their life. Those relationships remained important, even if they were not friendships.

Conflicts with other users were less frequent occurrences, but were remarkable in how they demonstrated how Tumblr’s architectural particularities can shape social interaction in damaging ways, allowing for harassment without adequate measures to restrict access. Unfollowing users is a first step, and many participants found this to be adequate for ending a social tie between users, with Blocks being particularly harsh. However, if harassment escalated, they were left with few tools to protect themselves.

Interview participants articulated the realities of using the platform in day-to-day scenarios, a far more social and interactive experience than the vision Tumblr presents to potential account holders. Choosing to Follow someone can be about more than simply the artwork they produce or the quality of their jokes (although that is certainly one determining factor). Who they are as a person factors into deciding who to Follow. The creative and
interpersonal properties of the Tumblr platform are perhaps more closely linked in the minds of users than in Tumblr’s own assessment of the platform they maintain.

Despite the difficulties they encountered in using the platform, and controlling information flows. The control they were able to execute over the material they saw on their Dashboards, and who they decided to engage with, increased their perceived autonomy. Sibona (2014) finds that among Facebook Friends, users most often Unfriend high school Friends. And when high school Friends are Unfriended, it tends to be because they post too frequently, both when it comes to “polarizing topics” or just posting too frequently in general (Sibona, 2014). Unfriending in general appears to be a relatively uncommon practice (Bode, 2016) and Unfriending over political views is typically only practiced by those identifying with ideological extremes (Bode, 2016, John & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2015). John and Dvir-Gvirsman (2015) found that during the Israeli-Gaza conflict in 2014, only 16% of Jewish Israeli Facebook users surveyed Unfriended a current Friend because of their politics during the conflict. While I did not ask interview participants to list every person they had Unfollowed or Blocked during their time as a Tumblr user, all easily came up with reasons why they would Unfollow someone, including not sharing the same social values, and said they had Unfollowed people in the past. Several users indicated that they had also Blocked other users for political and social opinions.

It is important again to consider that the majority of Facebook research assumes that offline connections lead to Facebook Friending, while Tumblr users by and large create networks that have no real-life interaction. Sibona’s (2014) research also considers the Unfriending of Friends known through work, and that most frequently, work Friends are Unfriended because of a conflict in the workplace. The Tumblr account holders I interviewed do not have to take into consideration seeing the person they Unfollow or Block during in-person activities. Their
perception of autonomy in shaping their Tumblr experience may be bolstered by having fewer social consequences when it comes to Following/Unfollowing other people’s blogs. While I am still, years later, deeply upset that a Mutual-friend of mine has Blocked me because of an interaction where I was in the wrong, I also do not have to face the pain of seeing her…ever. Participants certainly cited that not knowing other Tumblr users in person as a reason for why they felt more comfortable and open talking about their interests, sexual orientation, and gender.

In the following chapter, I more closely consider reblogging structures as a mode of interaction on the platform, where the architectural affordances of Tumblr and social behaviors interact in an extremely public, visible way, intended for circulation. Particularly, I consider “fandom” posts and how they transform through reblogging into discussions of feminist concerns. I consider Tumblr as creating an Arena for interaction and discussion, with reblogged posts serving as multivocal artifacts where media representations are contested between users. These posts, which combine pop culture and feminist concerns demonstrate concretely how social and technical actors interact on Tumblr, structuring interactions in particular formats that are not necessarily reproducible on other platforms. It is my contention that participation in and reblogging of these posts, in conjunction with other, variable content, allows Tumblr users to articulate an always-changing identity assemblage (Puar, 2005), privileging the instability of self-presentation.
4. PLATFORM AND USER INTERATION AND IN-ACTION

4.1 Introduction: Fan Service and Fish

In this chapter I consider reblogged posts as visible, circulating compositions that reflect the interaction of platform features and user behaviors resulting in Tumblr’s particular articulation of affordances. Specifically I use discourse analytic techniques to explicate posts where multiple Tumblr accounts contribute to discourses regarding depictions of gender in popular media (anime *Kill la Kill* (2013), video game *Nier: Automata* (2017), and film *The Shape of Water* (2017)). These posts are combinations of fandom engagement and broad feminist concerns. In one case, where the 2017 film *The Shape of Water* becomes the center of the discussion, additional intersectional concerns regarding race and disability are added to and removed from discussion as the post circulates. Intersectionality as an academic framework has itself been critiqued for sometimes falling into patterns of near-exclusive focus on the intersection of race and gender, to the exclusion of other contributing, contextual axes (Cho, Crenshaw, & McCall, 2013; Davis, 2008; Lykke, 2011; Puar, 2005). In their inclusion of disability in discussions around the film, Tumblr users express familiarity with intersectional concerns relating to the media they consume that is nuanced and contested, as other users try to dismiss claims made by previous rebloggers and layer their interpretation on top of contributors who came before them.

While I use discourse analysis as a framework for explicating the way each contribution via reblogs builds upon both the original post and previous reblogged additions, it is also of note that Tumblr users themselves often refer to these posts that combine fandom content and social commentary as “Discourse.” Rather than using a concept of “trolling” (Hardacker, 2010, 2013; Jane, 2014; Phillips, 2015) to understand the heated, sometimes deliberately mocking or
undermining tone of participants, these posts are understood as *Discourse*, or something that users engage in, rather than are subjected to. The end result is a series of visible, conflicting interactions that is carried forward across the platform through reblogging. But one that lacks the back-and-forth dialogue that one might associate with arguments or discussion. Instead, the affordances created through reblogging result in a dispersed conflict where users and points of contention appear and disappear from reblogged posts without any sort of linear progression. I conceptualize this field of interaction as an Arena, where interaction and conflict occur without distinct “sides” or dialogue. Participant responses in the previous chapter indicated that Tumblr’s architecture often facilitates misunderstanding and conflict, spurred on by the atemporal nature of post circulation and inadequate or poorly implemented privacy controls. While posts that combine fandom and feminist concerns are not the only way in which conflict manifests, they illuminate key features of how platform architecture contributes to conflict, and how the nature of conflict is shaped by platform.

4.2  Framework: Discourse Analysis Overview

Many of the foundational scholars of critical discourse analysis caution against labeling critical discourse analysis (CDA) as a *method* proper (Fairclough, 1995, 2009; Meyer, 2009; Van Dijk, 2009; Wodak, 1996). Instead, CDA may be seen as a problem oriented approach, sensitive to the conditions that propagate domination over subordinated groups (Meyer, 2009). Van Dijk (2009) acknowledges that CDA scholarship may indeed be “biased” in that when faced with inequities, the scholar will often defend the marginalized class from further oppression, but he denies that biased scholarship is necessarily bad scholarship. He does, however, acknowledge that the burden of evidence is always placed on the CDA scholar, as their clearly articulated biases may be subjected to greater scrutiny than scholarship that feigns objectivity. For the CDA
scholar, this evidence is to be found primarily, but not exclusively, in texts (Fairclough, 1992). However, the recipient of the text is by no means a passive sponge (Wodak, 1996, 2009; Wodak & Meyer, 2009) and a close analysis of texts should be combined with studies that investigate both reception and production in order to draw a clearer picture of the media landscape and how media interacts with society (Fairclough, 1995).

The “critical” in CDA arises from a particular dedication to Frankfurt School Marxism, interested in the perpetuation of ideology across social classes in order to produce stability (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2001; Wodak, 2009). I would argue here that a sound discourse analysis, whether or not it identifies itself as critical, or has any loyalty to Frankfurt School Marxism, must consider similar social structures and processes in order to adequately unpack the relations that the text preserves and articulates forward in time. Addressing the text as an object in isolation is of little use. Not all discourse analytic perspectives maintain this critical perspective explicitly, though they often still explicate how language can advantage and disadvantage marginalized groups. Wodak (2009) notes that the perspective CDA encourages is particularly adept at unpacking unequal power relationships in institutional, political, gender, and media settings.

Despite their insistence that CDA is not a method, but rather a perspective, most scholars attending to the tradition of critical discourse analysis engage in similar practices in order to produce a convincing, evidence-rich analysis. Meyer (2009) notes that the most CDA work focuses on a small body of initial texts, subjecting them to the hermeneutic circle (Ricoeur, 1971, 1981; van Dijk, 1985). In hermeneutic processes, small elements, even down to the level of the word, within a text are subjected to close scrutiny, then observations from these small passages are reconnected to the whole, drawing an ever broadening circle of interrelated meanings. “The
text” has since come to include media such as television and internet (Fairclough, 2013). Furthermore, reducing images and non-verbal sounds to merely serving the written or spoken text cannot provide a complete picture of how the media operates (Fairclough, 1995).

Most CDA projects utilize artifacts that act as records of societal relations. These artifacts are not meant to be taken as a substitute for direct observation, but are important in their own right, often as formalizations of ideology and interpersonal relationships (Fairclough, 1995; Thomas, 1994). Texts are not only shaped by the society that crafts them, but a durable iterations of thought, they are socially constituting, perpetuating ideology and norms (Fairclough, 2000). Furthermore, their importance and influence changes over time, meaning they must always be relocated in historical context (Fairclough 2009; Meyer, 2009; van Dijk, 2009, Wodak, 2009).

In the case of the Tumblr posts I have selected, exact dating may not always be available (xkit will allow for some dating, but only if the original blogger has not deleted their post; a practice that sometimes occurs because posts with thousands of notes can flood a blogger’s Activity feed, making the Dashboard difficult to navigate). What they do have in common, historically, is that they were posts that were still in circulation in the Fall/Winter of 2017/2018. Additionally, I consider the construction of the reblogged post as an important element of meaning construction when producing my analysis. The addition of images, audio, new text, bolding and italicizing, and the order in which rebloggers respond to each other (often never to return) are considered as important elements of the text.

I use intersectional feminist principles to guide my discourse analysis (Collins, 1998; Crenshaw, 1991; Moraga & Anzaldua, 1981) while remaining well aware of how “intersectional feminist” theory can itself be obscuring and totalizing (Davis, 2008; Lykke, 2011). In particular,
I am interested in notions of assemblage theory (Puar, 2005; 2012) as assemblage explicitly attends to the connections between the organic body and technological trappings. Furthermore, assemblage and its concern with incoherency and the passing of bodies through time and space, rather than static identity categories, is particularly apt for addressing the disjointed Arena of Tumblr posts that tend to be multivocal and contradictory, yet coexist in the same digital space.

4.2.1 Multimodal Discourse Analysis

Given that Tumblr is a platform that combines images, sound, and text, multimodal discourse analysis can serve to supplement where traditional conceptions of CDA fall slightly short, given the opportunities presented in a media-rich online environment. Multimodal discourse analysis turns a sharper focus back onto visual arrangements, auditory information, the arrangement of space, and moving images (Bateman, 2008; Holsanova, 2012; LeVine & Scollon, 2004). Jewitt (2009 in Holsanova 2012, p. 252) states that:

Multimodality describes approaches that understand communication and representation to be more than about language, which attend to the full range of communicational forms people use—image, gesture, gaze, posture, and so on—and the relationships between them.

So rather than subjugating the non-verbal as being in service to the verbal, multimodal approaches link together multiple sensory experiences and explicate how they work together, or against, each other. Just as Fairclough (1992; 2000) and Van Dijk (1983) are adamant about breaking down text to the level of the word, multimodal discourse scholars are interested in small structures, such as typeface as contributing to the larger multimodal text (Bateman, 2008; Van Leeuwen, 2004).

Discourse analyses that take digital artifacts as their center should consider the structural constraints and possibilities of online architecture, and the thrust of research (across methods) is increasingly sensitive to how text, photograph, moving image, and structure interlock and
influence each other online (Bourlai & Herring, 2014; Davis, 2010; Neill Hoch, 2014; Shelton & Skalski, 2014; Siles, 2011; Papacharissi, 2009). Each of the posts I have selected for analysis at minimum combine a textual element, a visual element, and the architectural frame of Tumblr’s Reblogging feature, which decisively shapes the way social interaction occurs on the platform. In each analysis, I try to keep all three of these elements in focus. Furthermore, two of the posts include links out to videos that include audio and one includes animated gifs, introducing motion to the visual experience.

The Tumblr Dashboard in general, and the posts I have selected in particular, are already locations where fans, as a reception audience, comment upon media objects in a critical way. I am, in that sense, producing a discourse analysis of one process of communal media analysis that occurs on Tumblr. Many voices on Tumblr contribute to a landscape of criticism, but one based in enjoyment. Most of my interview respondents indicated that they were on Tumblr in order to share their fandom interests with others, but also saw criticism as an important aspect of their fan-engagement. While not all produced analysis themselves, many noted that they reblogged social justice and fandom content side by side. And furthermore, the type of fandom content they chose to reblog aligned with their own ideologies.

4.3 Method: Research Blog and Procedures

In September, 2017, I created a new Tumblr blog using a distinct email address (rather than a side blog, which would have been linked to my existing personal account, using the same log-in credentials as all of my existing blogs). After selecting a username for the blog (imperfectresearchprotocol, which I felt adequately both signaled that, yes, in fact this was a blog run by the same maintainer as my personal blog, by re-using part of my personal blog username,
and expressed that this blog was being used for a research project), I set a simple, easy to
navigate theme, and posted some introductory “profile” information in the blog’s description.

Indira/Poli | 31 | Any pronouns | PhD Student | This is a research blog! I follow back all
blogs that follow me first (18+ only!). If you follow me, keep in mind I may
include posts you reblog in research. I do not include personal posts in my
research (anything marked personal, or not for reblogging, or any reasonable
variation). If you would like me to stop following you for any reason either
softblock or let me know and I’ll remove you from my follows.

The first few words of this “profile” are written in a style that conforms to a few Tumblr
norms regarding disclosure of a preferred name, age, and pronouns (Bell, 2013). In addition, I
made it clear that I am a PhD student conducting research, and basic information on how
participants can remove themselves from the study, with or without contacting me directly on
Tumblr. I left my “Likes” publicly viewable, allowing anyone who visited the blog (but most
importantly, participants who were curious) to see what posts I was “Liking” when I was logged
into my research account. This is a feature that I have never utilized on my personal account, and
likely never will.

Between September and December 2017, 213 blogs consented to be included in the
research pool for discourse analysis. IRB approved procedures that did not require me to contact
blog owners directly, instead allowing for an “opt-in” procedure where the blog maintainer either
“Liked” the advertisement post, or followed the research blog themselves in order to be included.
I posted the advertisement text to my research blog and then reblogged the advertisement post to
my personal blog, which had around 1500 Followers at the time recruitment began, allowing for
greater exposure. The promotional post was rebloggable, disseminating the post further across
my social network on Tumblr. Before following each blog, I viewed the blog title and subtitle,
along with any additional “about me” pages, to ensure I was not deliberately following blogs
maintained by someone under 18 years of age. The original advertisement stated that all
participants must be over 18 years of age, and none of the blogs that Followed or Liked the advertisement post were obviously maintained by underage users. One user who was 17 asked if they could follow the research blog themselves, but not participate in the study. I ended up declining their request. Only those blog maintainers who later agreed to be interviewed were provided with informed consent documentation (see chapter 3), but the entire research pool was provided with UIC IRB information regarding the research study via posts made to the research blog.

Participants were informed that I would be looking at high-circulation (more than 1,000 notes) reblogged posts that ended up on my research Dashboard, via their reblogs from other Tumblr blogs. They were also told that all “personal” posts would be excluded from research. Personal posts are typically marked as such in the body or tags of the post, and users ask that they not be reblogged. Given my extensive experience with Tumblr and the social norms of the platform, at least as far as the fandom-centric segment of the population, I felt confident in my ability to discern what was and was not a personal post (these posts generally include specific information about mental health of the user, physical health concerns, frustrations with specific family members or friends, and exclude any type of humor about these topics. They also sometimes use Tumblr’s “read more” feature, which hides a portion of the text until the reader decides to click the link to reveal the rest of the text). Furthermore, I was explicitly interested in higher-circulation posts for inclusion in the discourse analysis.

As I observed the research Dashboard from October 2017 to early January 2018, I used the “Like” function to mark Tumblr posts that combined discussions of feminist concerns with fandom content. I allowed my definition of “feminist” to be intentionally vague, as to cast as wide a net as possible in selecting posts that may later become relevant to analysis. While some
posts were more “intersectionally” feminist than others, including explicit discussions of race, sexual orientation, class, nation, and disability, most posts that spoke about fandom and social concerns simultaneously were not merely concerned with the broad category of women, but the specific characteristics of particular women (and men, and nonbinary genders) in media, gesturing at least briefly towards intersectional reasoning of why particular characters in media franchises were treated differently by either the source text, or the fandom that revolved around those texts. I also considered posts about men and masculinity as belonging to the feminist umbrella, particularly those that dealt with non-White men in media, as these also frequently gestured towards intersectional concerns (particularly available during the observation period were posts about *Star Wars: The Last Jedi* (2017) and the upcoming release of *Black Panther* (2018), both of which star non-White men in leading roles). The posts I have selected for analysis tend to combine both visual and textual elements, though there were additional posts that were purely textual conversations about similar topics.

I have selected three representational posts for detailed discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1995, 2009; Meyer, 2009; Van Dijk, 2009; Wodak, 1996). Each of these posts addresses feminist concerns and fandom simultaneously, combining comments on feminist concerns such as sexualization of women in the media, the depiction of romantic or sexual interest, and in one case intersectional concerns of race and disability, with pop culture and subcultural references, to speak the vernacular of Tumblr. From these posts, I trace how feminism and fandom practices on Tumblr are discussed concurrently, in a verbal and visual language that is disruptive, spreadable (Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013), and often memetic (Shifman, 2014). This interplay of textual and visual dialogue creates a playful, but sometimes cruel Arena for discourse between fans, who often explicitly see themselves as intimately tied to progressive social issues and movements.
Multiple interview respondents, when discussing the content they reblogged from others, noted that they include a mix of fandom, social justice, and humor posts in what they reblog. Ivan explained they reblog:

"a bit of everything, because I have sideblogs. Most stuff goes on this one - jokes, memes, all kinds of fandom post, news, social justice discussions. I also reblog stuff I consider "pretty" on my aesthetic sideblog, writing tips and refs on writing sideblog and various theories on a sideblog dedicated to collecting theories one particular fandom comes up with"

While most interview participants predominantly used a single blog, Ivan ran seven different sideblogs. Still, their “main” account included a mix of social justice discussions and fandom content, along with jokes and memes. Echoing the same sentiment, Mina stated that when she was more active on Tumblr she reblogged “original content posts from other [fandom] users, a lot of memes I found funny […] picture posts of people I found attractive, and social justice posts.” This content cohabited on a single blog, with fan fiction and pictures of attractive people sitting alongside social justice posts. This cohabiting of space bleeds into posts themselves, resulting in fandom posts that take on feminist/social justice themes, and/or feminist/social justice posts that have fandom content appended to them through the reblog chains that occur as the post circulates through Tumblr.

Rather than concerning myself with the accuracy of these user analyses and critiques built around fandom cores, I am instead interested in the process of their formation and their transformation through circulation. Particularly how reblogging and adding additions to original posts shifts the conversation in multiple directions over the lifespan of a post (which began before my data collection and will continue to long afterwards). This transformation can be seen as sharing features with Jenkin’s (2006) assessment of fan cultures more broadly participating in cultures of remixing and reflect Shifman’s (2014) assertion that memetic content achieves
“diffusion through competition and selection.” Not all reblogged additions to Tumblr posts achieve wide circulation. While the content discussed in the present chapter is not memetic by Shifman’s definition, its prominence relies on similar digital structures of replication and diffusion that make the process of transformation visible, in a way that differs from Jenkin’s (2006) conceptualization of remixing, as there is no static object. The remix of the canon material can, of course, be remixed again. But in the case of the posts under discussion in this analysis, even my ability to screenshot one particular iteration, does not actually arrest the post in the same way a remix is presented as concretized creation. The post as it begins its life is rarely the final product on Tumblr, and the final product cannot actually be defined.

4.3.1 Timeframe and Social Connections as Limitations

The data collection period of Fall 2017-Winter 2018 contributed to the particular distribution of content on the Dashboard. Furthermore, my own interests, media exposure, and social connections inevitably put some content on the research Dashboard over content pertaining to other media objects. I watched the anime *Kill la Kill*, the initial topic of the first example, during its original airing, I have played *Nier: Automata*, the initial topic of the second example. In the case of *The Shape of Water*, the initial topic of the third example, most Tumblr users had equal access to the available content of the film at the time of the post’s circulation, as the trailer was freely available on YouTube and this post was captured before the film’s wide release in December 2017.

And I must admit, I have chosen these examples over others available to me because I had already consumed the source material. Posts about *Star Wars*, *Homestuck*, various other anime shows and games, a Netflix show *One Day at a Time*, all circulated across my Dashboard and followed similar themes. At the tail end of data collection, *Devilman: Crybaby*, the most
recent adaptation/reboot of Go Nagai’s 1970s anime/manga series, which in some adaptations includes an intersex character and has displayed varying degrees of male-aligned characters’ attraction to each other, had just begun to enter the Dashboard. If data collection had occurred in late 2016 instead of late 2017, *Yuuri on Ice!!!* and discussions of race, sexual orientation, and cultural norms regarding the portrayal of sexual desire would have been in heavy circulation. The specific topics discussed are, in part, determined by timeframe, though the structure of these posts remains largely the same across topics and fandoms.

In addition to the limitations of my own media exposure, the posts that combined feminist critique and fandom content that appeared on the research Dashboard already skewed towards video games and anime, rather than say, live-action BBC dramas, American cartoons, Korean pop music, or the Marvel Cinematic Universe, all of which are exceedingly popular on Tumblr. Given that my preexisting social ties were used in initial recruitment, and my personal presence on Tumblr is largely rooted in video game fandom, my friends and Mutuals who reblogged the advertisement post were also largely involved in video game fandoms, and then their Followers, presumably, also shared that interest. So while participants in the blog pool, whose posts then appeared on the research Dashboard, often came from different specific fandoms (i.e. their fandom activities centered around games I had never played or shows I had never watched), and the majority of those who agreed to be followed were users I had never interacted with before the research study, there was still remarkable overlap in the posts that I saw. Additionally, entire segments of Tumblr fandom activity were all but absent from the Dashboard. At one point I scrolled past a *Supernatural* gif set, only to laugh at the fact it had been literally years since I had last come across content for the show on Tumblr. While *Supernatural* peeked through for a moment, just as soon, it was gone. Though no doubt there are
still Tumblr users that view a Dashboard primarily populated by *Supernatural* content, even in 2018. I simply did not encounter them.

4.4 Tumblr as “Arena”

This process of transformation over time and (digital space) is closely connects to what I have termed in this chapter as the Tumblr Arena. Arena is label that should deliberately bring to mind an artificial, purpose-built battlefield, where winning in the ring does not have the same type of consequences as say, war. Or, using Victor Turner’s (1988) formulation, we might think of Tumblr as a liminoid space, where ritual (liminal) behaviors and spaces with social consequences are reinterpreted as behaviors and spaces of play and jest. Both liminal and liminoid scenarios are spaces of transition between one state and the next, and Turner uses liminoid to delineate the incorporation of these transitional “between” states into artistic practice and play, making it the more apt term in the context of discussing Tumblr. While the Tumblr users who participate in the Arena may also engage in material activism or social movements in additional online and offline spaces, the Arena itself is best described as a liminoid space of play.

As opposed to van Dijck’s (2013) broader notion of the platform, through which “casual speech acts have turned into formalized inscriptions, which, once embedded in the larger economy of wider publics, take on a different value (p. 7),” and blur distinctions between private and public communication, the Arena *always* has an explicitly public intent. Interactions in the Arena are meant to be seen, and intended to be seen in the context of other, visible interactions between and among users. While these interactions are not possible without first assuming a platform, they nonetheless constitute a specialized construct within the platform, one explicitly meant for public performances. Additionally, given the flexibility of Tumblr’s interface, and the perception of autonomy that users retain in what they post, share, and how they structure their
interactions with Tumblr, the formalization process on Tumblr is murkier than other platforms. So while speech acts in the Tumblr Arena are meant to be public, they are not so neatly formalized. They may mean several things simultaneously to audiences, akin to Phillips and Milner’s (2017) notion of ambivalence.

Connected to the concept of ambivalence, the Arena also shares something with the magic circle of game studies, where stakes inside the magic circle do not quite abide by the same rules as outside the Arena, but the border between is still somewhat porous. Stenros (2014) in a review of the concept of the magic circle, argues that while Huizinga (1938) is frequently credited for the original concept, it is Salen and Zimmerman’s (2004) later formulation that is most frequently adopted in game studies. And this later concept does not overlap entirely Huizinga’s initial thoughts on the playing field/magic circle (also Rodriguez, 2006). Huizinga, in general, is deliberately vague in many of his formulations, and allows for an extremely porous circle between the game and reality (Rodriguez, 2006). In truth, he is not very interested in the magic circle at all, mentioning the concept only six times in the entirety of Homo Ludens (Stenros, 2014). Stenros goes on to summarize the four boundaries of the magic circle that are adopted in research and game design practice following Salen and Zimmerman’s expansion of the term in Rules of Play. Boundaries are social, mental, cultural, and occur in an arena. Defining this arena, Stenros writes:

The arena of play is a temporal, spatial or conceptual site that is culturally recognized as a rule-governed structure for ludic action, or an inert game product. As the social negotiation of a magic circle becomes culturally established and the border physically represented, arenas emerge as residue of the playing […] These sites are recognized as structures that foster play even when empty (and they can be constructed in ways that seek to foster playfulness), but they require use to be activated as the border of the magic circle remains social.
While the Tumblr posts under analysis here may not appear obviously “playful,” and indeed some are openly hostile, hostility and seriousness are potential outcomes of play, particularly when we feel as if one of the players is a spoil-sport and refuses to acknowledge there is a game being played (Huizinga, 1938). Arena is furthermore a particularly apt term as it captures both elements of play and elements of conflict for the sake of show. While my participants did not use the term Arena themselves, they did point towards the potential conflicts that arise between Tumblr users, and how Tumblr’s architecture has the potential to make conflicts worse (Missati, Elijah) and that U.S. centrism reinforced through the use of English as the lingua franca of the platform often made it difficult for users from other parts of the globe from participating in social justice discussions at all (Vera). “Performative” was a term that was used to describe the nature of some Tumblr users’ engagement with social justice and feminist topics, where reblogging a post might be seen as political and social engagement in and of itself. When asked to summarize what she believed where characteristics of “the Tumblr community” Mina stated:

The fandom Tumblr community is much more invested in wank and discourse, and often it feels that for some subcommunities the desired capital is social justice and discourse posts.
Oftentimes performative social justice and performative discourse posts.

While Vera shared:

A lot of the posts that gain traction seem extremely performative and self-congratulatory, in that sense. Especially if you look at posts like those that go "Reblog if you think it's okay to punch nazis" or some other obvious statement. It gets to a point where posts feel... guilt-tripppy, even. The more I am on Tumblr, the more I find myself going to the reblog button, reconsidering, then scrolling on rather than hitting it, because the content doesn't feel genuine.

While “performance” or “performative” was a more pervasive terminology than “Arena,” the phenomenon I hope to describe here, while related to performative social behaviors on the
platform, is more strongly concerned with considering the platform itself as an actor in the social performance of Tumblr bloggers, and carving out a specialized space within the platform. That is to say, the performance must occur *somewhere* and that somewhere is the digital and social space of Tumblr. Particularly the mechanism of reblogging gives the Tumblr-as-Arena specific properties that can facilitate the construction of a somewhat unstable performance through the platform. Tumblr, in this way, is not unique in being an Arena, but it is unique in the characteristics the Arena takes on, shaped by technical limitations and affordances, and social interaction encouraged among users. Different platforms foster different Arenas, where different stakes are contested with distinct technical weapons. Tumblr is only but one. Turner (1982) discusses the shift from liminal to liminoid performances particularly in terms of drama and stagecraft. We perform both in cultural rituals and in games that incorporate those rituals into art forms. In adopting the term Arena here, I specifically focus on episodes of conflict among users as posts circulate on Tumblr, instead of a Stage metaphor, which may overemphasize the importance of cooperation.

A participant in the Tumblr Arena may gain knowledge and develop skills that are applicable to other social causes, but for many others, success in the Arena alone may be their end goal. As quoted above, several interview respondents commented on the performative nature of Tumblr’s politics, where reblogging posts about particular social issues might be the beginning and the end of some users’ political engagement. While the connection between the Arena and broader engagement is a significant question, as of yet, it remains outside of the boundaries of the current project. Here, I will only concern myself with the textual and visual landscape of the Arena itself, explicating how Tumblr posts that combine fandom and feminist concerns are constructed, circulated, and transformed as they move across blogs and land on
Dashboards. Critical discourse analysis is a means to an end, a perspective that will allow for the hermeneutic (Ricoeur, 1971, 1981) explication of particular posts and to place them into dialogue with one another, and the platform, as they may be seen on a single Dashboard (indeed, they all appeared on the same Dashboard: my research account). The Arena itself is porous, and every one of the 213 accounts in the blog pool contributed, in that each reblogged post added to the texture of the Dashboard as it streamed across my screen, endlessly and unceasing.

4.5 Post 1: Panty Shots and Fan Service, for the Greater Good

Figure 29. Kill la Kill’s Ryuko Matoi, fan service, and the strong woman character.
The above post, split into three figures (29-31), begins with a screen shot excerpt of an even longer Tumblr post. User Pink, who is the original poster (OP) says that they are not
“reblogging the fifty image atrocity that is the original post,” but are instead concerned with only this first portion, which they label “comedy in its purest form.” But what is the comedy here?

In Pink’s screen shot, Pink has included the blog name of the OP who originated the “fifty image atrocity,” here Purple. Likely, the inclusion of this blog name is either an oversight, or an attempt to invite further mocking of the user for a post that Pink finds funny, rather than attribution or giving credit to the “fifty image atrocity.” Calling the screen shot post itself a “fifty image atrocity” is mocking, indicating that the rest of the post didn’t bear repeating. The only piece of the post that the Pink deems important enough to screen shot and repost is the initial comment, and the first image that follows it. “Tumblr: there are no strong women in anime! It’s all just panty shots and fan service! // Me: [unlabeled image of Ryuko Matoi from Kill la Kill (2013)].

Purple attributes the initial statement to “Tumblr” in the broadest sense, not bothering to further specify the speaker. This “Tumblr” appears overtly concerned with the portrayal of “strong women,” someone who dislikes “panty shots and fan service,” and someone who is perhaps predisposed to be unsympathetic to anime. While not explicitly stated, the strong implication here is that this “Tumblr” is a woman themselves, given their concern with the sexualization of women in anime.

The response, from “me,” rather than a verbal one, is an image (actually a series of images, but the only one of concern in this post chain is that of Ryuko), meant to speak their rebuttal as self-evident. Ryuko Matoi is the protagonist of Kill la Kill, which ran in a single, 25-episode, season from the Fall of 2013 through Spring 2014. Coming from the production team

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18 “Panty shot” is a visual depiction of a female character’s underwear; “Fan service” is typically used as a more generalized term for sexual material that a target group of fans desire, such as large breasts on female characters aimed at male audiences. “Fan service” can be used for non-sexual catering to audiences as well.
that produced *Tengen Toppa Gurren Lagann* (2007), the series was highly anticipated (Anime News Network, 2013) and was “simulcast” with subtitles in English, Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, and German (Daisuki.net, 2013), allowing international audiences equal access to the show as it aired and demonstrating a concern on the producers’ and distributor’s part with the show’s international success. The story follows high school student Ryuko, who has been traveling across and alternate-reality Japan to find evidence regarding her father’s murder. Her search leads her to a prestigious high school academy, where student council members have incredible powers, granted to them through the use of “Goku Uniforms.” Ryuko herself discovers a similar uniform, left to her by her father, which increases her battle prowess to super-human levels and allows her to physically fight against the members of the student council.

Why then is the juxtaposing of Purple’s text with the image of Ryuko “comedy in its purest form,” in the opinion of Pink? Because Ryuko’s uniform, and those of the other high school students, are exceptionally revealing and sexual, particularly in their transformed (for battle) form. In the image used in the original post, Ryuko’s stomach is revealed. Just out of the screen shot, her skirt is quite short. This is the more conservative version of her uniform she wears to attend school. Her uniform is sentient, often carrying on conversations with her, and transforming when she must engage in battle, sometimes against her will. In this transformed form, she is barely covered, and she (and other female characters) are often shown from angles that emphasize sexualized parts of their bodies (breasts, buttocks).
Figure 32. Ryuko’s transformed uniform in a battle scene.

Figure 33. Ryuko shown at low-angle, complete with “panty shot.”
Kill la Kill’s battle scenes in particular, while highly dynamic and exciting to watch, are153(113,78),(881,982) near constant stream of sexualized images that depict Ryuko’s (and other characters’) bodies in titillating ways (and, as a reminder, virtually all the characters in these fight sequences are high school students). The combination of Purple’s text with the image of Ryuko is “comedy in its purest form” because Kill la Kill trades in exactly those aspects of anime that the hypothetical “Tumblr” is depicted as objecting to, fan service and panty shots.

Which isn’t to say that Ryuko can’t also be a “strong woman” (again, she is technically a girl and the sexualization of high school students isn’t something to be easily brushed away). This tension in Kill la Kill was discussed at length, both on Tumblr and other social media sites, particularly Reddit, with seemingly every side of the issue extrapolated (Romano, 2014a). The original post under analysis, and the reblogs that follow, are simply one example of on-going discussion around the show. Almost four years after Kill la Kill has finished airing, praise and critique of the show’s sexualization and supposed social commentary are still in circulation on Tumblr, and debated among fandom participants.

Pink appears particularly amused by Ryuko being used as an example of a “strong woman” in anime, not necessarily because she is not a “strong woman” but because of the inclusion of “panty shots and fan service,” both of which occur frequently in Kill la Kill. Pink does very little to actually explain why this juxtaposition is funny, instead relying on the audience who might see the post to be familiar with Kill la Kill and the Discourse that surrounds the show. Indeed, Ryuko’s image here is of the more modest version of her uniform, and while her stomach is exposed, the length of her skirt is not. Just as Purple relies on the image of Ryuko to explain itself (Ryuko is a strong woman in anime), Pink assumes that their audience will come to a very different conclusion, based largely on the same image (Ryuko is extremely fan service-
y and sexualized). The juxtaposition here is based on assumptions regarding a target audience, both of which would have to be familiar with *Kill la Kill*, but would reach opposite conclusions from the same image.

![Figure 34. Ryuko’s uniform in its more “modest” form.](image)

At some point over the post’s lifespan, Blue reblogs the post, critiquing Pink’s assumption. But first, they must understand what Pink implicitly argues (that Ryuko is a fan service character, and thus a bad example of a strong woman in anime). Undoubtedly, given the controversy that began when the series aired and continues in interpretations of the anime since airing (Romano, 2014a), Blue, and everyone else in the reblog chain, have been exposed to multiple arguments, and are each advocating for their own position. Blue suspects what side Pink stands on, and takes issue with Pink’s position. However, built into Blue’s position is yet another assumption. “Anyone who watched KLK and thinks that Ryuko is just “pantyshots and fanservice” probably actually didn’t watch KLK.” This is obviously a contradictory statement. “Anyone who watched KLK…probably actually didn’t watch KLK.” In a literal sense, both of
these cannot be true. Pink couldn’t have both watched and not watched *Kill la Kill*. Blue can mean a number of things here. Either that Pink never watched *Kill la Kill* at all (notably, Pink never claimed to have seen the show); that Pink may pretend to have watched the show, but really has only seen commentary and screen shots/gifs from the series; or that Pink watched the show, but didn’t understand the critique that Blue sees embedded in the narrative. Contortions such as these, that regulate who and who is not allowed to speak in fandom about the source text and practices of other fans are typical of boundary maintenance or gatekeeping that occurs across digital and in-person fandom spaces and is not necessarily specific to Tumblr (Gonzalez, 2016; Honeycutt, 2005; Jenkins, 2006; Neill Hoch, 2018). Blue goes on to write:

Well then again KLK portrays issues A LOT of SJWS and feminists would find uncomfortable. That show is an SJW’s worst nightmare. Watch how much those guys jumped over backwards to insinuate that the Bath Scene is “rape culture for straight men.” Because mothers are always right™ so they can’t molest their kids and all men are rapists.

Here, they invoke the specter of the “SJW” or “social justice warrior” and aligns this stereotype with feminism more broadly. This comment carries a hostility that is markedly different than the exchange above, which may be snarky and dismissive towards the original poster (whose post only appears in a partial screenshot) but is less overtly hostile than invoking “an SJW’s worst nightmare.” Blue does not elaborate on what exactly makes *Kill la Kill* this “worst nightmare.” They instead recall a specific scene in the show and the discussion that surrounded it. The assumption here is two-fold. First, that the audience knows exactly what happens in “the Bath Scene” (they have seen the show) and second, the audience knows the controversy about this specific scene (rather than the broader, more accessible arguments regarding the show more generally). The language here remains hostile and exaggerated, saying that those who critiqued “the Bath Scene” unilaterally believe “all men are rapists” (while I cannot provide identifying
information about Blue, Blue does not fit the demographic categories you might expect, given the language of this post). While Blue provides little in terms of explicit examples of how “the Bath Scene” was argued as being “rape culture for straight men,” Blue assumes that others will know exactly to what they are referring (the “Bath Scene” includes no men, and implies parental sexual assault between a mother and daughter).

Blue’s final statement argues that a show where virtually all the important, lead roles are female (and many of these women are in positions of institutional power, in addition to engaging in physical combat), and with relatively little romantic content for any of the female characters, cannot be sexist towards women. Blue essentially brushes aside the idea that anyone who has “actually” seen Kill la Kill could interpret the show as misogynistic, because of the physical, material, and social power afforded to women in the show. It is not simply that it is a female-led show, but that the power these women have, even as high school students, is “real” and not subverted by or contingent on their relationships with men (though, of course, Ryuko’s extremely skimpy uniform was made for her by her late father!). This idea of “actually” having watched the show returns later in the reblog chain, and constitutes a particular feature of Tumblr’s Arena contingent on reblogging.

Brown’s addition via reblog is extremely short, but raises the intersecting concern of sexuality, in a follow-up to a single point made by Blue. That there is a “romance sub plot” between the “hero and the sidekick.” While this denies Blue’s statement that there are no love interests in Kill la Kill, the fact that both “the hero” (Ryuko) and “the sidekick” (Mako Mankanshoku) are both women (girls!) actually reinforces Blue’s larger argument that Kill la Kill cannot be sexist towards women. Hey! This addition cries out, two women show romantic interest in each other. And that’s good for women!
This succinct comment may slightly diffuse the hostile tone adopted by Blue. Rather than explicitly picking up the through-line of the show being a “SJW’s worst nightmare,” Brown’s counter, that there is a romance subplot between two female characters, serves to support Blue’s larger argument, but in a way that demonstrates that Brown’s knowledge of the show’s material is equal to or greater than that of Blue. Blue has already accused those “SJWs” who critique *Kill la Kill* as not having watched the show (however that may be defined). In order to effectively play by the rules that Blue has established as part of who is allowed to comment on their analysis (however cursory), the next reblogger has to demonstrate knowledge of the show that goes beyond the titillating, sexualized images and prove that they know specific narrative details. They must effectively perform as a knowledgeable fan before offering any additional analysis. That is the price of admission into the Arena. An outsider unfamiliar with the show cannot simply look at images of Ryuko and provide a reasonable critique. Their comments may be rejected outright.

The reblog left by Brown opens up the Arena for Yellow’s more detailed response. Yellow has to first pay the cost of admission, and demonstrate additional, show-based knowledge about the relationship between Ryuko and Mako that is not present in the original post, or reblogs further up the chain. Yellow counters both the statement by Blue (that there are no love interests) and Brown (that Ryuko and Mako have a romantic subplot) in saying, “That’s left intentionally vague, I feel. But you could certainly interpret it like that.” Responding directly to Brown, Yellow does not need to explain who “they” are. Notable is that no one in this chain of responses has actually said Mako’s name, she is simply, “the sidekick”. Additionally, Ryuko’s name is said only once, in identifying her as the girl in the original screen shot. But there is no explicit mention that Ryuko is “the hero.” The Tumblr user encountering this post must already
know that Ryuko is the girl in the original picture, and that she is the hero/protagonist, in order to engage in this reblog chain at all.

Having proven that they are well aware of the content of the series, by tying up the line of thought introduced by Blue regarding romantic content in the series through a dismissal of both Blue and Brown’s comments, Yellow is then free to continue on with their appraisal of the show. They effectively remove any further discussion of Ryuko and Mako’s queerness, stating that while it can be interpreted as such, they are not explicitly shown as attracted to each other. Instead of continuing the line of thought that the show might both be female-centric and focus on romantic relations between women, they instead return to the topic of sexualization, writing:

Also, Kill la Kill is a great show, with strong female characters. If you complain about panty shots in KLK then you clearly didn’t watch it because the show relishes every chance it gets to sexualize men as well as women, with two male characters entirely devoted to being naked.

The entire show was built on the concept of sex, sexualized clothing and personal sexuality. If you mock KLK for being fanservice, you likely didn’t watch it.

This assessment does not say much that is explicitly different than Blue’s assertion earlier. Yellow agrees that Kill la Kill is a “great” show and that it has “strong female characters.” Furthermore, those who dismiss the show as being only about panty shots “clearly didn’t watch it.” But in this case, their argument extends to the male characters, who are also sexualized. Two of the principal male characters (whose roles are arguably much smaller than most of the female characters) belong to a resistance movement trying to throw off the shackles of clothing (later in the series, it is revealed that all clothing in the world of Kill la Kill has mind-control technology built into their fibers) and spend most of their on-screen time virtually naked.

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19 In other reblog chains of this post, and in Replies to it, other users point out that Mako does have a more explicit romance sub plot with a boy, which undermines both the idea that there are no romantic interests and the romantic subplot is one between two women.
(refer to the right-hand side of figure 34). Yellow doesn’t deny that there are panty shots in *Kill la Kill*, but rather argues that complaining about or critiquing those panty shots misses the point of the show, which is about “sex, sexualized clothing, and personal sexuality,” though they provide no evidence to support this interpretation of the show, still relying on the reader to fill in the details of an ongoing argument. They again end with the assertion that any other interpretation than the one they have presented means that the person critiquing the show has not, in fact, watched KLK.

This performance is curious in the way that it initially contradicts both Blue and Brown, but ultimately all three users are defending *Kill la Kill* against the implicit attack by Pink. No one involved in the chain of reblogs provides any particular argument or perspective that can be clearly articulated in the text or images themselves. Rather, the chain of reblogs builds, one atop the other, expecting the reader(s) to fill in the gaps based on pre-existing knowledge of the show and Discourse that surrounds the show. Besides, if you haven’t *really watched Kill la Kill* your opinion doesn’t matter anyway. And the only logical conclusion someone who has *really watched* is the same as Blue, Brown, and Yellow. And yet the statements by Blue, Brown, and Yellow are not unquestionably mutually supportive of one another. They each participate in trying to one-up each other, demonstrating their knowledge of the source material in their response.

In this example, participation in the Arena is predicated less on presenting a strong, well-reasoned argument, and more on cursory identification of broader themes and a deployment of language that emphasizes particular positions in relationship to what is presented as a larger issue: is *Kill la Kill* sexist? But, importantly, the post did not actually begin as a discussion of the sexism of the show, but rather a comment on the fact that using Ryuko, and by extension *Kill la*
Kill, as an example of a strong woman in anime, in opposition to fan service and panty shots, is ridiculous. The initial intent of the post, as stated by Pink, is humor. None of the counterstatements by Blue, Brown, or Yellow deny that fan service and panty shots are in Kill la Kill, but rather argue that the show are about more than just the fan service, and to reduce the show to its sexualized elements is something only someone who hasn’t seen the show would do in the first place. And yet, they provide no evidence or explanation regarding why their interpretation is the correct one, beyond simple statements that a show where all the principal characters are women cannot be sexist against women and that because the show is about sexualization, it cannot be reduced to sexualization.

Yellow returns one last time in this Reblog chain, adding to their own comment and writing, “Oh and I like OP’s implication that fanservice and strong female characters are mutually exclusive. They aren’t.” But the question here is which OP? Are they referring to Purple, who is the OP of the screen shot post? Or Pink, who is the person who took a piece of Purple’s “fifty image atrocity” and reposted with their comment? Yellow is unclear which OP is implying that a character cannot be both an example of a “strong female character” and “fan service.”

It is, at least in part, this tension that caused the Discourse around Kill la Kill to be so strongly split. There were those, both on Tumblr and other social media sites, who were able to recognize both that Kill la Kill could be a complicated, compelling narrative with some level of inherent critique (including playing on a fashion/fascism pun, mocking broader anime tropes, and integrating elements of Japanese folk lore, see Romano, 2014a for summary) and contain overt, sometimes unrelenting fan service where teen girls were subjected to intense sexualization. Furthermore, the animation itself is dynamic and visually compelling, especially in the fight
sequences, which also happens to be when most of the overtly sexual framings occur. The show is messy, potentially being entertaining, troubling, and exciting all at once. But, at least in this case, Blue in particular is unwilling to entertain the idea that someone might both critique the show and have watched and understood *Kill la Kill*. Pink does not make a claim one way or another if they have seen the show, simply pointing out the irony in Purple’s original post. And Yellow has failed to be explicit in which of these two users is “missing the point” that a character can be both strong and a source of fan service. Because neither Pink nor Purple write or post anything that can allow that conclusion to be substantiated.

The end result is a performance of fan-knowledge with very cursory, unsupported claims. But the lack of textual and visual evidence in the post and series of reblogs does not undermine the idea of each of these actors participating in an Arena where their opinions and analysis are contested. In addition to demonstrating knowledge of the show, and the continuing Discourse around the show, they also include bits and pieces to confirm that they have read the original post, and reblogs above. They comment on what came before in a technical approximation of a dialogue or conversation, when, in fact, they are not actually speaking with each other. There are five blogs involved in this exchange, but there is no turn in conversation, rather each adds to the next, without a previous reblogger returning to the sequence (the exception being Yellow’s return to *their own* addition). Purple, in fact, may be said to not be involved at all. Unless someone showed them Pink’s post, or they found it on their own, they would have received no acknowledgement from the Tumblr notification system that their post had been included in this new post by Pink. By taking a screen shot of only a portion of the “fifty image atrocity,” Pink effectively excludes Purple from the sequence entirely, despite their username still being visible. If they had reblogged the “atrocity” Purple might have at least received a notification in their
Tumblr Activity feed. If Purple is excluded, there remain four bloggers who participate in this reblog chain, each responding both to the post above and contributing generally to the ongoing discussion around the show, but at no point in this chain does a reblogger return to counter the response someone directed at them. There is no conversation. The reblogging structure results in conflicts and corrections that are markedly different than those discussed in previous research of conflict on discussion boards and other digital social platforms, where users more frequently respond directly to one another (Chau, 2009; Danis & Lee, 2005; Honeycutt, 2005; Smith, McLaughlin & Osborne, 1997; also Neill Hoch, 2018 as an example of conduct control on Tumblr circa 2014).

Furthermore, while the last three rebloggers (Blue, Brown and Yellow) are generally in agreement, they still couch their responses in aggressive or competitive language (Hardaker, 2013), effectively trying to cut down the response before advancing their own position (which, again, does not really differ much in that they are in general agreement that Kill la Kill is “great” and not sexist). While not all interactions in the Arena might be equally combative, as we will see in the next post, escalation and de-escalation of emotion remains a core element of interaction in these posts, even if participants see themselves on the “same” side of the issue.

It is exactly this competitive, performative nature of social participation that several of the interview participants pointed towards as being a negative aspect of their Tumblr experience (Mina and Vera in particular). Participants who reported having largely positive experiences attributed their enjoyment at least in part to being able to avoid such arguments, usually by Unfollowing users who were participating in these arguments (Doan, Erin, and Randy) or by avoiding reblogging overtly political posts themselves (Amy). And while some users reported engaging in arguments more frequently in the past, the longer they were on Tumblr, the less
interested they were in trying to counter posts circulating across their Dashboards. When asked if their experiences on Tumblr were more positive or negative, E explained:

E: i'd say overall positive, definitely improving when i got the ability to block the things i didn't like 
it can definitely be pretty negative if you feel like you have to engage in or agree with every piece of discourse bouncing around, which i did when i first joined, but if you just keep to the chill-er parts of fandom and stick with the people who make it a positive experience for you, it can be super fun.

Other users (Missati and Constance) also explicitly mentioned enjoying Tumblr more because of the smaller circle of Mutuals who shared their interests and perspectives, rather than trying to cultivate larger followings or engage with many more Tumblr users. Erin discussed her own participation in what she called “passive aggressive reblogs” on fandom posts. Explicitly citing a conflict she had somewhat recently engaged in, she added to an existing post, “oh noe! im morally right and want you 2 DIEEE’ because the person making these callouts was telling the people they were attacking that they should die and was blocked.” But even she agreed that her Tumblr experience was largely positive, because “I don't look in the fandom tags, I block people rather than fight, and I follow a small amount of folks.”

This seeming contradiction, her both speaking about her own “passive aggressive reblogs” and stating that she Blocks people rather than fighting, is not a particularly troubling incongruence. Arguing, on the internet or not, can be tiring. No one wants to fight all the time. But occasionally engaging with a post where you may feel the content is inaccurate, upsetting, or simply bothers you, may still happen. Interview participants largely indicated that their behaviors on the platform changed over time, and that they may have participated in arguments more frequently when they first joined, or in some cases left the platform after they found it too tiring to continue arguing (Mina). As none of my participants had joined Tumblr within the last two years, it may have simply been that most of them had already passed through their most
argumentative stages, and simply engaged in conflict less at the time of interviews than they may have in the past. Their enjoyment revolved around better knowledge of the few tools Tumblr provides to manage what content they see on their Dashboard, as well as developing more comfort with exercising social autonomy over who they choose to Follow and interact with. The *feeling* that they could exert more control lead to more positive experiences.

### 4.6 Post 2: Boobies, Ass, and Zip Files Containing Boobs and Ass

A second reblogged post addresses similar issues of female protagonists and sexualization as the Ryuko Matoi-*Kill la Kill* chain above, this time centered around the 2017 video game *Nier: Automata*.

![Image of Nier: Automata character with text overlay](image)

**Figure 35.** *Nier: Automata* and voyeuristic misogyny.
Figure 36. Nier: Automata and voyeuristic misogyny. (cont).

The sentiment in this post (Figures 35 and 36) is extremely similar to the Kill la Kill sequence. Both discuss Japanese media with female protagonists that have had both commercial and critical success in North America and Europe. Nier: Automata has sold over 2 million copies worldwide (Hester, 2017) and holds both an 88 critic score and an 8.8 user score on Metacritic (Metacritic, 2018). Kill la Kill and Nier: Automata are difficult to simply brush aside as nothing more than misogynistic catering to particular audiences because audiences find them emotionally and intellectually compelling, beautiful to look at, and exciting, in addition to overtly sexualized female leads. They are entertaining, mass media products, and they don’t feel shallow and mindless when watching or playing, though the sexualization of the female body is ever present.

The original post by Brown consists of three multimodal pieces. The text, reading “when people assume Nier Automata is a shallow booby game because it’s japanese and has a female
protagonist.” The hyperlink, which points to a YouTube video of an audio track from *Nier: Automata’s* score, titled “This Cannot Continue.” This is a boss theme from the game, one element of which is a mechanized voice saying “this cannot continue,” over and over again through the entirety of the fast-paced track. And a still image of a machine from the game with red eyes, combined with a subtitle from a different section of the game saying “This. Cannot. Continue.” overlaid on top of the machine.

Instead of including an image of the “booby” female protagonist, Brown has instead included an image of a sexless, generic machine from the game. These machines are mostly low-level enemies, although some are also passive non-playable characters that will only attack when provoked. Brown has not actually shown an image of the supposed sexualized female characters. And, like many of the participants in the *Kill la Kill*-Ryuko Matoi post above, relies on other Tumblr bloggers having pre-existing knowledge about the controversy and Discourse surrounding *Nier: Automata*, rather than providing explicit context.

Red reblogs the original post, adding an increasingly hostile comment, “this wouldn’t happen if people shut the fuck up about 2b’s ass for like one second and maybe talked about the actual game a little.” Brown’s statement is already a hostile one, combining an in-game enemy, boss theme music, and the ominous statement of “this cannot continue,” though there is a playfulness in the way their “attack” is structured, utilizing *Nier: Automata’s* audio and visual elements into their commentary. Red uses profanity and invokes the specter of the knowledgeable fan. Instead of talking about 2b’s ass (the female protagonist and first of three playable characters, is an android built for combat, but one with emotions who expresses some personal desires as well), they should talk about other aspects of the game.
Figure 37. In-game shot of 9s (male, left) and 2b (female, right).

Figure 38. In-game shot of 9s (male, left) and 2b (female, right) depicting their costuming.
Notably, however, Red does not talk about the game’s content, simply stating that people should, but then not doing so themselves. Their statement, at least on the surface, does not appear to be in conflict with Brown, and if anything, is in support. If people could talk about something other than 2b’s ass, then maybe others who either have or have not played wouldn’t dismiss *Nier: Automata* as a “booby” game. Here of course, the language of reducing a female character to her physical properties is continued, though Brown uses “booby” and Red uses “ass.” Red is perhaps somewhat more accurate in their assessment of *Nier: Automata’s* sexualized fixations. As Green then points out in the next reblog, “there is a fucking trophy for upskirting the main character 10 times.” The trophy, named “what are you doing?” unlocks after the player has changed the camera angle to look up 2b’s skirt on 10 occasions, encouraging players to participate in the overt sexualization of 2b in order to fully complete the game. Green goes on to say that it is fine to play and enjoy the game, but the misogynistic elements should not be overlooked. Misogyny is built into the code and visual design of the game. Importantly, Green, like in so many other rebloggers across both discussed posts, demonstrates some level of familiarity with the game by knowing the trophy for upskirting exists, while they omit the name of the main character, and fail to note any other plot details. Neither “side” of the argument is particularly interested in robust support, instead throwing bits and pieces of abstracted information back at one another.

Blue’s final comment on this chain is sarcastic, snarky, and adds additional unsourced, somewhat non-specific information that requires the reader to have some level of pre-existing familiarity not only with the game, but with the game’s creators.

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20 There is also an achievement for playing for 1 hour with a pantsless 9s (the second of three playable characters). No one in this reblog chain mentions this achievement, though it could be seen as analogous to the comment in the *Kill la Kill* discussion regarding the simultaneous sexualization of male characters. Though 9s is an android and thus technically not a “child,” his physical features are reminiscent of a teenaged boy, rather than an adult man.
I love when people are all like oh but the dude is so open and honest about how he loves tits and ass so it’s progressive!!!! he asked for zip files full of lewd fanart of her!!! what a refreshing turn of events!!! yeah…. it being a japanese game with a female protag isn’t what led people to draw these conclusions lol.

Blue puts the responsibility of audiences thinking that *Nier: Automata* is a “booby” game about “2b’s ass” back on “the dude,” who “loves tits and ass,” and “asked for zip files full of lewd fanart of her!!!” This comment is devoid of names or sources, but presumably refers to the game’s director, Yoko Taro, who has stated that he would also like to direct an “adult film” as well as video games, stage productions, and novels (Ashcraft, 2017b). The “zip files full of lewd fanart” most likely refers to one of Taro’s Tweets, which he made in response to a circulating image of 2b with a visible anus, reported to be from the game files (generally now accepted as a photoshop; see Ashcraft, 2017a for translation of Tweet and Frank, 2017 for commentary). In the Tweet, Taro said that it was difficult collecting “rude” drawings of 2b, because there were so many of them, and he would rather have a zip file of them sent to him every week. Whether or not Taro was joking, he was interpreted, at least by Blue, as openly participating in the sexualization of his own female character.

These reblog chains are not deep analyses of the sexualization of female characters in media (designed and produced in Japan, but simultaneously aimed at a Western audiences [Iwabuchi, 1998 for how initially Japan sought to use media as a soft power mechanism across Asia; Valaskivi, 2013 for expansion to the rest of the world, particularly after 2005]). At the same time, this participation, not quite a debate, but a loose sparring in the Arena, allows each reblogger to add to an already saturated Dashboard in a way they may or may not think is actually meaningful, but is nonetheless a form of participation. Jenkins (2006) argues that fandom activities may allow participants to practice skills that are of use in civil society, mostly
digital literacy and analytic skills. And I am by no means suggesting that participation in the Tumblr Arena is without merit. McCracken (2017) emphasizes the importance of how the Tumblr platform in particular allows youth to participate in practices of representation that may have previously been inaccessible. However, I would contend that the transformative properties of such loose, posturing disagreements have less to do with broader discourse about feminist social concerns, and more with self-formation and identity. Green draws attention to the misogyny inherent in *Nier: Automata*, not necessarily to alter the opinions of Brown and Red, who do not return to this chain, but to confirm and build upon their own identity as a person who draws attention to misogyny. Through conflict with others, Tumblr users construct themselves.

### 4.7 Post 3: Disability, Class, and Fish-love

The final post I will discuss in detail addresses intersectional concerns of gender, race, class, and disability. Feminist scholars have noted that intersectional scholarship sometimes falls into the trap of discussing gender and race to the exclusion of other intersecting identity categories (Cho, Crenshaw, & McCall, 2013; Davis, 2008; Lykke, 2011), but in this post, Tumblr users who participate in the reblog chain assert and dismiss the importance of various intersecting identities as the post circulates, not exclusively race and gender. While I aim to later argue that self-presentation on Tumblr complicates the stability of identity categories, through Puar’s (2005; 2013) deployment of assemblage theory, the rhetoric of intersectional feminist theory is more accessible to most Tumblr users, and the users in the following reblog chain likely at least familiar with core concepts of intersectional feminism as they add their comments to the post.

This post is difficult to reproduce in print. Tumblr is intensely visual and affective (Cho, 2015), but more than just still illustrations or photographs, posts can also consist of animated gif
sets, reproducing motion and often affective in themselves (Ash, 2015). Miltner and Highfield (2017) discuss the affordances of animated gifs, particularly that in their short duration and repetition, looping endlessly, animated gifs are polysemic. This polysemy can lead to either resistance against restrictive cultural structures or easy commodification, depending on intent and context.

Tumblr image posts can display up to ten images of various sizes simultaneously, which, combined with the near-inexhaustible ability to add more text, can result in posts and reblog threads that are cumbersomely long. So, while I have included screen shots below of the post, I have accompanied these reproductions with detailed descriptions of each animated gif in an effort to capture the affective nature of what are, first and foremost, visually stunning moving images.

Figure 39. *The Shape of Water* (2017), disability, class, and sexual attraction to fish-men.
Figure 40. *The Shape of Water* (2017), disability, class, and sexual attraction to fish-men. (cont.)
Figure 41. *The Shape of Water* (2017), disability, class, and sexual attraction to fish-men. (cont.)

Figure 42. *The Shape of Water* (2017), disability, class, and sexual attraction to fish-men. (cont.)
The post under consideration (figures 39-42) includes five, full color gifs, replicating scenes from the trailer of Guillermo del Toro’s *The Shape of Water* (2017), a film that at the time of this post’s initial circulation in the Fall of 2017, had been screened at the Venice Film Festival, but not yet released to general audiences. The film, set in 1962, depicts a romantic relationship between a mute female janitor (Sally Hawkins) and a sentient, but also non-verbal, fish-man (Doug Jones) being held in a research tank in the facility in which she works.

The first gif shows Hawkins pressing her hand to the exterior of the glass, while the monster inside presses back. They look into each other’s’ eyes in a moment of developing intimacy. The second gif depicts Hawkins and her neighbor (Richard Jenkins) seated on a couch, facing the camera with a black and white television program playing just to their left. Hawkins and Jenkins tap their feet against the floor, then pull up their legs to click their heels against one another. The scene is playful and high energy. The third gif shows Hawkins and her coworker (Octavia Spencer) stopping their work, pushing a cart of linens, and turning at some unknown sound. Spencer is foregrounded while Hawkins is in the middle distance of the shot. The fourth depicts Jones, now free from behind the glass, standing in the pouring rain at his full height, while a male figure with his back to the camera crouches low to the ground. The final image contains two shots separated by a cut. The first is a medium close-up of Hawkins, with Spencer and additional actors in the background. Hawkins uses American Sign Language to spell out “F,” “U.” The cut transitions to the ranking military officer at the facility (Michael Shannon), seen in long shot kicking a table and then stalking towards Hawkins. Hawkins is still visible in this shot, but from behind. Her hand is raised and she can clearly be seen signing “F,” “U,” a second time now that Shannon faces her.
Each of these gifs is visually striking, unsurprising for a del Toro film (he would go on to win Best Director at the 2018 Academy Awards and the film would win Best Picture). None of the gifs contain captions or subtitles, with the exception of Hawkins signing in the last gif. As they are animated gifs, and not video clips, they are, by technical necessity, silent. The original poster, Green, presumably who made the gifs from the video of the trailer, using image editing software, only adds a single line of text to the bottom of the post. “The Shape of Water (2017) dir. Guillermo del Toro.” The underlined portion of the text is a clickable link that directs to the full trailer on YouTube. The gifs in this original context are of aesthetic value, intended to be circulated through reblogging because they are beautiful or interesting, rather than reaction gifs which may have been extracted to use in conjunction with texts to replicate non-verbal and/or embodied responses (Kanai, 2015; Miltner & Highfield, 2017; Tolins & Samermit, 2016). This gif set thus has somewhat more narrative coherency when compared to the decontextualized gifs most interesting to Miltner and Highfield (2017).

Unlike the two posts concerning the sexualization of female leads discussed earlier this chapter, this initial post here is not an overt commentary on any particular issue. Though discussion of The Shape of Water on Tumblr quickly became laden with intersectional concerns.

Since the announcement of the film, Tumblr users, who may often shun traditional heterosexual film romance plots in favor of advocating for more queer storylines, have discussed the film extensively. Sometimes with comments that articulate despite the primary relationship being between a woman and a man, The Shape of Water is exciting because it’s about a woman and a monster and thus deviates from the heterosexual norm, even as it still revolves around a woman and a male/masculine monster. While there is a long tradition in film of the sexualized monster’s inhuman, terrifying lust for human women (Evans, 1973; Williams, 1991), The Shape
of Water instead presents a consensual, romantic fantasy film where the monster and the woman connect emotionally, fall in love, and share intimacy (including a sex scene; Baker-Whitelaw, 2017).

Aesthetic posts, shitposts, off-hand commentary, and critique of The Shape of Water, a movie that only a very select few Tumblr users had even seen at the time this post first circulated, proliferated across the platform in late-summer leading into early winter 2017. Strangely enough, the actual release of the film in December 2017 did not seem to significantly increase the volume of posts about The Shape of Water on the research Dashboard, perhaps overshadowed by the release and critique of Star Wars: The Last Jedi during this same window. Or, because while more people had now seen the film in its entirety, there wasn’t a simultaneous release of new, high-resolution video available to gif makers. Similarly, while there was heavy circulation of text-post commentary during this same December period when Star Wars: The Last Jedi was released in theaters, relatively few new gif sets emerged, though a few shoddy, camera-phone stills quickly became memes. Figures 43 and 44 show one post circulating at the time, which also serves as an example of a post that expresses similar concerns about gender and disability, but without a visual component.
Figure 43. Example of a critique post about *Star Wars: The Last Jedi*, disability, race, and masculinity.

Figure 44. Example of a critique post about *Star Wars: The Last Jedi*, disability, race, and masculinity. (cont.)
In the particular reblog chain under analysis, the next comment that appears on the post by Red says, “The literally silent woman protagonist leaves a super bad taste in my mouth.” Presumably, this refers to the fact that Hawkins’ character is mute, and thus does not communicate verbally. The silent woman, at least in this argument, is stripped of her agency to communicate her wishes and desires in a way that can be comprehended by the (male) world around her, which would require her to speak in order to be heard. While aesthetic posts are not by any means value neutral, the original poster/gif maker has not offered up any explicit commentary on the film. The making of the gifs themselves, and presenting them without much in the way of additional commentary (again, only really a link back to the video source) offers tacit approval of film, as the gif maker is participating in unpaid labor on behalf of the film (Terranova, 2000). Fan-labor is by no means uncommon on the internet (Busse, 2015; Chin, 2013; Jenkins, 2006; Milner, 2009; Scholz, 2012), and in comparison to some tasks that fans engage with on behalf of a media product, the creation of gifs can be relatively low-labor (if still high-skill to successfully create).

Blue, who reblogs the post points out that while Hawkins’ character is deaf, she is not silent. *The Shape of Water*, instead of being merely another depiction of a subservient or brutalized woman, serves as representation for a disabled community. She is playing a deaf woman is a romantic lead in a major film production. Such characters are perceived as rare in mainstream filmmaking, and Blue cannot recall another example. Blue also points out that while she cannot speak, she is not silent either, as she is confidently signing “F,” “U,” to a male authority figure. Blue is openly hostile, ending their comment with the challenge, “so go off, I guess,” inviting Red to return in order to back up their discomfort with Hawkins as “the silent
woman.” Of course, as we have seen in previous examples of posts that participate in the Tumblr Arena, Red does not return to take up the challenge. Instead, the post moves on to yet another user.

Purple corrects Red, demonstrating close reading skills and stating that Hawkins is mute, not deaf. Purple then notes that the lead’s muteness might be a reference to *The Little Mermaid*. This too is a demonstration of knowledge that goes beyond what both Blue and Red have said in the reblogs above. In the absence of the film’s content being widely available, Purple draws from intertextual references in order to assert that their reading of the trailer is more correct than those who have commented above them. While they do not openly dismiss Red, they instead correct Blue, who has read Hawkins incorrectly as deaf, when she should be correctly be labeled as mute (this is potentially discernable from the gif set, as Hawkins reacts to the same off-camera noise as Spencer). Furthermore, rather than her muteness being viewed through the lens of disability, Purple places her inability to speak into a larger referential context of the Little Mermaid story, where the transformed-into-a-human mermaid must win over the always-a-human prince without the aid of her voice, a particularly apt comparison given that the male romantic lead in *The Shape of Water* is an aquatic fish-man. Here, Purple appears to correct both Red and Blue in terms of their reading of Hawkins’ identity in the film, but seems little concerned with either 1) the silent woman trope or 2) representation of disability. Purple’s response in fact steps away from questions of identity and marginalization, and towards intertextual references.

A final user (on this particular chain of reblogs), Orange, indirectly quotes Octavia Spencer (attributing it to an interview that is not linked) speaking about the film. As Spencer’s comment reportedly goes: The two romantic leads are mute, and thus the two characters who speak most frequently in the film are those who would normally be silenced in 1960s American
society, a Black woman (Spencer) and a closeted gay man (Jenkins). There is no link to the mentioned interview, and the statement itself is a paraphrase. However, the comment introduces further intersectional concerns to the conversation. What had been a discussion of female agency and disability in representational media expands outward to include commentary on how additional subject positions within the film(s trailer) are transformed via their relation to a leading romantic couple who cannot communicate vocally. Both Spencer’s and Jenkins’ characters appear in the trailer, but there is little information about their roles. Spencer’s role is perhaps a bit easier to discern. As a Black woman, the identity categories she belongs to as a “Black woman,” are relatively visible in the animated gifs themselves. She also visibly shares the identity category of “working class” with Hawkins, as they both appear in janitor’s uniforms, pushing a bin of linens together. Jenkins’ role as a gay man is less discernable from the animated gifs themselves. What is portrayed in the gifs is that he and Hawkins appear to have a playful, friendly relationship with one another. However, Jenkins and his character are not named in Orange’s comment, and no connection is made between the “closeted gay man” and Jenkins in the second gif. Either the reader must bring this outside knowledge to the reblog chain themselves, or be left in the dark on how the stages of the post relate to one another. The details of Orange’s argument are, as always, sparse, though this time attributed to Spencer, who has, of course, participated in the making of the film, engaged in interviews for the press tour, and seen the final product.

The aesthetic moment of the gif set is transformed as it moves through reblogs, with a limited number of users adding additional content to the post. The critique of the silent woman trope points towards a concern with the autonomy of women in mainstream media. While the response in the next text remarks on the importance of including disabled characters in
narratives. And how dare you say she’s silent? Just because she cannot (or will not) use her vocal cords to do so, she still speaks. She can still can tell a man to fuck off. Her (and her romantic foil’s) inability to vocalize leaves the aural landscape of the film open for two other, marginalized characters to be heard, when otherwise they may have been forced to remain silent.

And yet, none of these commentaries, however compelling, are particularly well supported or expanded upon. They are cursory glances towards topics that the rebloggers may be interested in, and they do demonstrate interest and some knowledge of intersectional junctions and concerns. None of this is to say that those who comment on this post, speaking across the Dashboard, are insincere, misinformed, or even that they could not provide stronger arguments or evidence or asked. All of this may very well be possible, from the same users who have already commented and from many more who simply reblogged the posts and adding no additional content themselves. But, instead, I am interested in the structures of these posts, how they adopt the reblog feature, and the very fracturedness of their presentation. Their shortness and lack of detail may in fact be why this series of comments were so heavily rotated, as they were easily comprehended and relatable (Shifman, 2014). But, in light of commentary from my interview respondents, as well as my own immersion in the Tumblr platform, reblog chains such as these serve the additional purpose of a sort of self-construction through the process of reblogging (though not necessarily by adding additional content, reblogging the chain unchanged may be enough).

4.8 Assemblage through Reblogging

Through the reblogging of these posts in the Tumblr Arena, which combine fandom content with critique, often shifting the tone of the post multiple times, Tumblr users can build an unstable identity, subject to change over time and quick recalibration with the addition of other
posts, the introduction of new reblog chains of the same post, or separate posts that critique what they may have reblogged earlier. In this way, Tumblr users essentially engage in a process of assemblage (Puar, 2005; 2012), where instead of stable, persistent identity categories, they are able to shape and reshape themselves through a process of exposure and concealment. Tumblr, unlike a more profile-centric social network platform like Facebook, does not display demographic or interest information by default. Instead, the portrayal of self occurs primarily through the reblogging of posts, with occasional personal interjections. All interview respondents indicated that they reblog content from other users more than they create and post content of their own. While there are certainly users where this trend does not hold true, in the case of the fandom population under discussion here, where many of the participants are content creators, but also consider their blogs to be their own personal repository for posts that they enjoy, reblogging content from others was a significant part of their Tumblr experience. Some participants (Amy, Randy, Missati) also discussed reblogging content that they specifically knew friends and Mutuals would enjoy, using the Mentions feature to @ those users and develop/maintain relationships. But other than cultivating friendships with specific users, there was little outward concern with audience. Users reblogged things that they enjoyed themselves, rather than worrying too much about their followers tastes. Multiple users (Amy and Constance in particular) cited that because the majority of their Followers/Mutuals did not know them in face-to-face contexts (though there may be a small number of exceptions) they were encouraged to be more open about their gender and sexuality than they were on other platforms such as Facebook. While interview procedures did not directly ask participants who they imagined as their audience (as was the case with Marwick & boyd, 2011), questions about the Tumblr community and reblogging practices seldom took curating for other users into account. Virtually
all participants either rejected the notion of a singular Tumblr community, or said that they did not feel a part of the community that did exist. Though they sometimes reported feeling a sense of community with a specific group of Mutuals. Their blogs were about things they themselves enjoyed. Not primarily a tool to communicate with other users, though this was often considered a welcome side effect.

While Puar does not necessarily envision assemblage as contradicting intersectionality, she none the less sees them as standing in tension with one another, and that tension being a productive one (2012). Puar’s assemblage draws attention to the unnaturalness of identity categories. While intersectional analysis rejects notions of essentialism outright, there is no such thing as the universal woman (Mohanty, 2003; Spivak, 1988; Lorde, 1981), Puar’s positioning is perhaps more radical, as it also suggests a denial of the fully organic subject. Puar (2005) writes that “as opposed to an intersectional model of identity, which presumes components—race, class, gender, sexuality, nation, age religion—are separable analytics and can be thus disassembled, an assemblage is more attuned to interwoven forces that merge and dissipate time, space, and body against linearity, coherency, and permanency” (p. 128). The assemblage is always tenuous and can be unmade, remade, and destroyed. In the case of her primary example, the terrorist suicide bomber, the body is packed with technology for the explicit purpose of explosion. The assemblage, in a similar vein to Butler’s (1990) performative, makes the seams of “identity” visible and fragile. With the binary of organic/inorganic so clearly violated (Puar also gives the example of the Sikh man, who is an assemblage of turban, hair, body, etc.), the assemblage is always queer, or rather, complicates our relationship to queerness. Haraway (1991) says the same of the cyborg and its ability to cross binaries, though Hamilton (1997; also Puar, 2012) critiques this notion as the cyborg is always a combination of human/technology
parts and not an actual melding of the two. This queerness that marks the terrorist assemblage serves to perpetuate U.S. sexual exceptionalism in a perverse way, where the photos at Abu Ghraib of U.S. service men and women brutalizing Muslim detainees become images of Muslim barbarism, because “they” are humiliated by homosexual acts “we” permit.

While it may be ludicrous to compare a suicide bomber to a Tumblr post and the constructed identities of Tumblr users engaging in reblogging practices, it is the blending of technical and displaced organic, temporarily held together in an unstable mixture that I find most compelling about the uneasy comparison. And why I find assemblage a more fitting framework for addressing the function that these Tumblr posts that blend fandom and feminism serve in the larger context of participation on the platform, as well as their relationship to the Arena. As discussed in the analysis of posts above, many of these displays of concern with feminist or intersectional topics are left vague, without support and presuming that the reader has enough knowledge to fill in the gaps themselves, having already read other parts of the discussion, dispersed across multiple posts over an indefinite timeframe. Because of the openness and incoherency of the posts themselves, the interpretations of both the media objects, and the analysis, are left unstable and subject to transformation. When reblogging a post to one’s own Dashboard, it is not always immediately apparent what view the Tumblr blogger who has interacted with the post is hoping to align themselves with. Interview participants frequently noted that before following someone’s blog, they would take the time to scan the content they posts, and wouldn’t follow if the posts’ contents were things that they found offensive or unsettling. Randy expressed the idea that by looking at a user’s reblogged posts combined with some of their personal/original posts, you could get a fairly good idea of who that blogger was,
“I usually follow someone after scoping their blog and content out for a couple days, check for red flags, and I'll be more likely to follow if they make funny personal text posts.”

This meshing of social text and technological specificity means that as a post progresses through time and across the Dashboard, additions and shifts in tone transform both the meaning of the post, and what it means to have reblogged the post. Additionally, as specific Tumblr users reveal themselves to have particular perspectives and attitudes, users may choose to no longer reblog posts where these users have either originated the post or participated in commentary on reblogs. As a user scrolls through the Dashboard, they are likely to encounter posts by thousands of different users, even if the number of people they Follow is quite small. As much as a user may try and control the content they are exposed to on Tumblr, and interview respondents overwhelmingly indicated that they did try to limit their Dashboards to content that personally interested them, it is difficult to entirely exclude competing viewpoints. Even if that exposure to the other side of a discussion is only present in posts such as those explicated above, where the alternate interpretation is only present for the next reblogger to comment upon expressing a different side of the issue.

Additionally, the same user may reblog different posts at different times, expressing conflicting views as their blog reflects their own shifting development as a person. Missati had her own past posts and associations on the site used against her, explaining:

Missati: I’ll call a white girl out on her Fracism and her friend will step in on some “well on October 23rd 2003 so and so said a thing that could have been transphobic so my friend gets a pass at being racist” or some shit. And it’s like Susan we are not discussing 15 year old tea. We are discussing why Helen is fetishizing black dick and writing slavery AUs that are hypersexualized.

Many participants, including Missati, indicated that their behaviors on Tumblr changed over time, and posts that they had reblogged or statements they had made earlier in their participation,
they would not necessarily make now. Sometimes, this change was for reasons as benign as Doan no longer originating posts because he only had a small number of followers. Or Erin, who no longer wanted to engage in so many arguments with other users.

The decision to reblog particular posts, while ignoring others, or adding additional commentary, acts as a way of self-constructing an identity on the platform that is always subject to change, and contributes to the perceived autonomy account holders feel they exert while using Tumblr. Rather than viewing reblogging as strictly performance of an identity, it may be more accurate to consider the possibilities of instability through the continual addition (and sometimes subtraction) of posts from one’s own blog, which then reflects on the Dashboard of the people who Follow you. Posts that share structural characteristics with those analyzed above, in particular, where interpretation requires outside knowledge and the reader is open to inserting their own perspectives and arguments easily, rather than the text of the post restricting how the conclusion is reached in a predictable and logical fashion, allows for maximum flexibility. This openness is typical of memetic content more generally (Shifman, 2014), but instead of creating new iterations of the image or text, based on interpretive flexibility, these posts are transformed via addition, while maintaining the original commentary as a moving document that participates in the performance of identity within the Tumblr arena, where reblogs act as documentation of current perspectives and opinions, but always in a state that can be altered, blown apart by new introductions, or deleted altogether.
5. CONCLUSION: TUMBLR FROM THREE PERSPECTIVES

5.1 Tumblr as Platform, Experience, and Artifacts of Use

In the three preceding content chapters, I have used the SCOT framework, ethnographically informed interviews, and discourse analysis to triangulate engagement with the Tumblr platform and its users from three distinct positions that are nonetheless linked together as they describe and explicate the same digital platform from different foci. Ultimately, using these three methods allows for a richer understanding of the conflicts between Tumblr as digital platform, Tumblr account holders, and the visible artifacts produced in day to day practices when account holders and the platform together create affordances. Tumblr account holders are can be vocal about their discontent with the platform, and yet continue to use Tumblr in productive and nuanced ways.

New technologies are built on the bones of the old, and as researchers, we perhaps think too little of processes of decay and waste (Jackson, 2013). It would be unfair and premature to claim that Tumblr is in a process of decay, though the active user base on the site has been in decline (Barredo, 2017) and its popularity never reached the number of users of powerhouses like Facebook and Twitter. And yet, Tumblr account holders appear well-aware that the platform won’t last forever. Some other site will come along, and it won’t necessarily be better, but it will be different. In articulating the successes and failures alongside accounts and explications of day-to-day practices on the platforms we use, we can construct better platforms, or, at the very least as users, walk into our next platform experience better informed and equipped to be observant and critical of the structures that act upon and in conjunction with us. Latour (2005) in particular cites the moment of an “object” breaking as offering a particular occasion for revealing how
technologies previously assumed to be autonomous are in fact constructed by and in communication with human actors (p. 81).

Figure 45. Tumblr and delayed platform death.

Beginning with the social construction of technology (Bijker, Hughes, & Pinch, 1989) framework, I analyzed Tumblr’s “About” materials, accessible from the sign-up page, to understand how Tumblr seeks to shape and direct user experience by highlighting and concealing particular features. Most often, these “About” materials stressed Tumblr’s ease of use for distributing creative content and the ability to gain Followers through this distribution. By comparing these “About” materials to specific affordances (Evans, Pearce, Vitak, & Treem, 2016; Gibson, 1979; Norman, 1999) of Tumblr and how those affordances actually played out in concrete terms on the platform, I traced moments of conflict between Tumblr as an idea of a digital platform and Tumblr as a digital social space inhabited by people who put the platform into use. Tumblr’s “About” materials largely either downplayed the social expectations of the platform, such as providing little information regarding how to gain Followers, or excluded
socially focused features and affordances altogether. There was no mention in “About” materials of Asks, a feature that is largely unlike one-to-one or one-to-many communication features present on other digital platforms.

Tumblr’s “About” materials instead try to encourage new account holders to join the platform by emphasizing how many people already use Tumblr to share content, linking each other to specific posts or blogs, even before they sign up for an account. Account creation is framed as an extension of preexisting Tumblr use, rather than drawing attention to particular features and quirks that might define Tumblr participation as distinct from other social media platforms. This contradicts many of the expectations that Tumblr account holders, interviewed in chapter 3, had for the platform when they joined.

Chapter 3 re-centers the conversation around account holders’ personal experiences and narratives. Using ethnographically-informed interviews with Tumblr account holders, we worked together from the position of the user, rather than the starting position of the platform. Discussing their initial decisions to join Tumblr, decisions they make day-to-day in what content they share and who they Follow, privacy concerns, and their sense of a “Tumblr community,” these users’ responses shy away from a cohesive, overarching narrative, though they have moments of overlapping practices and concerns.

In our conversations, interview participants discussed Tumblr in terms of the Dashboard, posts they saw in a stream, curated only in so far as they were able to make decisions regarding who to Follow and who to Unfollow, oftentimes augmented by Xkit or Tumblr Savior, allowing them to exclude particular tags, even when reblogged by those they Followed. Deciding who to Follow and who to not Follow, as well as controlling (almost always with some degree of frustration) who Followed them was core to many of their privacy concerns. While some users
who had faced particularly severe harassment made use of the Block feature to try and regulate who had access to their blog, most found the feature insufficient. Far more common was the idea that not knowing in-person the majority of their Tumblr Followers and Mutuals made them feel as if their blogs being “more private,” even though they were well aware that Tumblr is actually very public. While this is by no means a universal Tumblr experience, and the publicness of Tumblr’s architecture can have grave consequences for some users (Bell, 2013; Cho, 2017), my interview participants felt as if they could be more open about themselves on Tumblr, despite the risks.

None of my participants felt that Tumblr truly constituted a “community,” but they did find affinity with other platform users, most frequently through a shared sense of humor that was described as being particularly Millennial, deadpan, and used as a coping mechanism for trauma or mental illness. More than social justice, fandom, or queerness (though all three of these played some role) a particular attitude towards humor was cited as the most unifying feature of Tumblr account holders, as least as far as participants could see on their own Dashboards and that they felt in their own connections to other users.

Finally, in chapter 4, I used discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1995) to explicate three Tumblr posts and their reblog chains in hermeneutic (Ricoeur, 1979) detail. These reblog chains each contained a combination of fandom materials, including images of characters from mass media products, and feminist concerns. Posts using fandom materials from the anime *Kill la Kill* and the video game *Nier: Automata* primarily concerned the sexualized depiction of female protagonists. A third post, beginning with a gif set of the film *The Shape of Water*, transformed through multiple reblogs as users added and subtracted intersectional identities from the post, moving from an idea of “the silent woman trope,” to representations of disability, and the ability
of other marginalized identities to speak in the film because of the muteness of the romantic leads.

These posts, often labeled “Discourse” themselves by fandom participants, are examples of how Tumblr’s technical and social realities culminate in visible practice. They reveal underlying technical features and social behaviors on the platform, and how these two aspects of digital platform experience interact. All three posts are high circulation, with over 1,000 Notes. They also simultaneously exist in multiple forms. The version of each of these reblog chains I have captured and discussed is not the only iteration that continues to circulate across the platform. Other Tumblr users encounter these same posts with different additions to the original posts (or sometimes the original post in isolation). As well as users across Tumblr encountering these posts under differing contextual conditions, and varying levels of familiarity with the source materials and knowledge regarding surrounding controversies.

I contend these posts as belonging to a Tumblr “Arena,” where the stakes for participating in discursive combat can be murky at best, and in some cases may be limited to making additions to the post simply for the sake of making an addition. Instead of focusing on off-platform outcomes, I instead consider the execution of these posts as a starting point for understanding how users on Tumblr interact with each other and construct their own identities. Participants in these posts do not engage in back-and-forth linear discussion or argument. Instead, they make their addition to the reblog, adding a statement that is generally somewhat non-specific and unsourced, relying on the viewer who encounters the post at a later date to fill in the details. Once they have made their addition, someone else might pick up the post, correct or dismiss them, or reaffirm what they have said. However, the circulation practices on Tumblr through reblogging means that the previous reblogger very often does not return to the post to
engage in dialogue with the person who appears to have “responded” to them. There is no conversation. And the post moves ever onward, waiting for the next addition. Even if a previous reblogs tries to return and respond, the affordances of the Tumblr platform may mean that users involved in the reblog chain are actually wholly unaware that someone has commented on their reblog, and that there is even an opportunity for conversation or dialogue. In this way, Tumblr differs substantially from previous online social platforms characterized by discussion forms or other mechanisms that encourage users to engage in back and forth turn-taking, one user responding directly to the next, even as interlopers also have access to the conversation, adding their interjections (Chau, 2009; Danis & Lee, 2005; Honeycutt, 2005; Smith, McLaughlin, & Osborne, 1997).

If having a discussion or argument on Tumblr is unwieldy, what does the reblogging of these posts accomplish? Coupled with the ideas expressed by interview participants, where they do not think of their blogs as being particularly curated for an audience, I argue that the reblogging of these posts that combine fandom and feminist interests (with or without adding additional commentary) are most in keeping with the idea of assemblage (Puar, 2005). They are part of a self-presentation process that is unstable, only situationally coherent, and subject to rapid formation and deformation. The addition or subtraction of a post on an account holder’s blog has the possibility of dramatically changing the interpretation of all the content that has come before, while changes in reblogging practices over time can result in dramatically altered self-presentations. However, these self-presentations are less directed or stabilized than previous examinations of personal websites/blogs or social media profiles (Liu, 2007; Papacharissi, 2002a, 2002b; Walker Rettenberg, 2014; Watkins, 2009) given the ease of reblogging content produced by others, rather than an emphasis on producing content about themselves. Instead,
content originated by other users are stitched together in an assemblage that reveals and conceals personal demographic information (such as some users who tag posts about combating racism as “I’m White,” political and social stances, and fandom interests.

Despite largely not thinking of what they reblogged in terms of self-presentation or imagined audiences (boyd, 2007; Litt, 2012; Marwick & boyd, 2011), interview participants nonetheless understood what other users reblogged as being demonstrative of their taste and views (Bourdieu, 1984; Liu, 2007; Papacharissi, 2009). Choosing who to Follow and not Follow, and who to engage with in more meaningful relationships, directly contributed to their enjoyment of Tumblr. Being able to keep up conversations with people they disagreed with was rarely spoken about. Erin, who admitted to engaging in “passive aggressive reblogs,” but also noted that most of the time, she no longer bothers engaging in conflict. But, even when not offering commentary themselves, reblogging posts such as those discussed in chapter 4 serve as a way of combining interests in social justice, feminist concerns, and fandom materials. Only a small number of users, out of the thousands who Like or reblog, might add their own commentary to the post. But through the affordances created through reblogging, iterations of these posts nonetheless participate in the assemblages constructed by many additional users, by which they demonstrate their mutable presentation as the type of person who endorses this content and/or perspective.

Without being able to engage in conversation or arguments in a straightforward way, these posts do more to contribute to the self-construction of the person reblogging them, than to actually change the perspective of other users who might disagree with the ideas advanced in them. As can be seen in the three examples discussed in detail, quite often the users who add commentary agree at least in part, with the comment that came before them. Even in agreement,
they might express hostility when adding their own addition. Rather than trying to fit these posts into a sense of coherent argument in isolation, it is more appropriate to consider them as one of the many types of content a user might reblog on a given day. A user who has not included their own commentary might simply reblog one of these posts to display approval of one or multiple of the positions presented. But these posts would appear bracketed by other content; fandom, humor, politics, selfies, observations, etc. While the multitude of content on the Dashboard might lack coherency, and the posts that appear on the Dashboard are originated by an even wider swath of the Tumblr populace than just the accounts a user follows, these reblogs nonetheless become part of the blogger’s self-presentation in that contextual moment. The post that stream by in an affective, aesthetic reel cannot easily be separated from one another (Cho, 2015) and yet interview participants felt very strongly that they were connected to other bloggers they Followed, whether or not they had interaction with them beyond a symmetric or asymmetric tie.

The mutability of this indirect self-presentation in choosing what to blog about and what to reblog may be unselfconscious as a behavior, but points towards how Tumblr offers an online space that is distinct from other platforms, while still sharing some similarities. While the Dashboard may vaguely recall a Facebook News Page in the mashing up of content, or a Twitter Feed in pulling together information posted by different users, Tumblr users themselves articulate their engagement with the platform as being distinct from their use of other sites, where they might either display a version of themselves appropriate for broader consumption, or withdraw altogether. The disengagement behaviors discussed by Light and Cassidy (2014) as applicable to other social media sites are better conceptualized on Tumblr as behaviors that make long-term engagement possible. While Tumblr account holders acknowledge that their behaviors changed over time, they largely framed these changes, such as limiting Liking and Unfollowing
particular users in terms of being able to better use Tumblr more frequently, rather than stepping away. Tumblr, in its particular set of affordances and constraints, continues to appeal to users who find other platforms too curated or restrictive. Randy, when asked about their use of other sites described their experience as “Compartmentalization, probably. Facebook is for school, Instagram is for showing others how great my life is (kidding).” Randy had specific audiences in mind when choosing what to share on Facebook or Instagram.

The number of interview participants who stressed that their Tumblr blogs were simply a collection of whatever happened to interest them at the moment reinforces the idea that Tumblr blogs allow users to shape their own presentations in ways that are flexible and contextual, and largely for themselves. While they may be aware that other users make Following decisions based on what they reblog or post about (as they were well aware that they themselves came to decisions regarding who to Follow based on reblogging) they still did not feel particularly compelled to curate, beyond those who were largely non-confrontational and did not want to invite hostility. reblogging remained for themselves, their own interests, likes and dislikes, sense of humor, and interest in social concerns, rather than outwardly directed, rather than a strict concern with negotiating imagined audiences (boyd, 2007; Litt, 2012; Litt & Hargittai, 2016; Marwick & boyd, 2011) as is most frequently considered in the case of Facebook, a platform many of my participants discussed disliking for exactly the reason that they had to more carefully watch what they posted.

5.2 Theoretical Implications and Contributions

I have focused here on the digital platform Tumblr and its particular affordances and constraints by approaching analysis from three differently centered methods. First, with a central focus on the technical platform and how the corporate entity that maintains the platform tries to
encourage particular behaviors through SCOT. Second, how users articulate their patterns of behavior and their understanding of relationships with the platform and other platform users through ethnographically-informed interviews. And finally through discourse analysis of actual posts in circulation that draw together themes developed in the first two sections, understanding how the platform and users work together in order to produce a particular genre of digital artifacts.

In applying these three methods to Tumblr architecture and practice, I explicate how Tumblr’s architecture and account holders construct and reconstruct one another in every-day practice, where users push against architectural constraints and where the platform pushes back, shaping behaviors into specific channels and creating particular digital artifacts. But these conflicts break neither the users nor the platform (at least, not yet). Instead, conflicts swell into users expressing frustration with the platform, while still acknowledging that they don’t yet have another place to go.

As stated previously, all interview participants responded that when considering their overall experience, their time on Tumblr was largely positive. While none expressed an experience that was without conflict, concern, or discomfort, on the whole, they preferred Tumblr over other social platforms available to them.

The question then arises, what is Tumblr’s appeal to these users?

The chronological Dashboard was cited as one feature that users enjoyed, as well as the mix of content they were able to view on their Dashboard by curating who they followed. Others mentioned friendships, access to information, or simply the fact that the people who followed them on Tumblr were not the same people who followed them on other social media platforms, usually a mix of irl friends and more professional contacts.
What these responses have in common is an overarching concern with control. Or what might be labeled as a perceived autonomy. If we return to actor-network theory, considering Tumblr, the platform, as a non-human actant, that nonetheless exerts some measure of influence within the network that includes the platform, Tumblr users, Tumblr bots, outside applications, widgets, media that serves as source materials for posts, etc., we are reminded that there is no true autonomy. The influence of human actors and non-human actants (which should not be considered less than human actors, simply different than) within the network cannot be easily divided. Latour (1996) cautions against comparing the actor-network too closely to a technical network, as these engineering networks are “only one of the possible final and stabilized states of an actor-network” (1996, p. 369). The more apt comparison is to Granovetter’s (1977) notion of weak ties, where nodes on the actor-network are available for action and influence, even if their connection to a more distant node may be somewhat difficult to articulate as it lies latent. Law (1992) further clarifies that the actor or actant alone should not be misrepresented as an individual entity, as most actors/actants are, in fact, actor-networks onto themselves. A “patterned network of heterogeneous relations” can just as soon be located inside or outside a human body, and come to be considered as an actor that is simultaneously also a network. Tumblr, in our example, is both an actant, and a network of interactions embedded in that actant.

Through the previous three chapters, I have explicated the actant of Tumblr, and its interaction with multiple other actors (individual users who graciously shared their experience with me) and actants (including media objects that are used as materials for Tumblr posts combining text and image, only to enter Tumblr’s churning reblogging steam and further have their interpretations and relevance transformed and manipulated through distribution and commentary). Furthermore, individual features and practices on the platform begin to reveal the
networks of relations within the Tumblr platform. The depth and breadth and intertwined-ness of these relations prevents even the barest brush with actual autonomy. But it may very well be that the complexity, the messiness of Tumblr’s code, the users who populate it, the posts that they circulate, the features that claim one use but provide another, allow the humans who use the sit to craft experiences and relationships that simulate an autonomy that they find lacking on other platforms. Participants perceived Tumblr as allowing for more autonomy, even if that autonomy came in the form of being able to change their own behaviors without the social repercussions they may encounter on Facebook, where the majority of their “Friends” consist of in-person contacts (Ellison, Steinfeld, & Lampe, 2011; Ellison, Vitak, Gray & Lampe, 2014; Marwick & boyd, 2014).

In a way, this end is reminiscent of (and connected to) Phillips and Milner’s (2017) notion of ambivalent internet. That which is ambivalent “reflects the “both, on both sides” use…cases that could go either way, in fact could go any way simultaneously.” (p. 9). The multiplicity of interpretation options for Phillips and Milner results in cases where connecting social, cultural, or political meaning to an example becomes a complicated map of possibilities and connections, without a definitive end or agreed upon result. Narrowing from the internet more broadly, down to Tumblr specifically, Tumblr’s “openness,” that it allows for much more complicated and diverse content than other social sites that may be more specialized, provides more formatting flexibility than Twitter, Facebook, or Instagram, as examples, which do not allow for customization of themes, and frees users from concerns regarding their personal and professional personas, allows for a space where ambivalence can thrive, for good, or for ill (remember that several respondents expressed unease at Tumblr continuing to host Nazi and pedophilic content).
While the space is one that can be considered ambivalent from the broader interpretive standpoint, to the individual user, who can then interact with the Tumblr actant and other Tumblr account holder actors in accordance to their own desires, experiences, and perspective, produces their own relationship with the platform that is tailored to their preferences. This isn’t to say that this tailoring process is straightforward, easy to manage, or reaches a definitive ending point. Participants continue to see their relationship with Tumblr as a messy one, but after years of use, are able to develop guidelines for themselves that allow them to engage in more positive experiences than negative ones.

Because the pattern of use they choose to adopt is only one possible network of interactions (and they can quite clearly see how their Tumblr experience can be arranged differently) account holders interact with the Tumblr actant in ways that suggest autonomy, while remaining constrained by hard-and-fast boundaries regarding what the platform can and cannot accomplish. As long as other possibilities remain visible (through conflict, broken code, upsetting past experiences, the looming specter of people and blogs they absolutely do not want to associate with) users feel as if they are making active, autonomous choices.

This is not to say that their frustrations fade into the background. If anything, the constraints they endure become even starker, as their practice butts up against obstacles they cannot overcome. Xkit, which can either be conceptualized as an actant itself or as part of the Tumblr actant-network, expanding the perceived autonomy experienced by users. Xkit, as a browser extension which allows for additional Tumblr customization, multiples the possible available relationships between user-actor and platform-actant.

While we may speak of typical patterns of behavior on Tumblr, and indeed, that has largely been my project here, labeling an entity such as “the Tumblr community,” remains
inaccurate, even as account users may forge ties, weaker and stronger, with one another through the tools available on the platform. We are not speaking of a singular online form or close-knit interest group, as has typically been the subject of online community research (see Baym, 2000; Kendall 2002; Markham 1998; Pearce & Artemesia, 2009 as examples of studies I am indebted to as they shaped my approach, but ultimately focus on much more structurally bounded online communities). To claim that there is a “Tumblr community” broadly speaking, obfuscates the fact that individual users experience perceived autonomy in relation to the platform, and that relation constrains and allows for the social connections they build with other account holders.

We do not speak of “the Facebook community” or “the Twitter community” writ large, even as we may consider smaller social groupings that use the platform to facilitate community building and interaction (see especially Black Twitter (Brock, 2012; Florini, 2014, Sharma, 2013), which can be further delineated into smaller groupings as users seek out each other based on affinity and shared interests). Instead of pushing for the idea of a “Tumblr community,” it remains more productive, and intellectually flexible, to consider Tumblr users as building experiences from available materials, and seeking out those who share their interests and utilize the platform in a manner similar to themselves. By and large, my participants maintain blogs with similar end results, even if their politics and fandoms differ. They combine mixed content, including fandom and social justice posts, aesthetics and their own personal commentary, and are drawn largely to other users who combine personal and media interests into a single digital space. Many of them participate, or have participated, in aspects of the Arena, even if over time they engage less and less with particular arguments they may find exhausting. They still reblog such posts and add them to their own blogs, placing them onto the Dashboards of those they Follow, in a self-constructive performance that they can at least maintain some control over,
even if the ultimate arbitrator is the limits of Tumblr’s code (augmented by Xkit and/or other extensions, but there is still a limit to what can be done).

I have presented an analysis of a digital space that is simultaneously successful and a failure, and account holders themselves, through both interviews and the digital artifacts they leave behind, are able to articulate their mixed feelings about the platform. Other digital platforms can and should be assessed using a similar framework, which tries to triangulate between architectural intention, user desire, and documentable artifact. The three methods I have used here in combination can be applied to different online platforms in hopes of discerning the ways in which we act upon the technologies that surround us, while those technologies also act on us.

Understanding the mutual shaping of technology and social interaction remains undoubtedly key to our appraisal of technology in critical and resistive ways. Social platforms do not simply rise out of the ether. They are constructed by people with social, cultural, and personal biases. And these assumptions are quite literally written into the affordances and constraints that are carried forward into our next platforms. The next David Karp, or Mark Zuckerberg, or Tom Anderson, learns from the digital social platforms they experienced themselves as users and creators, designed by people who worked from their own particular set of assumptions, shaped by the technical and social experiences they encountered. Karp learned from other platforms, he crafted Tumblr’s initial feature set with Facebook’s social climate in mind (Walker, 2012). But the end result of Tumblr, despite being different, cannot conclusively be described as better.
5.3 Limitations and Future Directions

The present study comes with a number of limitations. First and foremost, it was not designed to assess the connection between behaviors on Tumblr and associated political actions in “real-life” spaces. There is a rich body of work regarding connectivism and the links between activism online and the consequences they precipitate in larger movements (Bennett, & Segerberg, 2012; Castells, 2009; Gerbaudo, 2018; Gerbaudo & Treré, 2015; Papacharissi, 2015). Rather, I have remained largely focused on the connections between Tumblr, Tumblr users, and their experiences on the platform, even as some interview participants expressed that behaviors on Tumblr had potential in-person consequences.

I also had no direct access to decision-makers in regards to the vision Tumblr Corp had for the platform. Here I have used the “About” pages (in chapter 2) as an indirect means of assessing the way in which Tumblr presents a public face to potential account holders. There are other public faces that can be utilized in a similar fashion, such as publically available interview materials with Karp and others (some of which I have integrated) and attempting to access and interview those individuals who have been employed at Tumblr over the last ten years.

The number of participants who completed interviews remained low (14 completed). While this allowed for exceptionally personal, in-depth interactions with interview participants, and “randomizing” participants in qualitative studies has not proven to yield richer results (Noy, 2008), conducting additional interviews with participants who are not so closely tied to my existing contacts would allow for additional perspectives and voices to be heard. Particularly interviews with non-fandom Tumblr users would illuminate the positions of daily users who may have markedly different experiences to the participants who contributed to this study. Tumblr hosts literally millions of blogs, and while fandom participants continue to make up a large,
visible portion of those blogs, there are additional groupings who may not easily intersect with fandom, and thus remained largely invisible in my discussions with account holders.

Also, having essentially piloted interviews with this project, a number of refinements should be made to the interview questions themselves. Privacy emerged as one of the topics that participants were most excited to discuss, but they chose to frame their discussions in terms of privacy from other users. Knowing now that Tumblr users are intensely interested in privacy, working from an existing privacy framework, such as Ellison, Vitak, Steinfield, Gray and Lampe (2011) do in their assessment of privacy and social capital would result in more specific, can yield pointed questions regarding users’ privacy concerns. As I remained more interested in platform broadly, my current interview topics, while including questions regarding privacy, were general enough as to not force interview responses to adhere to a particular perspective. Armed now with preliminary data, I can now more effectively craft interview procedures that address privacy more substantially.

Rather than casting such a wide net, as I have done in the present study, focusing more narrowly on topics that this initial participant pool found particularly compelling (including privacy, conflict, brokenness/glitching) with larger participant pools would allow me to produce more nuanced, specific critique of “life with Tumblr.” The risk (and reward) of qualitative research was not knowing exactly what I would find, particularly as it came to the interviews. Now, with a better understanding of the overview of topics and concerns that Tumblr users are most passionate about, future research can more directly address these points of interest. Broader overviews of Tumblr, such as I have produced here, are still rare. And in attempting to complete a “big picture,” qualitative project, I’ve exposed areas where deeper engagement prove necessary.
Finally, the timeframe of data collection (barring my long-term use of the platform, which informed my analysis at every step) was very brief, spanning from late Summer 2017, when IRB approved procedures, until early 2018. This period was tumultuous for Tumblr, as it followed the sale of Yahoo! to Verizon, and as I am writing this conclusion, Tumblr’s physical offices in New York are in the process of moving. Suspicions of Verizon’s intentions for the platform remain high among users, but addressing these concerns directly was not feasible, given that they deviated too far from the research questions with which I began. However, the specific question of Tumblr users’ reactions towards the takeover by Verizon is crucial for further research, as my participants here already expressed unease with Tumblr’s existing practices and ability to manage their own platform.

Tumblr is a platform in motion, one that can be captured as snapshots, as interactions, as arrested images and account holder positions. What this project does provide is boundaries around a particular digital space, and signposts as to where account holders and developers spend their time and effort. Perhaps there is no better platform to be had, as user expectation and technical features will never be a perfect one-to-one match. And it may be that we should not strive for that perfect coupling between platform and user, lest we forget to criticize the structures that facilitate our social interactions with others. But still, technologies exist in a history, one that will always be full of holes and gaps, untruths and myths used to fill in the spaces we can’t quite get right. In developing methodologies that allow us to more fully understand the conflicts that exist between platform and user, and how these frictions perpetuate particular perspectives and behaviors, we can perhaps move into the next platform with a better understanding of why we behave the way we do, and how we might learn to use platforms in ways that we, as individual users and broader societies, find most productive. It is my hope that
we, as both users and developers of social platforms, can stop ourselves from our technologies and histories leading us down paths we did not intend to follow.
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APPENDICES
APPENDIX A

Glossary of Common Tumblr Terms

Anon – Used to denote Asks or Submissions that are sent “anonymously.” If “allow anonymous Asks” is turned on by the account holder, other people can send Asks without being logged into Tumblr, or, even if logged in, the Ask sender can remove their blog name by pressing a toggle switch.

Asks – Allow Tumblr account holders (an non-account holders, if “Anon” is turned on) to send 500 character texts to another user. The Ask receiver can then choose to either publish the Ask publically, or respond privately. If the Ask was sent on Anon, the receiver can only publish. The sender has no control over whether or not their Ask is published or replied to privately. Images, video, and links cannot be sent via Ask. Without xkit installed, there is no Outbox.

Dashboard – A reverse chronological feed of all new posts and reblogged posts created and shared by the blogs that you Follow. Even if an account manages multiple Side Blogs, there is only one Dashboard. A small number of ads and promoted posts can be inserted into the Dashboard by Tumblr.

Follower – Used to refer to any blog account that Follows your account. On Tumblr, users can only Follow from their Main, and not their Side Blogs. Generally used to either denote the total number of people following your blog, or users who Follow your blog but you do not Follow back (asymmetric ties).

Main – Used to refer to an account holder’s primary Tumblr blog name. A single Tumblr account can manage multiple blog names, but the account’s Main is the display name for all Liking activity and Following. This name, like all other Tumblr blog names, can be changed at any time.

Messages – Tumblr introduced a direct messaging feature in 2015. This feature allows for private one-to-one, ongoing communication with other Tumblr users via a small chat window that can be opened and closes on the right-hand side of the Dashboard.

Mutual – Used to refer to a symmetric tie where both you Follow the other user and they Follow you back. Mutuais are frequently distinguished from Followers more generally.

Notes – Cumulative number of Likes, Reblogs, and Replies a post has received. Viewable at the bottom of each post on the Dashboard. A small number of circulating posts have no Notes (despite having Reblogs, Likes, and Replies) because of Tumblr glitches.

Reblog – One of Tumblr’s key features is the ability to Reblog entire posts created by other users to appear on your own blog. These posts then also appear on the Dashboard of all account holders who Follow the blog who Reblogged the post. Similar to Twitter’s retweet function. When Reblogging a post, the user has the option of adding additional text, images, video, links, etc.
APPENDIX A (continued)

Reply – Feature that allows users to add a text response to a post without Reblogging the post. Replies are visible from the Notes of a post. Clicking on the notes opens up a small window showing Replies, Reblogs, and Likes. This feature was introduced in 2015, removed, then returned in 2016.

Side Blogs – Tumblr allows a single account to manage multiple blogs in addition to the Main. These Side Blogs can be Followed individually by other users. For example, a user may have a Main where they post a mix of different content, and then a Side Blog where they only post their own artwork. Other users can elect to only Follow the Side Blog.

Submissions – Allow one Tumblr user to send a new, complete post to another user. The receiving user can then publish the post to their own blog in its unedited entirety, or remove or add content to it. Images, text, and video posts can be sent via Submission. Submissions can be both “on Anon” or restricted to all Tumblr account holders, or just Followers.
APPENDIX B

Note on Xkit

As is apparent, particularly in the interview materials discussed in chapter 3, many participants who primarily use the desktop site to view their Dashboard (as opposed to the mobile app) use browser extensions and plug-ins to alter their user experience of Tumblr. “New xkit” is the most widely used of these browser tools.

“New xkit” is an open source browser extension that allows for the implementation of dozens of add-ons to “tweak” various aspects of Tumblr’s interface (adding an outbox to Tumblr’s Ask system, time stamping posts, blocking particular tags from ever showing on your Dashboard, removing suggested posts, are all possible with Xkit). The majority of interview who use the desktop site either use “xkit” (technically “new xkit”) or have tried to install the extension but ran into technical issues. The prominence of Xkit led The Daily Dot to comment that the “Xkit guy” (Atesh Yurdakul) is “Likened to a god” (Romano, 2014) and had his own “fandom” (Romano, 2013b). “New xkit” is no longer developed by Yurdakul, who withdrew from Tumblr in 2015.

I primarily utilize the extension to 1) reply directly to replies on my posts, and 2) block notifications on my own “viral” posts, which would otherwise make my Dashboard unreadable at times of high traffic. During data collection, I also occasionally turned on timestamp functions, allowing me to see when particular posts originated, as Tumblr has no built-in timestamp feature. I have turned timestamps back off before any screenshots that appear in this study, as they are not native to the Tumblr architecture. While some interview respondents reported using the timestamp feature, it was not a feature that they had particularly strong feelings about (as opposed to Blacklist, Replies, and Block Notifications, which were considered by some to be more critical to improving Tumblr’s usability).
APPENDIX C

Interview Participant Demographic Information

Doan – 20, Turkish, male, bisexual
Vera – 27, Argentinian, female, bisexual
Tessa – 26, White, female, bisexual
Ivan – 22, White Slav, agender, pansexual
Elijah – 22, White, afab nonbinary genderfluid, demi/pansexual
Mina – 33, Taiwanese-American, cis woman, bisexual
Elliot – 23, White, nonbinary, gay
Missati – 29, Black, cis female, bisexual
Constance – 26, Mexican-American, woman, panromantic demisexual
Randy – 27, White, trans, bisexual
E – 21, White, nonbinary, aromantic pansexual
Amy – 32, White British, nonbinary, gay
Anuli – 19, Black, female, bisexual
Erin – 22, White, female, asexual

All participants were asked to give their age, race or ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation without pre-determined categories. Other than minor adjustments for consistency (capitalization, hyphenation), I have preserved the text of how they personally identify. Participants were also asked to provide their own pseudonym.
APPENDIX D

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS
AT CHICAGO

Office for the Protection of Research Subjects (OPRS)
Office of the Vice Chancellor for Research (MC 672)
203 Administrative Office Building
1737 West Polk Street
Chicago, Illinois 60612-7227

Exemption Granted

September 1, 2017

Indira Neill, MA
Communication
1007 W. Harrison Street
1140 BSB, M/C 132
Chicago, IL 60612
Phone: (312) 996-3187 / Fax: (312) 413-2125

RE: Research Protocol # 2017-0913
“Tumblr: Social and Technical Affordances and Constraints, Day-to-day Interaction on the Platform Interviews”

Sponsors: None

Dear Indira Neill:

Your Claim of Exemption was reviewed on September 1, 2017 and it was determined that your research protocol meets the criteria for exemption as defined in the U. S. Department of Health
Exemption Period: September 1, 2017 – September 1, 2020
Performance Site: UIC
Subject Population: Adult (18+ years) subjects only
Number of Subjects: 30

The specific exemption category under 45 CFR 46.101(b) is:

(2) Research involving the use of educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures or observation of public behavior, unless: (i) information obtained is recorded in such a manner that human subjects can be identified, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects; and (ii) any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research could reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, or reputation.

You are reminded that investigators whose research involving human subjects is determined to be exempt from the federal regulations for the protection of human subjects still have responsibilities for the ethical conduct of the research under state law and UIC policy. Please be aware of the following UIC policies and responsibilities for investigators:

Amendments You are responsible for reporting any amendments to your research protocol that may affect the determination of the exemption and may result in your research no longer being eligible for the exemption that has been granted.

Record Keeping You are responsible for maintaining a copy all research related records in a secure location in the event future verification is necessary, at a minimum these documents include: the research protocol, the claim of exemption application, all questionnaires, survey instruments, interview questions and/or data collection instruments associated with this research protocol, recruiting or advertising materials, any consent forms or information sheets given to subjects, or any other pertinent documents.

Final Report When you have completed work on your research protocol, you should submit a final report to the Office for Protection of Research Subjects (OPRS).
Information for Human Subjects UIC Policy requires investigators to provide information about the research to subjects and to obtain their permission prior to their participating in the research. The information about the research should be presented to subjects as detailed in the research protocol, application and supporting documents.

Please be sure to use your research protocol number (listed above) on any documents or correspondence with the IRB concerning your research protocol.

We wish you the best as you conduct your research. If you have any questions or need further help, please contact me at (312) 355-2908 or the OPRS office at (312) 996-1711.

Sincerely,

Charles W. Hoehne, B.S., C.I.P.
Assistant Director, IRB #7
Office for the Protection of Research Subjects

cc: Zozo-Angeliki Papacharissi, Communication, M/C 132
    Adrienne Massanari, Communication, M/C 132
Exemption Granted

September 1, 2017

Indira Neill, MA
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1007 W. Harrison Street
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Chicago, IL 60612
Phone: (312) 996-3187 / Fax: (312) 413-2125

RE: Research Protocol # 2017-0914
   “Tumblr: Social and Technical Affordances and Constraints, Day-to-day Interaction on the Platform”

Sponsors: None

Dear Indira Neill:

Your Claim of Exemption was reviewed on September 1, 2017 and it was determined that your research protocol meets the criteria for exemption as defined in the U. S. Department of Health and Human Services Regulations for the Protection of Human Subjects [(45 CFR 46.101(b)]. You may now begin your research.
Exemption Period: September 1, 2017 – September 1, 2020

Performance Site: UIC

Subject Population: Adult (18+ years) subjects only

Number of Subjects: 200

The specific exemption category under 45 CFR 46.101(b) is:

(2) Research involving the use of educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures or observation of public behavior, unless: (i) information obtained is recorded in such a manner that human subjects can be identified, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects; and (ii) any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research could reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, or reputation.

You are reminded that investigators whose research involving human subjects is determined to be exempt from the federal regulations for the protection of human subjects still have responsibilities for the ethical conduct of the research under state law and UIC policy. Please be aware of the following UIC policies and responsibilities for investigators:

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Sincerely,

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Fundamentals of Media Writing, University of Illinois at Chicago, Spring Semester 2012.

Introduction to Communication, University of Illinois at Chicago, Summer Term 2014, 2015, 2016.


New Media and Communication, Loyola University Chicago, Summer Term 2016; Fall Term 2017 (online).

Web Design and Usability, Loyola University Chicago, Spring Term 2017 (online).

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Journals


Book Chapters


Proceedings Papers

Kruzan, K., Appignani, T., & Neill Hoch, I. (2014). Avatars as ghosts in MMORPGs. Selected papers from Internet research 15: AOIR.


Neill Hoch, I. (2014). Open for prompts, open for fills: Creative deployment of social network sites into fandom kink memes. Selected papers from Internet research 15: AOIR.