Fragmentary Girls: Selective Expression on the Tumblr Platform

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Fragmentary Girls: Selective Expression on the Tumblr Platform

A Thesis Presented

by

SAMANTHA SHOREY

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

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Department of Communication
Fragmentary Girls: Selective Expression on the Tumblr Platform

A Thesis Presented

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ABSTRACT

FRAGMENTARY GIRLS:

SELECTIVE EXPRESSION ON THE TUMBLR PLATFORM

MAY 2015

SAMANTHA SHOREY, B.A. UNIVERSITY OF SAN DIEGO
M.A. UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AMHERST

DIRECTED BY: Dr. Emily West

Empirically based on a series of focus groups with college-age women, this thesis examines how the affordances of anonymity and audience specificity facilitate both intimate personal expression and political participation on the Tumblr platform. In dialogue with literature on self-disclosure and privacy, I seek to broaden our understanding of the mediated contexts that provide space for women’s voices online.

The privacy afforded by Tumblr’s registration policies allows users more flexibility in terms of self-presentation than sites such as Facebook, which are necessarily linked to one’s offline identity through “real name only” policies. The use of pseudonyms contributes to a larger culture of anonymity on the platform, emboldening users to express themselves more freely and with less consequence. Specifically, Tumblr norms encourage the communication of emotions other than happiness or significant “life events” – instead providing a space for girls to express culturally devalued emotions such as sadness and anger. These kinds of intimate and cathartic expressions were made to an (imagined) audience of close friends and strangers in which parents and acquaintances were importantly absent.

The reduced pressure of explanation, a limited (often like-minded) audience and the lowered-stakes of anonymity, are all also key features that encouraged feminist expression online. For focus group participants, the possibility of back-and-forth Facebook debates with relatives or former classmates kept them quiet. They described these interactions as exhausting, not as true conversations but as times when they needed to give long explanatory defenses as to why their concerns were issues at all. While debate is often assumed to be as a positive, constructive element of political discourse, this research calls into question the ways in which these ideals contribute to the silencing of women online and ask us to rethink what it means to say that “the personal is political.”

Keywords: Tumblr, Audience, Anonymity, Expression, Blogging, Feminism
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CHAPTER I
CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

A. Introduction

At twenty-one, Smith college student Sylvia Plath hesitantly described herself as a “passionate, fragmentary girl.” Writing in her diary, she implored the imagined reader: “please don’t ask me who I am” (p. 163). Sylvia is the patron saint of deep-feeling college girls, especially in Western Massachusetts, where Smith College is located. Her words are everywhere in the small New England town: library collections display her letters, quotes are sharpied onto walls. Online, she’s a fixture of Tumblr blogs. Her words do some of the work for micro-blog curators, providing familiar expressions of first love, fear of the future, the desire to disappear.

The time girls spend in college, typically from ages 18 to 22, is a significant period of personal growth. The process is fraught and complicated. Girls are faced with their own experiences, social pressure, and messages from society writ-large in deciding who and how they should be. Yet self-expression during this time is often dismissed as overly emotional, attention seeking or irrational.

In today’s digital-media environment, people of all ages increasingly turn to social media for expression and connection. For young people especially, social media can be a place for seeking community and understanding. However, the elevated stakes of online expression temper the potential for openness, sharing, and disclosure on social network sites. “Media literate” young people are very aware that the things they do online have consequences. Statements made on social networking sites can be wide reaching, permanent, and more closely tied to one’s identity than even face-to-face interactions.
Whereas Sylvia wrote in her journal, college-age women now take to the Internet. Yet, here they’re faced with conflicting desires for connection and privacy. How do girls share intimate feelings, knowing that with a few clicks and a search engine parents or casual acquaintances can view them? It is at this intersection we find Tumblr – a microblogging platform that’s known for being a youthful, visual, emotionally laden online space.

This project focuses on two central affordances of the Tumblr Platform: anonymity and audience specificity. In Chapter 2, “Stranger and Friends,” I focus on the privacy afforded by Tumblr’s registration policies, which allow users more flexibility in terms of self-presentation than sites such as Facebook, which are necessarily linked to one’s offline identity through “real name only” policies. The use of pseudonyms contributes to a larger culture of anonymity on Tumblr, emboldening users—as they tell us—to express themselves more freely and with less consequence. Tumblr norms encourage the communication of emotions other than happiness or significant “life events” – instead providing a space for girls to express culturally devalued emotions such as sadness and anger. These kinds of intimate and cathartic expressions are made to an (imagined) audience of close friends and strangers in which parents and acquaintances were importantly absent.

In Chapter 3, “All the Feels,” I outline how this limited, community-like audience encourages alternate forms of online expression. While emotional expression felt unwelcome, even viewed as “attention seeking,” on other social networking sites, participants felt that their statements on Tumblr neither required nor desired a response. Additionally, because interaction on Tumblr almost exclusively occurs through
“reblogging” to ones’ own Tumblr page, reactions are perceived as empathetic – contributing to feelings of understanding and support rather than the need for explanation or attention.

Of particular interest was the way that this audience created a space for both personal and politically feminist expression online. For focus group participants, the possibility of back-and-forth Facebook debates with relatives or former classmates kept them quiet. They described these interactions not as true conversations but as exhausting, as times when they needed to give long explanatory defenses as to why their concerns (about sexuality, patriarchy, systematic racism) were issues at all. With this project, I want to broaden our understanding of the mediated contexts that provide space for girl’s voices online. More specifically I argue that offline-identity- based social networks limit the tentative, messy, out-loud exploration of one’s own feelings and ideas.

The vast majority of social media scholarship has focused on Facebook, a site that requires users’ first and last name. Naturally, this complicates privacy – collapsing one’s offline and online identity into a single “self.” This seems like the obvious future of the Internet at times: a completely integrated, identity-based system that is not only likely, but also imminent. Yet, there are platforms like Tumblr where digital identities remain as nebulous as the earliest days of online interaction. This project is an effort to open a space for acknowledging the differing ways social media platforms can and do take shape.
B. Basics of the Tumblr Platform

Tumblr is a blogging platform that specializes in “short form blogging.” As of October 2013, there are 64 billion posts created by 141 million users (Tumblr “About,” 2014). That comes out to over 400 posts per user. On a Tumblr, bits of information are collected to make a meaningful whole. Images and words are often lifted out of their original context and reassembled like a collage, next to other decontextualized images and words. As the name implies, viewers of Tumblr pages move through content quickly and easily - each picture “tumbling” the user into the next.

The name “Tumblr” is taken from the practice of “tumblblogging,” which predates the invention of microblogging platforms. On traditional “long form” blogging platforms - such as the early blog host, Angelfire - bloggers collected bits of media and blogged them in rapid succession (Davis, 2008). Yet visually, the existing technology worked against this practice. Blogging platforms were designed for a “one at a time” type format and were text-centric, rather than designed for a collection of images and quotes.

Tumblr was founded in 2006 by software wunderkind David Karp, in an effort to solve layout and posting problems “with an aesthetic sense” (Davis, 2008). Karp sought to design a platform where users could easily post their own content and the website would take care of the formatting. Tumblr templates arrange images and text in aesthetically attractive grid patterns, resizing as necessary to fit the layout (see Fig. 1).
In an article titled “The 5 Keys to Tumblr for Media Outlets,” *The Atlantic* notes that quotes that are “short and telling” do the best on Tumblr because they “diffuse easily through the system” (Madrigal, 2012). Tumblr, perhaps better than any other platform, captures and capitalizes on Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford and Joshua Green’s (2013) theory of “spreadable media.” Jenkins, Ford and Green define spreadability as “the potential – both technical and cultural – for audiences to share content for their own purposes, sometimes with the permission of rights holders, sometimes against their wishes” (Jenkins et al., 2013, p. 3). Jenkins and his co-authors emphasize that web content can’t be thought of merely in terms of popularity and audience. Traditional media models rely on “destination viewing” whereas spreadability focuses on the ease with which content moves to viewers (p. 5). The ease with which images can be uploaded or reblogged –
and thus “spread” – is a central feature of Tumblr websites. “Reblogs” of photos often rank in the thousands.

Tumblr’s popularity is due, in large part, to how easy it is to create and curate content. Tumblr has been described as being part way between Twitter and blogging: it allows users to maintain a blog, with no more involvement than typing a single short statement or, in most cases, a push of a button (Madrigal “The 5 Keys to Tumblr for Media Outlets,” 2012).

Recent research by the Pew Internet and American Life Project suggests that long-form blogging has “lost its luster” for young Internet users. The number of people ages 18-29 who keep a traditional blog decreased 15% between 2006 and 2009 (Lenhart et al., 2010). Instead, young adults have turned to microblogging platforms to communicate about their lives.

Early adopters of Tumblr were – and are – primarily teenage and college age Internet users. Tumblr entered the mainstream in 2010 when businesses and print media outlets, such as Rolling Stone and The New York Times, “caught wind” of the website and created Tumbrls of their own (Wortham, 2010). For corporations, creating a Tumblr page became a way to speak to a highly valued demographic. The ease with which information is shared on Tumblr is a dream for businesses seeking to gain visibility. Furthermore, unlike paid advertisements on social networking sites such as Facebook, branded content appears native when it’s reblogged to a personal Tumblr. It doesn’t appear in a separate space designated for advertising (as with sidebar ads on traditional blogs) and there is no subtext marking it as an advertisement.
Yet, despite the massive popularity of Tumblr, the platform has been slow to monetize. Founder David Karp was publicly very hesitant to introduce advertisements to Tumblr. He was quoted in 2010 article in the LA Times as saying “we’re pretty opposed to advertising. It really turns our stomachs” (Milian, 2010). But in May 2013, shortly after Yahoo purchased Tumblr for 1.1 billion dollars, the Tumblr homepage was opened to advertisements (de la Merced et al., 2013).

Karp has remained critical of the advertising on other SNS sites, recently calling them “devoid of creativity” in the keynote speech of the 2012 AdAge Digital Conference.¹ He is seeking to challenge this by applying the same aesthetic sense that founded the platform to the advertising agenda. Rather than text heavy blocks in sidebars, advertising on Tumblr is designed with a focus on a user-engagement and making people “feel something for the brand” (Walker, 2012).

C. Literature Review

“Media” is plural. It’s one of the first things you learn as a communication major: that even though it’s the media, it’s really multiple. Like the people. So, when we theorize social media we really mean social medias. Social media are a type of media, defined by a set of “features and tools that enable peer-to-peer communication” (Ellison & Vitak, 2014). With this in mind, it becomes clear that making claims about social

¹ Though, in light of his previous comments in the LA Times, his mere appearance at the conference earned him the title of “biggest business stance reversal” in the Ad-Age recap.
media is contingent on these “tools and features” – the functionality of which varies across platforms.

Perhaps the most often quoted line of communication scholarship is Marshall McLuhan’s “the medium is the message.” In *Understanding Media: the Extensions of Man*, McLuhan (1994) argued that it was the medium itself – not simply the content – that should be the object of study. In contemporary scholarship, McLuhan’s advice has gone so far as to encourage some scholars to theorize “the Internet” as a unique form with its own set of possibilities and problems. Yet, the many distinct platforms that exist in the vast virtual space have been (often necessarily) conceptualized with a pastiche of scholarship on differing sites and services under generalizable claims about the nature of social media. I make this point not to argue that platform-focused work can’t be applied to different permutations of Internet communication. But rather, I seek to refocus our analysis on what the particular capacities of these platforms make possible.

This project recognizes the qualities – the affordances – of the Tumblr platform. Speaking broadly, affordances are properties of particular mediated environments that shape, but don’t dictate, the form of participant engagement (boyd, 2010). Viewing the mechanisms of social media in this way means occupying a middle ground between deterministic and social-constructionist conceptions of technology (Baym, 2010, p. 41). These two perspectives are at either pole of an ongoing debate about the impact of technology in society. Technological determinists argue that the primary power is in technology, with the nature and qualities of a medium essentially and irrevocably changing how people communicate with one another. Alternately, proponents of a social-
constructivist viewpoint argue that the power belongs to people, who use technologies to fulfill their communicative needs (Baym, 2010).

In between these opposing viewpoints is what Internet researcher Nancy Baym (2010) has called the “Social Shaping Perspective.” From this perspective, researchers consider the specific possibilities and constraints offered by a technology — and how the possibilities and constraints are adopted or reworked in the everyday life of users (Baym, 2010, p. 45). These possibilities are called “affordances,” a word which indicates that technological capabilities enable certain kinds of communication but that they’re also used in creative, unanticipated ways (p. 44).²

Throughout this research, I will mostly compare user practices on Tumblr to the social networking site Facebook. I do this for two reasons: the first being that Facebook is far and away the most popular social networking site in the world. Internet users spend twice as much time on Facebook as they do on all other social media networks combined (Madrigal “The Case for Facebook,” 2012). Secondly, and likely because of this, the majority of Internet research on social networking sites has also focused on Facebook.

There are basic differences in the platform characteristics of these two sites. Tumblr is a blogging platform. Blogs are typically focused on a topic, or a collection of

² In this sense, Tumblr practices can be thought of as co-constructed. For example, Jonathan Sterne (2003) uses the example of the turntable, a technology originally made to play back music, which was then creatively used to remix and create “new” songs by DJs. Of course, this was only possible through specific elements built into the technology itself (in the case of turntables, the mechanism that allows for simultaneous playback) which, in retrospect, seems like an obvious, even endemic, function of the object. Yet, operating a turntable in this way is a practice created and normalized by turntable users. (p. 373). Sterne’s perspective is useful for thinking through the distinct ways that tumbloggers use the platform.
topics. Alternately, Facebook was originally designed as a college directory, focused on the identity and personal information of individual users.

Yet, beyond the platforms’ origins, the dividing line between what constitutes a blog and what constitutes a social network has become almost too blurry to manage. In 2008, Jill Walker Rettberg defined blogs as “a frequently updated website consisting of dated entries in reverse chronological order so that the most recent post appears first” (Rettberg, 2008, p. 32). Today, this definition could describe a blog or Facebook. Both platforms allow users to announce their activities or current mood - on Facebook through the “status update” function, on Tumblr through text posts. Both platforms allow users to upload personal photos.

Blogs, which were once thought of as a single-subject oriented collection of commentary (e.g. political blogs, news blogs) are now most commonly used for personal reasons. In a study by the Pew Internet and American Life Project, 37% of bloggers said that “my life and experiences” were the primary topic of their blog (Lenhart and Fox, 2006). Additionally, through the updated functionality of Facebook, content can also easily be circulated on the platform - a feature that once set Tumblr apart. Through Facebook’s “share” function one can repost links and photos originally posted by another user, much like the reblogging on Tumblr.

All of this is to say, that comparisons between Tumblr and Facebook can’t simply be written off as a category error. The capabilities of these platforms are increasingly similar. Yet, there are still pronounced differences in the way that they’re used. Focus

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3 Blogger’s personal lives were by far the most popular topic, with “government and politics” coming in second at 11 percent (Lenhart and Fox, 2006).
group participants often contrasted their practices on Tumblr to that of Facebook, differentiating the way they identified themselves, disclosed their feelings and perceived the self disclosure of others. As I’ll discuss throughout the following chapters, this is due both to the subtle variations in the platforms’ design, policies and the norms constructed by those who use it.

**D. Research Questions: Tumblr and the Audience**

Initially, this project was motivated by a simple research question: What makes Tumblr an attractive platform for college-age women? In a mediated environment where even new social-media platforms with an extraordinary amount of financial and social capital fail to amass a considerable following (Google Plus, and more recently Ello, e.g.) it seemed misguided to assume that Tumblr simply provided a similar but alternative version of Facebook.

On the other hand, Tumblr was also capturing a cohort of college-age women who were turning away from traditional blogging; 2014 (the year I started doing this research) was deemed “the death of the blog” by Jason Kottke, curator and author of the popular liberal-arts blog Kottke.org⁴. In a series by Harvard’s Nieman Journalism Lab, Kottke is quoted as saying “In 1997, wired teens created online diaries, and in 2004 the blog was king. Today, teens are about as likely to start a blog (over Instagramming or Snapchatting) as they are to buy a music CD. Blogs are for 40-somethings with kids” (Kottke, 2013). Was blogging really dead? I, like my research participants, started

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⁴ Adding significance to this claim is that Kottke.org is one of the longest running blogs on the web. It’s been written for 16 years.
blogging as a college student back in 2009. For me and many of my female peers, the blog I kept featured writing about my life, personal snapshots, and also a collection of quotes and images. My blog was hosted on what would now be considered a “long-form” blog platform, but the posts were often micro-blog like; recycling bits of media that I’d found from other blogs. I still saw girls doing this in the college town where I lived. But, now they called it “Tumblr.”

Pilot study research indicated that Tumblr was especially attractive to college-age women because others on the platform were perceived to be more similar to themselves than other social networking sites – both in terms of age and interests – and they could use the site anonymously. Through the series of focus groups, more analytic questions evolved: What are the key affordances of the Tumblr platform, compared to other social media? What are the norms for identity and expression? And how do platform design and user-policies contribute to these norms?

Of special interest was the co-construction of an audience-specific space, in order to meet girls’ desire for both connection and privacy. Early on it became clear that anonymity was a central concern for participants. Users viewed Tumblr as site specific, mostly separate from other SNS and from their offline social lives. In what ways did this shape how and what they shared about themselves? More broadly, what could this tell us about how Internet users carve out spaces to fit their needs for connection, expression, and information?
E. Active Audiences Online

Tumblr pages, while personal, are also public. Users are aware that the content they post can be viewed by others, and thus has communicative potential. The publicness of Tumblr pages means that attention must be paid to the Tumblr audience, specifically the ways in which the known and presumed audience affects how and what users disclose.

Furthermore, most Tumblr users are acting as an audience for content even when they are also constructing it. The nature of the Tumblr platform means that curators of personal webpages are drawing from already existing images, commonly viewing the item through their dashboard, after another user has posted it. When a Tumblr user is “tumbling” they are seamlessly switching between the roles of audience and producer: viewing content, reposting it, imagining the audience of the content they’ve reblogged, and also occupying the role of audience for someone else.

For this reason, the theoretical foundation of this project is influenced by Hall’s (2007) model of encoding/decoding, in which coded messages are seen as “symbolic vehicles” (p. 508). For Hall, meaning occurs on two levels: the literal denotative and associative connotative. Understanding of coded messages depends on the level of “symmetry” between the original meaning intended by the sender and the meaning interpreted by the receiver (p. 510). Hall’s work inspired a legacy of researchers seeking to understand how audiences create meaning from media texts. Although his work was focused primarily on pre-digital technologies, his conceptualization of the active audience has been instrumental to continuing cultural studies scholarship. Theorists who work from the active audience perspective think of audiences as people who are involved
with media texts; they actively make meaning rather than just receiving it from the message sender (Chandler and Munday, 2011). In recent years, Hall’s conception of the active audience has been increasingly relevant as aggregation and curation continue to blur the lines between media producers and consumers.

In *Encoding/Decoding*, Hall (2007) asserts that a sign is very rarely just denotative. It’s a point that gives weight to Tumblr blogs that could be potentially written-off as “just a collection of pictures.” Though the images and text are easily circulated, they are purposefully selected by users. In the digital age, people increasingly “interact through sharing meaningful bits of media content” (Jenkins et al., 2013, p. 11). Articles are forwarded through e-mail and videos are posted on Facebook walls. Even without additional commentary, simply receiving a link can lead a person to consider the range of potential meanings in a text (Jenkins et al., 2013). When sharing media content, senders must consider what it says about their relationship to the recipient and what it says about themselves.

For Stuart Hall (2007), the audience is “both the source and receiver,” as symbolic messages are made with an audience in mind. Because Tumblr is not a directed form of communication, one of my primary interests for this project is to explore how users of Tumblr imagine the Tumblr audience.

To some extent, online interaction (outside of directed communication, such as e-mail) has always required the imagining of an audience. Even in the days of Usenet groups in the early 1990s only a small fraction of those reading the postings also posted (Baym, 1999, p. 144). Today, the knowledge threshold required for accessing a blog is significantly lower than the computer mediated communication of ten years ago. Blogs
exist as a webpage – albeit, one updated easily and regularly – and it has been estimated that the majority of blog readers are “lurkers” who read but don’t comment (Meyers, 2013, p. 105). Because of this, blogs must be thought of as a public form of communication, giving bloggers the same audience concerns that television creators and authors have faced for years: who’s receiving this message, and what meaning could they take (or make) from it? These concerns are further amplified by the fact that blogs are most often focused on one’s own experiences (Lenhart and Fox, 2006) and often produced by a single person, making them extremely personal in nature. The concerns aren’t just about who’s receiving the message or how they’re decoding it - but at what cost to the blogger herself? How will the author be perceived in light of this disclosure? What are the consequences?

Tumblr users practice what I’ve termed “selective expression” – a phrase that captures two key aspects of the platform. First, the content on Tumblr pages is constructed through the practice of selection. Rather than the creative process being focused on production – writing, photographing, drawing, and composing original content – it takes place through curation. Users select photos and words from an assortment of content that, for the most part, already exists in the Tumblr-sphere.

Secondly, a Tumblr is more than just a digital journal. Users collect and curate digital material with the awareness that their selections are visible to others. The perceived audience of Tumblr pages is less broad than other social networking sites, which may include, quite literally, everybody and their mother. Tumblr allows users to express themselves to a more selective (or perceived to be selective) group of people.
F. Research Design

As a micro-blogging platform, Tumblr has an open design that allows webpages to be created individually or collaboratively and for a variety of purposes, from political activism to fandom to business promotion. Because this project explores the everyday practices of individuals, it is accordingly focused on the personal Tumblr webpages of individual users. I do think that the platform characteristics that I explore here may also contribute to Tumblr’s usefulness outside of personal webpages. For example: the simplicity of uploading content is advantageous for both young women wanting to share their daily experiences and for large scale, overtly political collaborative projects – as was the case in the Occupy movement’s Tumblr campaign, “I am the 99%” (Sutter, 2011). Yet, my interest for this project was based more in the mundane uses of Tumblr as a way to collect images and text to document interests and feelings in daily lives.

Data were generated in a series of four focus groups with college age women who keep personal Tumblr pages. Although college students are often used as “default” research subjects, working with college-aged women was a deliberate aspect of my research design. First, over half of Tumblr users are under the age of 25 (Lipsman, 2012). Second, the majority of Tumblr users are also college educated (Quantcast, 2013). The relative youthfulness and education level of the Tumblr population means that college students can be considered a significant portion of Tumblr’s demographic. Furthermore, from a theoretical standpoint this demographic is especially well suited for questions of self-expression online. Aside from being generally Internet-capable as members of the “net generation” (Tapscott, 2008, p. 131) college students are also in a period of considerable personal development.
Psychologist Jeffrey Arnett (2000) has theorized the years between 18-25 as a specific age category, what he terms “emerging adulthood” (p. 469). People in this life-stage have a unique kind of independence – as they are no longer completely reliant on their parents but have yet to take on the responsibilities and normative expectations of adulthood. “Emerging adulthood” is characterized by identity exploration in terms of love, work, and world-view. A platform like Tumblr can serve as a site for this kind of exploration.

Limiting the scope of this study to women was a choice I based primarily on the nature of focus group research and my nascent knowledge of Tumblr norms. Tumblr has a reputation for being an emotional and sexy Internet space. The platform’s Terms of Service openly permit content that is “not suitable for work” (or what site administrators call “NSFW”). In my preliminary observations, the “adult” content seemed to be more sultry than sexual, occasionally crossing into “soft core” zones – with none of the research participants content being explicitly pornographic.

Open dialogue on this intimate type of Internet content was, in my opinion, most achievable in a group of same-sex participants. As David Morgan (2007) notes in Focus Groups as Qualitative Research, focus groups members are especially susceptible to the pull of social desirability (p. 12). Because of the expectation of modesty in polite conversation, women may not have felt comfortable expressing themselves honestly in a mixed-group setting. Morgan suggests seeking homogeneity in background characteristics, such as gender, may increase participants’ willingness to discuss a certain topic (p. 36). Additionally, focus groups took place in a public but sufficiently private area on the UMass and Smith campuses. These familiar locations were chosen in order to
put participants at ease, while providing the necessary confidentiality (Lindlof and Taylor, 2010, p. 188).

Ethically speaking, every measure of precaution was taken to ensure the confidentiality of the focus group. Proceedings were audio-recorded, but the research report was scrubbed of any identifiers linked to a person’s identity. All recordings have been kept on a project specific USB drive in a secure location. That being said, the biggest threat to confidentiality was the other participants. Focus group members were asked to sign an informed consent agreement. This also included a confidentiality agreement, both on behalf of the researcher and all participants [see Appendix A: Consent Form for Participation in Research Study].

G. Recruitment and Participants

Participants were recruited almost entirely through postering. While posters seem counterintuitive for Internet research, one of my primary interests in the platform was anonymity. Tumblr users often take steps to distance themselves from their offline communities, which made seeking out local, college-aged Tumblr users difficult. Tabbed posters were placed in libraries, cafés, and classroom buildings throughout the Smith College, Amherst College and UMass campuses. Respondents were offered a $5 coffee gift card for their participation.

Each focus group consisted of two to five students - a group size that was manageable but allowed for group “synergy” (Morgan, 1997, p. 13). Additionally, I

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5 Respondents were invited to bring friends or fellow Tumblr users as well, so the sample was partially snowballed.
conducted four one-on-one interviews with Tumblr users due to logistical constraints, which allowed for more in-depth discussion of content selection and creation. These interviews had the same research design and followed the same basic interview guide as the focus groups, yet the focus groups were much more effective at generating insight. Focus group participants were more talkative, introspective and forthcoming when given the opportunity to compare and contrast their own thoughts and experiences on the platform with other users’. That being said, the interviews did shape the overall conclusions, predominantly reinforcing the focus group data gathered.

At the end of the focus group, participants were asked to fill out a brief exit survey which asked them for basic personal information, their parents’ or guardians’ occupations (as a potential indicator of socio-economic status) and the address of their Tumblr page [see Appendix B: Exit Survey]. In summarizing their responses, I do so mostly to provide information on their demographic similarities and differences. Systematic differences in their practices, however, were not observable and data were not analyzed according to how their responses may have varied among demographics.

In the course of my research, I spoke with 19 women. My interpretive findings are based on the seven hours of tape and 55 pages of transcription generated through these focus groups and one-on-one interviews. The conclusions here reflect a selection of college-age women and their perspective on Tumblr. This research isn’t representative of

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6 Only the participants from the last three focus groups and those who were individually interviewed received the exit survey, as the first focus group was a pilot study. Pilot study participants were contacted for follow-up, but did not respond to requests. Because of this many of the demographic categories that require self-identification, such as sexual orientation, are only available for 14 of the 19 college-aged women who took part in the study.
Tumblr users (or even female Tumblr users, as a whole). The digital practices of young people are shaped by a variety of intersecting cultural contexts such as class, race, geography (boyd, 2014). With this in mind, my project is designed less to generalize than to understand how a specific group of users make space for their voices online.

Focus group participants ranged in age from 19 - 22 and each year of college (freshman - senior) was represented. Four of the nineteen participants were current students at Smith College, one was an alumnus. Twelve were from the University of Massachusetts Amherst, one was from Amherst College and one was a visiting student from the University of Pittsburg. The majority of the students self-identified as white, though a small portion of students identified as Asian-American and one as Jewish. Most of the participants also self-identified as straight/heterosexual. Though 2 reported that they were “mostly straight,” one stated “I don’t know” and another identified as “panromantic demisexual.”

The focus groups were made up of a variety of financial backgrounds. In order to get a rough idea of socio-economic status, participants were asked about their parents’ occupations. Each of them were roughly categorized using Thompson & Hickey’s (2005) education-based class model which divides occupations into five categories: Upper Class, Upper Middle Class, Lower Middle Class, Working Class, and Lower Class. For individuals with two employed parents, the higher of the two incomes was used because they were a two-income household. Of the 14 participants who provided

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7 Much of Tumblr has an especially feminist, progressive culture that provides a vocabulary for a variety of sexual orientations.
exit surveys, 7 were upper-middle class, 3 lower-middle class, 3 working class, 1 lower class.

In terms of Tumblr use, most participants had been on the platform for about 2.5 - 3 years. They estimated that they used it between 3 - 6 hours a week. Most of them followed hundreds of Tumblr blogs, and had anywhere from 20 - 150 followers (a notable exception to this being two power-users, who had 1,700 and 71,000 Tumblr followers).

H. Focus Groups

As I have outlined, this research focuses on the experience of using Tumblr. While I was also interested in questions of self-expression and identity, I was primarily interested in identity-creating and expressive practices that users undertake on the platform. Methodologically, the discussion-based nature of focus groups was well suited for questions about “complex behaviors and motivations” (Morgan, 1997, p. 15). Additionally, a key benefit of this research method was group interaction. Complementary interactions revealed shared vernaculars and actions (Lindlof and Taylor, 2010, p. 183). Comparison amongst participants, whether it was through disagreement or consensus, was valuable for determining the norms of the Internet platform.

Focus groups are often used for exploratory research due to the large amount of data that can be generated by a single session (Morgan, 1997, p. 18). Because Tumblr is an understudied platform, this was an asset for my work. The overall focus group design
was inspired by what Eve Sedgwick\(^8\) (2003) calls “weak theory” (p. 6). Weak theory challenges the suspicious, paranoid stance that often seems inseparable from “strong theories” of criticism. With an emphasis on surprise, connection, and coexistence, scholars such as J.K. Gibson-Graham (2006) have used weak theory to approach their work from a “stance of curiosity” (p. 8). Approaching Tumblr as a curious beginner was both a valuable and natural way to approach this project, seeing as neither I – nor the academy – know much about it.

In the spirit of weak theory, the focus groups were designed openly with a set of focused questions and about a dozen potential follow-ups. The questions were written into a flexible “interview guide,” allowing me to re-order and rephrase them depending on the direction of the conversation (Lindlof and Taylor, 2010, p. 201). Additionally, doing a series of small focus groups allowed me to revise my questions through the process, refining them to further investigate emergent patterns and conclusions.

Typically, the interview began with basic introductory topics, progressing into queries that may need more in-depth answers. The questions were primarily focused on the choice to use Tumblr (instead of, or in addition to, other social networking sites) and how the imagined audience of their Tumblr impacts their use of material. In *Focus Groups as Qualitative Research*, David Morgan (2007) writes “I emphasize experiences because even self reported behavior is more useful as data than opinions that have an unknown basis in behavior” (p. 20). With this in mind, my questions are focused on each participant’s own motivations for and experience of using the platform rather than their perceptions of others’.

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\(^8\) Borrowing from Silvan Tompkins
During the focus group, I intended to act as a moderator, rather than an interviewer, in order to facilitate discussion among participants. I attempted to stay out of the conversation as much as possible to let the group members talk with each other rather than simply responding to my questions. Afterwards, I roughly transcribed each of the focus groups with detailed transcriptions for especially pertinent parts of the discussion.

I. Analysis

There is very little academic scholarship written on Tumblr. Of course, the nature of academic publishing makes it difficult to produce definitive work on technologies that are ever changing and less than 10 years old. But in-depth, site-specific research is needed for a platform that is only second in popularity to Facebook. Analyzing the functionality and social dynamics at work on Tumblr provides necessary insight into the creative ways users carve out Internet spaces to fit (potentially unforeseeable) purposes.

The lack of existing literature inspired me to approach the topic inductively using Joseph A. Maxwell’s (2012) “process theory” (p. 29). Rather than focusing on variables, this perspective seeks to understand the processes between people, situations, and events and how they influence each other. In using this perspective, I sought to understand the process of constructing a Tumblr page and how the platform characteristics of Tumblr influence the media material users share. For research based in Process Theory, analysis focuses on “the particular context within which participants act and the influence that this context has on their actions” (Maxwell, 2012, p. 30). I conceptualized Tumblr as a type
of context and sought to understand the influence that this particular Internet context had on users’ ability and comfort expressing themselves.

Process theory, as an inductive approach, generates theory through identifying emergent patterns – rather than deductively testing previously constructed hypotheses (Babbie, 2007, p. 54). This made Glaser and Strauss’ (1999) “Grounded Theory” a natural fit for my proposed method of analysis. The basic position of grounded theory is that social scientific research should seek to generate theory, rather than making deductions from already existent theories to empirical work (p. 4).

In practice, analysis was conducted throughout the research using the "constant comparative method" of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1999, p. 101). Constant comparison began with coding data into as many categories of analysis as possible. When data were found that fit an existing category, it was compared to the already existing examples of that category (p. 106). After multiple instances of a category had been coded, I defined the code using memo writing. As new categories and codes were revealed, they shaped and were applied to subsequent data collection (p. 109).

Using a flexible, iterative approach proved to be invaluable. The primary findings for this study are actually based on a small sub-portion of my original research question. I entered the pilot study seeking to talk about the visual qualities of content, how imagined audiences shape expressions of taste. Yet, this wasn’t really all that important to the girls I talked to. They wanted to talk about how the imagined audience of Tumblr and characteristics of the platform allowed them to express their feelings and political beliefs. As an emerging form of media, I believe it’s important to honor participant’s own
discourse about the subject. The following two chapters are based on what they found to be the most significant, salient, or important aspects of their Tumblr use.
CHAPTER II

STRANGERS AND FRIENDS: ANONYMITY, OBSCURITY AND THE INTEREST DRIVEN COMMUNITY

Tumblr pages are public websites, easily viewable by anyone with an Internet connection. Yet, participants indicated that the audience that they imagined for their Tumblr was more limited than simply anyone and everyone. When I asked an early focus group “who do you think reads your Tumblr?” one of the participants, Alex, responded “Ideally, my close friends and then strangers.” This was met by laughs and sounds of agreement from other participants. At first listen, “strangers and friends” seems like it covers just about anyone who could look at a Tumblr. But, more significant in their discussion was who wasn ’t reading: acquaintances and parents. Part of the attraction to Tumblr, as a platform, is that the perceived audience of their self-disclosure was less wide-ranging than other SNS or blogging websites.

The literature on self-disclosure is often framed in terms of intimacy and trust. Altman and Taylor’s (1973) influential “social penetration theory” posits that interpersonal communication progresses somewhat linearly, from superficial to deeper forms of self-disclosure. As trust is established through expressions of vulnerability and positive feedback, individuals gradually reveal more intimate aspects of themselves (Altman and Taylor, 1973, p. 27). Yet, in our discussion of Tumblr use, it became clear that trust is only part of self-disclosure online. On the one hand, users are more comfortable imagining those they trust (friends) viewing their Tumblr, as opposed to

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9 It is an option to limit visibility of a Tumblr page to password access, but this feature wasn’t enabled by any of the focus group participants.
those they don’t (acquaintances). On the other hand, family members are some of the most trusting – or alternately, untrustworthy - relationships in a person’s life.

Written in 1973, the principal work of social penetration theory focused on face-to-face interactions. But, as Altman and Taylor (1973) argue, self-disclosure is a necessary part of nearly all communication that involves a person’s thoughts or feelings. Self-disclosure on blogs differs in the sense that, rather than being a directed form of communication (such as a conversation or an e-mail), disclosure is public. Users often have to contend with a wide and unknown audience, which may have a variety of relations to the speaker.

Because of this, self-disclosure online is often framed in terms of privacy. Privacy is primarily concerned with the ability to selectively prevent sharing personal information (Taddicken, 2013, p. 2). Once one makes the decision to share online, it’s difficult to regulate who exactly might be seeing what you’ve shared. Users of social networking sites typically seek privacy by creating boundaries – such as changing settings or using pseudonyms – rather than ceasing to self disclose altogether (Tufekci, 2008, p. 26).

In this chapter, I explore how boundaries were created on Tumblr. As discussed in the conceptual framework, privacy is co-constructed - through both the technological design of the platform and the practices of the users themselves. Using an affordances perspective, I’ve paid careful attention to Tumblr’s specific platform characteristics and how they shape the ways in which users disclose information about themselves. As I’ll discuss in this chapter, Tumblr’s registration policies and the functionality of usernames afford users greater opportunities for anonymity than other social networking sites. These affordances contribute to user-created Tumblr norms, permitting users to withhold certain
information, such as their first name, without seeming weird or elusive and also allowing them to share other, potentially more intimate, aspects of themselves without the fear of being viewed as needy or attention seeking.

A. Privacy

Identification researchers have argued that anonymity is not dichotomous, but rather varies by degrees depending on how much “identity knowledge” is shared (Quian and Scott, 2007, p. 1430). Depending on the platform, a user can be anywhere on a scale - from being entirely anonymous (no identity knowledge) to using one’s legal name. Tumblr users who participated in the focus groups most commonly fell somewhere in the middle of this scale, choosing to disclose some personal information such as location, sexual orientation, and age in varying combinations.

None of the focus group participants identified themselves with their first and last name on their Tumblr. Half of the users did identify themselves by their first name somewhere on their page, most commonly in a very short - typically less than 5 word - bio. These were usually simply formatted as a list of stats (i.e name, age) unlike the extensive “about me” pages commonly seen on long-form blogs. Additionally, three users did include their first name in their URL. 16 were identified by pseudonyms made up of their blog URL.

The lack of identity information is made possible, at least in part, by Tumblr’s open registration policies. If one wants to sign up the only necessary information is a username and e-mail address. In contrast, the social networking cite Facebook has a “real
“name only” policy which requires users to identify themselves by their first and last names.

The anonymity afforded by Tumblr has two primary impacts on Tumblr users. First, it creates what Quian & Scott (2007) have termed “discursive anonymity” (p. 1430). While a statement can be attributed to an individual user, it can’t be attached to a particular offline identity. Should a statement be read by someone who finds it disagreeable, the cost to the user is relatively low. This has a significant impact on how much - and what kind - of self disclosure Tumblr users perform. I’ll pick up on the implications of Tumblr’s “lower-stakes” in Chapter 3: Expression.

Secondly (and more saliently for the purpose of this chapter) anonymity effectively limits the potential audience of a Tumblr page. Creating a page separate from your legal name reduces the chances that it can be found by parents, partners, or employers. None of the participants’ Tumblr pages could be located by an Internet search. Prior to conducting the focus group, each participants’ full name was entered into Google. The searches turned up Facebook profiles, twitter accounts, and stories about high school basketball teams — though not a single Tumblr blog. This is made possible by the use of pseudonyms and is also built into the platform. Tumblr gives users the option to hide their blog from search engines. In the settings panel, one can either “allow search engines to index your blog” or not.

Internet law scholar Woodrow Hartzog (2013) has identified “search visibility” as a key facet of a larger concept, which he terms “obscurity.” Obscure information has “a minimal risk of being discovered or understood by unintended recipients” (p. 1). Hartzog argues that both search visibility and anonymity (which he calls “identification”) are
tactics for creating privacy online. As he observes, websites without search visibility can only be discovered though other websites or manually entering a URL.

Focus group participants reported that indeed it was difficult to locate people, even their friends, on the platform. Within Tumblr, searches for a first name would turn up hundreds of pages, and searches for a first/last name will turn up zero. Most commonly, they connected with people they knew in real life through sharing their URL, rather than being found through a search.

Throughout the focus group discussions, it was clear participants were very aware of who was (or wasn’t) reading their page. On the surface, the Tumblr audience seems especially opaque. Interactions between users is limited to “liking” content or reblogging it to one’s own Tumblr. This doesn’t facilitate the kind of commenting and conversation that are prevalent parts of other Internet blog communities and that can give an audience a clearer identity. Yet, users were actually very aware of who was viewing their page.

Most of the participants had a relatively small follower base - between 20 and 150 followers - allowing them to monitor who their followers are. When they were notified of a new follower, participants reported viewing their page to see if they knew the person or to check out the kind of content they posted. Of course, not all the people who can view - or do view - a Tumblr are Tumblr followers. So, a handful of participants had also installed a widget on their Tumblr called “stat counter” that records the location of an IP address. Alex, the participant whom at the start of this chapter described her ideal Tumblr audience as “strangers and friends,” described a recent experience in which someone had told her “by the way, I know you have a Tumblr.” She replied “I know you know I have a
Tumblr!” having already seen them viewing her page through her stat counter. These practices indicate the audience of a Tumblr page is a primary concern for Tumblr users.

**B. Audience: Not Their Parents**

When I asked participants why they preferred Tumblr to other social networking sites, they routinely reported that their parents or other older relatives weren’t on Tumblr. The discursive anonymity of users makes it difficult for adults to seek out a Tumblr page in order to “lurk” or monitor a user. And perhaps more importantly, adults aren’t Tumblr users themselves.

Tumblr, in general, is not popular among older people. According to a poll done by the Pew Internet and American Life Project, only 5% of adults (age 18 and over) use Tumblr.\(^{10}\) Compare this to the 66% of adults who use Facebook (Raine et al., 2012). Focus group participants perceived the audience on Tumblr as equal to them in age, or younger. Indeed, over half of Tumblr users are under the age of 25 (Lipsman, 2012).

The age disparity between Tumblr and Facebook users is likely due, at least in part, to the nature of Tumblr technology. Participants commonly said that Tumblr was difficult for them to figure out in the beginning – the website uses a re-blogging system different than other Internet platforms and customizing templates can require a basic knowledge of html code. In my own experience, the process of using Tumblr required platform specific knowledge. Despite having used other blogging platforms for many

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\(^{10}\) The same Pew study indicated about twice as many people ages 18-25 use Tumblr (about 11% of young adults). That being said, I anticipate these numbers being much higher if the age range were broader. Pew only polls respondents 18 and over, but 20% of Tumblr users fall between the ages of 13 and 17 (Lipsman).
years, Tumblr’s minimalistic design means one needs to know the functionality of a platform that basically runs off of two buttons (a heart - which “likes” content - and a set of circular arrows, which reblogs it.) This is further complicated by the variations in page layouts, encouraged by Tumblr’s open and easily edited templates. It requires one to know where to look for the button to like or reblog, not just how to do so.

With that being said, if Tumblr is difficult for the computer savvy “net generation” to figure out, it’s probably more difficult for their parents. Penny, one of the participants, sent a link to her Tumblr page to her mother – who complained that it was too difficult to look at and who hasn’t viewed it since.

The young audience of Tumblr gives the platform a feeling of “in group” communication that has been missing on Facebook since it ceased to be solely for college students in 2006. The exclusivity of early Facebook - which required an .edu e-mail address to register - meant that users expected to be communicating solely with their peers. This gave the platform a kind of mystique, especially for college-bound students who viewed it as a rite of passage (boyd, 2011, p. 8). When asked about the presence of adults on Facebook, participants described a sense of annoyance. One girl told a lengthy, eye-roll filled story about her relatives posting videos of their dogs and making inconsequential announcements.

When participants’ family members “liked” their status it was viewed as an intrusion - an acknowledgement of a statement that wasn’t even directed at them.

Jessica: My relatives have gotten Facebook and they are jumping on everything post. I don't post anything on Facebook anymore.
Nicole: I don’t really post that much on Facebook because my, you know, all of my old relatives are on there and they’re commenting on everything I do. Even if I’m not posting anything inflammatory, it’s kind of annoying.

One participant described the presence of the “older generation” as a “take over.”

Participants were especially vocal about the effect that this had on their use of the Facebook status function - an open text box that allows users to share what they’re doing, how they’re feeling, and more recently an accompanying picture. They described their non-use as a recent thing, as something they’d once enjoyed but stopped doing. Another user, Erin, explains: “I think Facebook is more for life events now. That’s the only thing I feel comfortable posting.”

Throughout the focus groups, it was clear that this was for a variety of reasons, including the lasting impacts of the statements they made and the broader audience who was viewing them. The perceived youthfulness on Tumblr allows users to imagine an audience made up of other young people who come to the space with a sense of understanding regarding the typical struggles of 20-somethings: the loss of love, the stress of school, the frustration felt towards their parents.

Users also took steps to distance their Tumblr from other social media that may make it visible to offline acquaintances. Only one participant had a link to their Tumblr somewhere on their Facebook page. The accounts of the other participants showed that this was not an oversight but a choice. Participants sought to keep these networks separate; Facebook and Tumblr were described as two very different social spheres. One

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11 Other reasons included the pressure for a status to be “liked” or the fear that it would be perceived as “attention seeking” — both of which are discussed in Chapter 3: Expression.
participant, Lena, describes: “it’s not like my friends would disown me if they saw my Tumblr but I feel like they wouldn't get so much of it that I feel like it's not worth connecting it to my Facebook. Because that's where my real-life friends interact with me.” Lena’s statement highlights a key aspect of the social dynamic at work on Tumblr. Individual’s pages were built around content - not their “real life” identity - so their networks were forged in a content driven way too.

For the focus group participants, the networks (and ultimately audience) on Facebook were predominantly built through offline connections. In fact, the original design of the site only allowed users to “friend” individuals at their own universities. While this facet is no longer dictated by the platform, it has had a lasting effect on the way users create networks on the site. Participants indicated that they use Facebook primarily to keep in contact with people they know, through messaging and event planning.

Alternately, the audiences built on Tumblr were based on mutual interest. When asked what made them follow another Tumblr user, participants reported that it was primarily based on content.

Nicole: If I see someone who posts things that are interesting to me I’ll follow them. It’s not one particular quality - maybe we have a TV show in common or they talk about political things that interest me.

12 Facebook’s essential rooting in the offline is even evident in the previously discussed real-name only policy, which implores users to ask “who is this?” and subsequently “how do I know them?”
Throughout the focus group series, participants constantly reiterated this point: that they followed and interacted with users who had a mutual enthusiasm — whether that be for politics or popular culture.

Online practices, like these, which forefront interests or perspectives are what Mimi Ito and her co-authors (2009) have theorized as “Interest Driven Communities.” This type of relation is contrasted to friendship-driven communities, which are based on offline peer groups. Interest driven communities are “not about the given social relations that structure kids’ school lives but about focus and expanding on an individual’s social circle based on interests” (p. 16). Though the work of Ito and her co-authors is focused on teenagers, their observations about how social circles are built - either through in-person interaction through school or online through interest - are certainly applicable to college students as well. Tumblr networks function beyond offline social circles, sometimes by the deliberate choice of users. Interest driven communities don’t just serve to connect users with particular interests, but they also narrow the (imagined) scope of those who may be viewing. Interest Driven Communities can be conceptualized as a selected and supportive group of readers, an Interest Driven Audience.

**C. The Interest Driven Audience**

All of the focus group participants started using Tumblr after being introduced to the platform through someone they know offline: a friend, a roommate or a sibling. Additionally, there were three sets of “real-life” friends that attended the focus groups together. Yet, respondents indicated that the majority of the people whom they follow
and who follow them aren’t people they have in-person relationships with. Rather, they connect mostly with people who have similar interests.

For example, Erica and Kelly came to the focus group together. They were clearly close, laughing at one point about Erica’s ex-boyfriend. Yet they didn’t follow each other on Tumblr. Kelly explains:

Erica: I'll sit next to Kelly and we'll Tumbl and we won’t Tumbl the same things.

I mean we don't even follow each other.

Researcher: You don't follow each other?!

Kelly: She posts a lot of cats and I post a lot of fandom and more political stuff than she does. So it's just not worth it to either of us to follow each other.

Erica: Ya!

Kelly’s statement that it’s “just not worth it” indicates what the intentions are when two people follow each other on Tumblr. It’s not so much as an interpersonal connection, but one based on mutual interests. She, and others throughout the focus group, said that they followed other Tumblr users in order view the things they posted and to repost to their own pages. This sentiment was mirrored in another focus group by Lena. “When I have friends back home that reblog a lot of things, it would annoy me so much to see it in my dash. So we kind of have this agreement we don’t have to do a mutual follow.”

When users did follow offline friends it wasn’t simply because of their personal relationship. Kelly explains: “There are a couple friends that I have in real life that I follow on Tumblr because we post similar things and we have similar interests.” In fact, often the people they followed whom they also knew offline were weak interpersonal connections. Participants described following people who they had barely ever talked to,
such as a high school classmate from a different social circle who happened to share the same interest in music.

What I hope is clear from this discussion, is that participants’ offline/online spheres weren’t exclusive. Almost all the participants did interact with people they knew IRL (“In Real Life”), but this was based on a connection beyond simply knowing one another offline. Throughout the focus groups, participants described practices that involved both their offline friends and Tumblr simultaneously. They would browse Tumblr together on a Friday night or send screenshots of photos to their friends via text. Within the platform, participants created ways to share content with their offline friends who were also Tumblr users. They would tag posts with that friend’s name (ex: #ashley). While this simply appears as another tagged word (like #ocean or #funny) it was a way to draw a specific audience member’s attention. Kelly described it as signaling: “I thought of you when I saw this thing.” These connections were based on mutual interest, with the offline relationship being an added (or, at times, simply incidental) aspect of their interactions.

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13 The functionality of Tumblr doesn’t allow users to “send” content to friends as on other social networking sites. On Facebook, users can simply post a link to someone’s Facebook wall. On Twitter, one can use the @reply function to public message a link. Also, both those platforms allow individual users to be tagged in posts (a feature that creates a hyperlink, connecting to that users profile, and notifying them of its posting) in a way that Tumblr doesn’t.
D. Social Pressure

Because the networks built on Tumblr are based on interests rather than interpersonal connections, participants routinely reported they didn’t feel the same kind of social pressure on Tumblr as they felt on other social networking sites.

Erica: I like it because you don’t have to follow anyone for political reasons. Like ‘why didn’t you friend me on Facebook we have 3 classes together or we do this together, we live in the same dorm room.’ On Tumblr, it doesn’t matter who you follow, as long as you enjoy what they post so you can reblog it or like it or something. It doesn’t matter who they are. It just matters what they post.

Users seemed to mutually agree that following was based on a shared interest in the things one posts. Because of this, users also didn’t feel the need to maintain connections that didn’t meet their criteria for content. They felt capable of “unfollowing” a user, without interpersonal consequences.

Erin: I think being able to unfriend someone without it being a big deal is my favorite thing about Tumblr. It’s not like a personal thing, it’s a matter of what you like. I don’t find it a personal thing if someone unfollows me because this is who I am and if you don’t like it that’s fine. But when you unfriend me on Facebook it has more of a connotation to it.

These responses, and others throughout the focus group, indicate that identity functions quite differently on Tumblr than other social networking sites. As Erin states above “It’s not a personal thing” - pages are not based on one’s offline identity, and the networks built around them aren’t either.
Overall, users expressed very little concern about *how many* people were following them or the popularity of their page. Multiple participants mirrored Erin’s nonplussed attitude about their number of followers, or being unfollowed.

This provides an interesting challenge to the growing body of communication research that focuses on SNS and blogging as a method of “branding the self.” For example, Marwick and boyd (2012) argue that a primary function of the platform Twitter is to consciously market oneself as a commodity (p. 119). Through strategic self-presentation, users “craft notable self-images” in order to stand out in a competitive, individual-oriented, post-Fordist market (Hearn, 2012, p. 21). These self-images are connected to real, offline identities and forefront services (or even personality characteristics) that are desirable to clients, employers, and acquaintances.

Alternately, Tumblr poses a challenge for all of these things. As discussed in this chapter, registration policies allow users to create accounts that are easily separable from their offline identity. I’d like to argue that Tumblr isn’t really an identity-based platform, at least not in the traditional social network sense.

**E. Beyond Offline-Based Identity**

We can see Tumblr’s alternate approach to identity embodied on the platform in two ways: through users’ blog titles and their avatar pictures. As discussed throughout this chapter, the majority of focus group participants used pseudonyms to identify themselves on their blog. This is partially determined by Tumblr’s design. With a traditional blogging platform, such as google’s Blogger, a user creates a username independently from the web address of their blog. Commenting and other activities are
performed by the username, which is then hyperlinked to the blog. In contrast, Tumblr usernames function as the identifying web address/URL (e.g. username “starsinthesky” appears as starsinthesky.Tumblr.com).

Across blogging platforms, the web address is usually made up of a blog’s title, rather than the name of the author. Blog titles often describe the content or hint at a perspective - and the user names of Tumblr users are often thematic or poetic. By collapsing the user name and blog title function, Tumblr users often assume the identity of their blog.

Tally: It’s so much easier to remain anonymous, you just use your blog’s identity. Mine doesn’t have that much information about me and that’s not weird.

But, if you have Facebook and you only have one picture and no information … it doesn’t work that way.

Tally’s statement brings to light the kind of pseudonym culture prevalent on the Tumblr platform. Users feel capable of muting this offline (or “actual”) identity, taking on the identity of their blog. Withholding their name or their picture doesn’t challenge the norms of the platform.

Secondly, focus group participants commonly created what Quian and Scott (2007) term “visual anonymity” (p. 1430). They used icon pictures that may very well be of them, but don’t make them immediately identifiable should the user be seen in an offline context. Tumblr pages feature an avatar picture called an “icon.” In comparison to Facebook's “profile picture”, the icon differs in two ways: it’s singular and notably small. Unlike Tumblr, Facebook catalogues profile pictures when they’re changed, making it possible to click through a series of past images of the user. And secondly, profiles are
designed in a way to foreground this photo - it’s large, above the scroll and, combined with the new “header image” feature, the first thing you see when reading left-to-right. Of course, the website is also called Facebook.

When I asked about the images the participants had selected for their avatars, many of them described pictures that depicted only part of their face or obscured it all together.

Researcher: If someone were to see your picture on there would they be able to recognize it?

Jane: No, probably not no. It’s really in the dark and blurred out.

Lena: Mine is just a part of my face. But I also wouldn’t want people to recognize it.

Marie: It’s a picture of me, where my hands are covering my face.

Tally: Mine’s a picture of me, it’s from behind.

After observing their Tumblrrs, about half of the participants were recognizable in their icon photos, though most of these photos were so small that significant detail wasn’t visible. While most users didn’t expressly cite privacy concerns as their reason for choosing those photos, the prevalence of images used in this way indicates that there is a culture of relative anonymity on Tumblr. The choice to obscure your face doesn’t challenge norms for the platform. Recall Tally’s statement earlier when she acknowledged the lack of personal information on her Tumblr page isn’t viewed as “weird” the way it would be on Facebook.

Rather than serving as a visual for one’s “actual” identity, the icon photo on Tumblr functions as the name suggests; as an icon or symbol. A few of the participants
hadn’t changed their icon photo since getting Tumblr 2-3 years earlier. In the focus groups, participants said that they found it confusing when someone changed their icon photo. Lena explains: “People want you to change your Facebook picture. They’re like ‘why is your Facebook picture you in Freshman year? But, I don’t change my icon very often … some of the best icons are actually iconic. They’ve just been that way for so long, and they’re so unique, or they’re really trivial but also iconic. I don’t want you to change your icon, so I don’t change mine.” The pronounced differences between Tumblr icons and Facebook profile photos are a visual marker of the platform’s differing relationship to identity.

F. The Anonymous Internet

Emerging research shows that Tumblr may be part of a new trend of young people seeking the anonymous Internet. In an informal survey conducted by tech start-up PostHaven more than 57% of the 1,038 respondents used Tumblr. The poll focused on two age ranges, teenagers (13-18) and emerging adults (19-25), and found that Tumblr was the most used social networking site for both. It beat out Facebook by 5% in each group (Tan, 2013). While this research comes from a potentially biased source (a tech start-up) the young people’s waning interest in Facebook was also supported by reports from focus group participants.

In Alone Together, Sherry Turkle (2011) observes what she calls “Walden 2.0:” teens who willingly disengage from social networking sites because they are “exhausted by the pressure of performance” created by their online profiles (p. 274). Turkle’s
respondents elaborated on their concerns for their privacy. They worried about creating permanent online personas that had real, offline consequences (p. 256).

Since the middle of last year, the number of teenage Facebook users has been declining (Stern, 2013). But, young people aren’t leaving social media all together. Apps such as SnapChat have been steadily increasing – boasting 4.1 million users at just over two years old. It’s not just that SnapChat is new, but that it’s different. It alleviates what Turkle (2011) calls “the anxiety of always” by sending ten second long videos to a closed number of recipients (p. 259). Once the video is viewed, it’s deleted from inboxes and servers forever. Platforms such as SnapChat and Tumblr are part of a broader social trend in which Internet users are seeking creative and pleasurable online spaces beyond always having to put your best foot forward.
CHAPTER III

ALL THE FEELS: EXPRESSION AND EMOTION ON “THEIR SPACE”

In his landmark work, The Virtual Community, Howard Rheingold (2010) writes: “Masks and self disclosure are part of the grammar of cyberspace. The grammar of CMC involves a syntax of identity play: new identities, false identities, multiple identities, exploratory identities” (p. 153). Rheingold originally wrote these words in 1991, a decade before even the first social networking sites. Early Internet sites such as MUDs and MOOs were known for the freedom of avatar identities (Rheingold, 2010). These sites are characterized by fluidity and multiplicity, allowing for exploration of alternate occupations, genders, and dispositions (Turkle, 1995, p. 255). But today, interaction online commonly takes place using the same name and identity characteristics as interaction offline (Wittkower, 2014).

As discussed in the previous chapter, the anonymity afforded by Tumblr’s registration policies allows users more flexibility in terms of self-presentation than a site such as Facebook, which is necessarily linked to one’s offline identity. The use of pseudonyms on the platform not only emboldens users to express themselves more freely, but also decreases social pressure for users’ statements to be liked and responded to.

Kelly: The stakes are very different. With Facebook, your name’s attached to it. Your photos are attached to it. People know who are you are; these people you know in real life. Whereas on Tumblr, it’s more of the ‘this is what I want to post and this is what I want to do and if you don’t like it there’s the unfollow button.’

Kelly’s statement draws our attention to unique ways that expression on Tumblr differs from other social networking sites. As I’ve argued, Tumblr is not a platform based on
offline identities but rather a collection of interests. When Kelly states “this is what I want to post” she is nodding to a perspective that was shared by nearly all of the study participants: rather than using Tumblr to amass a following or to please a large audience, users lead with their own preferences and invite other to follow or not follow.

One of the incidental aspects of this study on Tumblr was a lot of talk about Facebook. Users continually chose Facebook as a comparative measure, and predominantly in a disparaging way. Participants reported that they “only had Facebook because they had to” - that it wasn’t particularly fun for them but was the only way to keep in touch, or plan events with other users. As discussed in the previous chapter, Facebook was used as an interpersonal tool to connect users to their offline networks of friends and family. In contrast, participants repeatedly described Tumblr as “their space.” They described it as a repository for the things that they found beautiful, inspiring, interesting or important. They used it to interact with others who shared their perspectives.

Additionally participants indicated that they expressed their emotions more openly and expressed a wider variety of emotions on Tumblr than on other social networking sites. Participants recurrently reported that they only felt comfortable sharing good news or happy things on their Facebook pages. But, Tumblr was a place for them to express what one participant called “the great in-between” of their lives.

In this chapter, I discuss three primary factors that contribute to Tumblr feeling like “their space:” separate social spheres, intra-directedness, and the open expression of the personal and political.
**A. Separate Social Spheres**

Previous research on the relationship between anonymity and self-disclosure online indicates that anonymous Internet users feel that they can self-disclose more freely, more often, or more intensely than they would in person (Suler, 2004). Yet, anonymity itself is only a partial aspect of self-disclosure for Tumblr users. It’s true that anonymity allows users to communicate more openly because they weren’t worried about the impact of their statements on their offline identities. Though perhaps more significantly, anonymity functioned as a way to put space between their online and offline social networks.

Erica: That’s why I use Tumblr, is to hide from people I know in real life. It’s like, I don’t want them to know what I say on Tumblr! Some of my friends would be like ‘oooh that’s real weird.’ … it’s my place to hide, that’s my anonymous self online.

Chloe: If my friends from high school or college saw what I post on Tumblr they’d be like “what’s up with this girl?” She’s posting all sorts of freaky stuff.

Taylor: I feel like it’s another me. I wouldn’t tell people my URL that I knew in real life and we weren’t already Tumblr friends.

The discursive anonymity of users makes it possible for users to create a discrete social sphere, separating their Tumblr from the people they know in “real life.” The statements made by Erica, Chloe and Taylor draw our attention to the way users viewed their
Tumblr and “real life” social circles as separate - and the impact this has on how they express themselves online.¹⁴

On Tumblr, users posted the things that they enjoyed, that they found beautiful or important. Often times, participants reported that their offline peer groups would find these things weird (as Erica or Chloe’s friends did), “creepy,” or inappropriate. They felt they could post thematically dark art, politically radical statements, or girly pictures that may be written-off as silly. Opening one participant’s Tumblr pages now shows a landscape photograph featuring a grizzly bear, a GIF of a donut, and an illustration of the phases of the moon — all photos that could be considered generally inoffensive. Yet, amongst them there is also a blinking GIF of the word “bitch,” a person covered in duct-tape to look like a bad version of a ninja turtle, and a black-and-white photo of two shirtless young people making out. These things could be considered coarse by some, but strike a note (whether that be humor or sensuality) with those who posted them.

**B. Other vs. Intra-Directedness**

Mirroring the descriptions of Tumblr as “their space,” participants indicated that posting material to Tumblr was more for their own, personal purposes. One participant Erin stated: “It’s less personal on Tumblr. It’s more personal for me, but less personal towards other people.”

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¹⁴ Of course, as Taylor states, the division between online/offline isn’t an exclusive aspect of their networks. Participants regularly reported interacting with their “real life” friends on the platform. Yet, these connections were based on shared interests, not merely their offline relationship.
As Erin’s statement indicates, the meaning of “personal” is complex on Tumblr. The word was used often and inconsistently, to describe multiple aspects of the platform. Participants report that Tumblr was less personal than other social networking sites because it doesn’t rely on their personal (offline) identity. Recall Erin’s earlier statement (on p. 35) that when she unfollows someone on Tumblr “it’s not personal” (it doesn’t mean “I don’t like you”). Yet on the other hand, participants reported that their statements could be more personal (intimate, open) on the platform. Additionally, they also said that they used the platform for personal reasons (to find and curate content for their own enjoyment, not to keep in touch with others.)

Up until this point, the less personal ideas of anonymity and discrete social networks have been the primary focus of this project. Here I’d like to explore the more personal aspects: open disclosure and a social dynamic that I call intra-directed Tumblr use.

The phrase “intra-directed” is based on the work of sociologist David Riesman et al. (2001), whose mid-century book The Lonely Crowd distinguished between inner-directed and other-directed character types. Where inner-directed character types are independent, other-directed character types seek the affirmation of others and seek constant contact to fulfill this need (Riesman et al., 2001). While Riesman’s work is focused on contextualizing these traits within a broad historical context, the concepts are useful for conceptualizing the social dynamics at work on different SNS platforms. Participants viewed Facebook as an other-directed platform, where the statements made seemed to necessitate a response. Mindy described the prevalent attitude about Facebook succinctly: “Facebook is all about things for other people to see.” Alternately,
participants viewed their actions on Tumblr, and in turn the actions of others, as being motivated by their own need for expression (in a cathartic sense) rather than having this expression validated by those who may see it. They described themselves as wanting to share their feeling within — *intra* — a group of understanding strangers and friends. But they neither sought a reaction to their statements from others nor seemed to want one.

Participants reported scenarios on Facebook in which they shared that they’d been feeling sad or angry, and then received reactions from friends and family asking “are you all right?” or “what’s wrong?” While acknowledged as well meaning, these types of responses kept users from wanting to post their feelings on Facebook. One participant, Marie, describes that she’d recently written a text post on Tumblr that simply said that she’d felt sad that day; though she wouldn’t post that kind of thing on Facebook. Explaining, she says “I feel like people would look at it and be like ‘what am I supposed to say to that?’ and then other people would be overly concerned. My mom would be like ‘oh my god, why are you sad, are you okay?’”

Furthermore, participants felt that their statements on Facebook would be perceived as wanting a response. Focus group participants had a high level of awareness about feminist issues, making them express discomfort about using a phrase like “attention seeking,” even in the confidential interview context, because it is often associated with victim blaming and rape culture. Yet, they acknowledged that they felt (or, felt that others felt) statements were posted for the purpose of being noticed.

Penny: If I were to post about my chronic illness on Facebook people would be thinking I’m trying to get attention. Whereas, on Tumblr … if they don’t care,
they don’t reblog it. But if you posted on your Facebook, people would be like “why?”

Erin: [On Tumblr] I felt more comfortable putting it out there. Because if it’s on Facebook it’s ‘how many likes did you get?’ all of a sudden it’s like ‘hey look at me, I’m going through something.’ And I don’t like people to know I’m going through something. But on Tumblr, it’s more cathartic I guess. It doesn’t matter how many likes I get or reblogs. It’s just out there and I expressed my feelings with people out there, they don’t have to respond, they don’t have to care, just the fact that it’s there in the world.

Erin’s statement especially illuminates two aspects of self expression on Tumblr. First, when she states that “she doesn’t like people to know she’s going through something,” she doesn’t seem to mean any people. She begins the statement with the desire to “put something out there” — to say it, in a space with an audience. Just not to an audience of people she knows offline, who know her, and may know who she’s talking about. The same is true for Penny, who has a need to express the pain she’s going through. She doesn’t want to share it with the wide, offline-based network on her Facebook. She wants an audience that’s selective, connected through the shared experience of chronic illness (or in Erin’s case, a shared emotional experience.)

Secondly, the identity based nature of Facebook results in statements having a sort of weight, rather than just being “in the world.” This weight means that a response is crucial (or, even, seems crucial by others who view it). We see it in Erin’s statement when she mimics “how many likes did you get?” The liking function on Facebook was often remarked upon in the focus groups - users reported deleting posts if it didn’t get any
likes. It wasn’t just that no one liked it, but that others could see that no one had, and that they found that “embarrassing.”

Alternately, on Tumblr, an almost identical function exists: a small heart symbol at the bottom of a post. When the heart is selected, the post is catalogued under the term “like” on a users’ dashboard. Participants described using Tumblr’s “like” function to indicate their support for something, or to bookmark it for later. Like Facebook, the amount of likes a post receives is evident to other users through the “notes” function: a combined total of likes and reblogs. Yet, users didn’t report feeling the same pressure for their posts to be liked and reblogged. Tally worded it this way: “I feel like on Tumblr, if you make a post and it doesn’t get any likes or reblogs, it’s not a big deal. Because you didn’t share it because you want activity from it.” With networks being based on interests, rather than offline social relations, the popularity of content feels less like an evaluation of the person posting it and more about the content.

Lastly, Erin didn’t feel that her statements on Tumblr would be perceived, as she says, like “hey look at me.” The intra-directedness of the platform allowed for users to share things that would be viewed this way on Facebook. Emotional statements were normalized on Tumblr; users mutually understood that it was more for catharsis rather than to get a reaction or to cause drama.

Part of this is due to the fact that posts on Tumblr simply can’t generate the kind of attention—show a statement on Facebook can. In comparison to other social networks, Tumblr is unusual because it doesn’t allow for commenting on another user’s page. If a user wishes to provide feedback on a statement or photo they have two options: “liking” the content or reblogging it. In order to make commentary on a picture or text post they
must reblog it to their own page first. When material is reblogged, the comment thread from the previous poster also automatically regenerates, but it is easily deleted through the pop-up window that appears when one clicks “re-blog.” Almost all of the participants in the focus groups and interviews in fact reported deleting others’ comments from the material that they repost.

If one were to post about being angry or sad on Tumblr the only way for another user to ask “are you okay?” would be to comment on it using the “reblog” function. Any responding statement the poster receives isn’t easily seen by the poster’s followers, because it doesn’t show up on the poster’s page. It’s posted to the responder’s page and also catalogued through the previously mentioned “notes” function.¹⁵

Furthermore, because commentary can really only take place on one’s own page, the content has to meet the users’ curatorial standards. Whatever they wish to comment on will be reposted along side the rest of the images and words they’ve collected. Participants described predominantly reposting content that was reflective of their own interests, tastes, and opinions. So, when a user reblogs a statement about feeling sad, it’s likely that it’s being reblogged because the feelings are shared — not in order to make commentary on the feelings of another. In practice, this would look more like “I

¹⁵ When viewing a Tumblr page, the notes on a post only appear as a number. But, if one clicks on this number (which appears as a hyperlink) the photo or text opens in its own window - along with a list of who has liked and reblogged it since it was posted. The comments users have made when reblogging are also visible. To work around this, users started making comments in the “tags” portion of the post, which doesn’t regenerate when content is reblogged. Tags were designed to catalogue content with single word descriptions (#lovely) or nouns (#yosemite, #coffee). Using the tag function as a way to write commentary, which can sometimes be up to a paragraph long, is a creative adaption by the users. Using tags for commenting was reported in every single focus group I conducted.
understand” or “I feel (or have felt) this way too” and less like “what’s wrong?” This provides another dimension to the users’ fear of appearing attention-seeking, as even attention is based on each users’ own relation to the statement, not simply validating the original poster.16

C. “All The Feelings”

The anonymity, separate social sphere, and intra-directed nature of social interaction of Tumblr result in users feeling capable of expressing “negative” emotions more openly than they do on Facebook. When participants were asked how their self-expression differed between these platforms, they commonly responded that they felt most comfortable sharing positive things on Facebook - excitement for an upcoming trip, achieving milestones or announcing good news such as a new job or graduation. But, if they wanted to express sadness over an ex-boyfriend or frustration over a misogynistic co-worker, they turned to Tumblr.

The title for this chapter “all the feels” is actually a term used, in-vivo, by focus group participants on their Tumblr pages. When seeing a photo or video that made them feel multiple, sometimes conflicting, emotions (i.e. a puppy rescued from abuse; happy, sad, angry) they would tag it with the phrase #allthefeels. Seeing this phrase on their Tumblr pages was especially apt because participants reported that they felt capable of sharing a great variety of feelings on the platform. Whereas on Facebook they only wanted to share happy, significant, or positive declarations, on Tumblr the opposite was

16 At one point, Marie was actually describing a popular bit of content and said “it had thousands of notes, so a lot of people related.”
true. Users turned to Tumblr to share homesickness, heartbreak and their fears about the future.

For example, during each of the focus groups participants were asked to describe things they’d shared on Tumblr that they wouldn’t feel comfortable sharing on other social network sites or yelling into a crowded room. One of the participants, Taylor, began by talking about how she hated her first semester at UMass and how she’d posted a lot of depressing things on Tumblr during that time. Kelly followed this with a story about a sexist interaction that she’d had with a coworker that lead to her writing a text-post (to read the full quote see pg. 55). “I was just rage” she said. Erica, an offline-friend of Kelly’s responded “oh yah. I’ve definitely rage posted about ex-boyfriends before.” Erin followed these statements to talk about something she’d also posted about her ex-boyfriend.

Later on in the conversation Erica, an exceptionally sweet participant who earlier shared that the primary purpose of her Tumblr was to collect pretty and girly images, elaborated:

Erica: If I ever post something [I’ve written myself] it’s always just rage posts. I need to get this out but I can’t tell anyone. So I’d be like ‘alright, I’m going to Tumblr.’

Tally: I don’t share a lot of feelings on Facebook or Twitter, like anger. So I go to Tumblr, I feel like I can put things there.

Again and again, the participants quoted above used words such as “rant” and “rage post” to describe the statements that were exclusive to Tumblr. Another participant, Marie, described it as “sharing her frustrations.” Through their discussion it became clear that
this was due to both the selectiveness and the behavior of the Tumblr audience. This audience was imagined to be like-minded, or at least more inclusive or open-minded than that of Facebook. Participants felt that those who read their angry statements would understand where they were coming from and potentially have these same feelings themselves.

Additionally, the audience was imaged to be mostly separate from their offline identity and offline relationships. When the “offline” and “Tumblr” social spheres did intersect, it was because of shared interests. This limited how inflammatory a statement may be, because the audience isn’t as wide-reaching.

Despite Tumblr being described as a “personal space,” users certainly considered who read their pages. Through the use of stat counting widgets (which track IP address locations) and low-level investigation when they received new followers, participants indicated that they were usually aware if someone that they knew offline followed their Tumblr blog. One focus group participant, Tally, states: “I do think about who reads it. If I make a personal text post, I know exactly who I know in person, somebody I may encounter the next day.” In the next breath, she goes on to talk about why this knowledge matters: “When it comes to feminism, sexuality, social justice, I would only share that on Tumblr. Because I would only be comfortable having the people that know me in real life who also follow me on Tumblr see that I have an interest in that.” Supporting Tally’s statements, many focus group participants reported that their friends on Facebook “don’t
get” the issues and material that they often post about on Tumblr. Marie elaborates about posting feminist material

Marie: On Facebook, I know I’m friends with a few people that would probably just like think it was a joke. Or think it was something stupid, or think I was over reacting to something. I don’t want to deal with that reaction about something that’s really important to me.

Much of this is due to the fact that their friends on Facebook are made up of people from many different stages of their offline lives: families, hometown high school friends, roommates from Freshman year. This is especially true for people of the 18 - 21 age group, many of whom have had Facebook since their early teens. Later, Marie went on to express this explicitly: “Tumblr people follow you because of an interest, where on Facebook, people follow you because they’re your friends. So it’s very likely that people you’re friends with on Facebook are going to have differing political views than you.”

Additionally, it wasn’t just that these people had differing political perspectives. They also had a differing perspective on the user herself. One participant Erin describes: “A lot of Tumblr isn’t being someone you’re not. It’s not necessarily who you are, it’s what you think you are.” Tumblr gives users the flexibility to explore and to grow, without the extensive connections to people who’ve known the old or offline version.

The segmented audience of Tumblr allows users to remedy the kind of disconnect that develops in times of personal growth. On the one hand there’s “who” they are (their offline identity, who others think they are) and on the other who they feel they are

17 Also recall Lena’s statement from the previous chapter: “It’s not like my friends would disown me if they saw my Tumblr but I feel like they wouldn't get so much of it that I feel like it's not worth connecting it to my Facebook” (p. 32).
becoming. As discussed in the introductory portion of this paper, the women who participated in this series of focus groups are in a category known as “emerging adulthood” - defined by exploration of identities and beliefs (Arnett, 2000). Multiple participants talked about personal transformations, especially in connection to their political beliefs (which were becoming more feminist) and the level at which they spoke out about them.

They credited their personal growth to both their time spent in school and the things they’d learned on the platform. For example, the following is a conversation between participants during one of the focus groups:

Erin: That’s one of my favorite parts of Tumblr, I learn things I didn’t necessarily know about. There are people more informed than I am and it makes me do more research if I want to.

Taylor: You can use it to become more informed. I look at one of my tags labeled “important” for things to mention in class.

In another focus group, Marie and Tally remarked…

Marie: The most pleasurable part of Tumblr for me is finding out new things. I find new artists on Tumblr. And I also find out new things going on, discussion about social justice and stuff like that. I really feel like I’m genuinely learning a lot. And then sometimes it’s just like ‘I’m not learning anything right now. I’m just going through pictures.’

Tally: Ya, sometimes it’s just fun. Sometimes your brain is fried all day. I just want to look at these pictures, maybe it’ll be something nice. And other times, when I get mad, I want to put something on social media [I turn to Tumblr].
For these users, Tumblr is neither completely information oriented (like a news website), social (like Facebook), nor purely aesthetic. The snippet-like quality of content makes the information less intellectually taxing, allowing users to easily consume a variety of content. Participants called the practice of Tumblogging “passive” and “mindless,” one describing it “as a reflex, almost.” Words like mindless are easily associated with the way that Internet activity, like television before it, is often perceived (as useless, as merely an amusement). Yet, I’d like to suggest that these descriptions have more to do with the short, visually pleasing form rather than the content alone. For students who likely spend a lot of time reading and writing, Tumblr doesn’t require the same amount of information processing or creative output that long-form blogging does. That being said, it still provides a space to see, take-in, and share media. The same platform characteristics that make Tumblr a great place for sharing images also make it a great place for seeking knowledge, often simultaneously, but without having to “study.”

Furthermore, Tumblr’s platform design means that users view content that’s curated through the follow feature, limiting a potential glut of incoming-information to select topics, perspectives or styles. This, combined with the norms of Tumblr following in which users connect through shared interests with a decreased pressure to follow people they know offline, means that social networks built on Tumblr are often like-minded or, at the very least, receptive to the kind of content one would produce or share. Participants described Tumblr as a community of like-minded people, creating what one user called a “safe space” to express their new found political beliefs.

Kelly: The majority of the people I know in real life don’t follow my Tumblr, don’t know who I am in that sense. It’s my space to talk about things that I think
are important. That people I know in real life maybe don’t agree. It’s my space to get that out there and share those opinions in a more safe community where you don’t necessarily need to agree with me, but it will be respected.

Another participant, Marie elaborated on this idea. Relevantly, earlier in the focus group she had differentiated between Tumblr – where people follow you because of your interests – and Facebook, where you’re networked through being friends.

Marie: There are definitely some things that I wouldn’t feel comfortable saying on my Facebook because I know that it would bring up conflict that I just don’t want to deal with. If I put it on Tumblr, I know that people are going to understand what I’m talking about. Not *not* argue. But they’re going to understand what I’m talking about and share in my frustrations.

Marie goes on to contrast this to Facebook, an Internet space which they felt required them to have debates with other users.

Marie: I will put stuff on Facebook if I feel like I can deal with discussing and debating things, but if I’m not in the mood to debate things I’m not going to put it on Facebook.

Alex: On Facebook I’m pretty much guaranteed like 80 people I know in real life will see. I only really post, if I’m going to post a link, if it’s something I really care about and I’ll post a little speech.

Because the networks on Facebook are built with people in their offline social circles, rather than interests, it makes sense that it would draw a wider variety of political views resulting in contestation and disagreement. Participants described political posts on Facebook as “controversial,” “reactionary” and seeking to “start something.” Alternately,
political posts on Tumblr were described as “educational,” “interesting” and seeking to bring “awareness”. As shown in the comments above, participants were careful to point out that it wasn’t a space of total agreement. Much of the material they discussed was critical, described as “radical” by Marie and “social justice-y” by Taylor – areas of thought that come with contestation and disagreement about definitions, values, and identities.

Yet, I can’t overstate, as a researcher, how important the difference in audience compositions was to the way users talk about Tumblr. Generally speaking, academic discussions of politics forefront the value of debate - of being exposed to differing opinions, changing minds, and broadening perspectives. Yet, for the focus group participants, the possibility of a back-and-forth Facebook debate kept them quiet. They described it as bothersome, even exhausting, to have those interactions. They often reported that other Facebook users simply thought they were over-reacting about feminist issues, participants citing comments like “what’s wrong with this?” or not viewing it as an issue at all.

Highlighting the interconnected nature of expression and audience on both Facebook and Tumblr, one focus group participant Kelly explains:

Kelly: I was just like rage about that customer telling me to smile. I’m not going to post that on Facebook because people will be like ‘no that’s a good compliment’ because lots of people who are friends on Facebook I know in real life and they’re idiots. I post it on Tumblr because it’s a community I have. I follow lots of feminist people ... I post lots of Disney and Harry Potter and
fandom stuff too but there’s also this aspect of being aware that what we say means things, and stories mean things.

It’s the “community” of like-minded people that she’s developed on Tumblr that encourages her to share her feelings, such as anger, without having to worry about disagreement because there isn’t the same back-and-forth debate between users. Like Kelly, participants recurrently talked about their political practices on Tumblr with the same language they used to describe their circulation of more lighthearted content. Respondents would regularly talk about the political things they liked and in the same breath, talk about the TV show Gossip Girl.

What emerges here is that the same interest driven networks that make the platform good for fandom and circulating visual content also make it a good tool for political self-expression. Because communities are “interest driven” the information coming in - and those receiving the information - feels more relevant, receptive to their ideas and safe. Users don’t feel the need to debate with intolerant people, but rather feel they are communicating with people who approach their mediated interactions with a sense of understanding.

D. Speaking Up Online

Research released last year by the Pew Internet and American Life Project reported on, what they term, “Social Media’s Spiral of Silence” (Hampton et al, 2014). The phrase “Spiral of Silence” is borrowed from work by Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann (2006) who observed that people don’t speak up when they feel that their opinion isn’t shared. The research done by the group at Pew confirmed a similar phenomenon online;
Facebook users are less likely to voice their opinions if they think that their Facebook friends may disagree with them (Hampton et al., 2014). They speculated that respondents kept their opinions to themselves due to the fear of disappointing friends or getting into fruitless arguments.

The findings by the group at Pew support the chorus of voices from this focus group based project, asking us to rethink the almost universally accepted ideal of debate in political conversation. For young women especially, disagreement may limit the tentative, messy, out-loud thinking that is so important to the creation of perspectives and commitments.

The common concern of “group think” is indeed a very real possibility for people who are only surrounded by those who share their opinion. Yet, safe and communal spaces are essential for the building of those opinions, particularly when these opinions aren’t reflected in mainstream discourse. This may be especially true for young women, who generally feel less capable of speaking with authority and whose informed opinions are commonly met with corrections.

Furthermore, the spiral of silence underscores the importance of the audience to expression online. The broader implication of spiral of silence research is not only that people don’t share their opinions, but that this is amplified as people fail to realize that their opinion may not be so unpopular after all. The intra-communication that occurs on Tumblr gives college age women a space to see that yes in fact others share their perspectives, interests, and frustrations.

In this sense, Tumblr demonstrates how platform characteristics that encourage users to share personal self-expression are also valuable for creating other kinds of open
forums. Though Pew (2014) terms this phenomenon “Social Media’s Spiral of Silence,” I’d like to leverage this research to challenge the idea that this is a necessary or inevitable characteristic of all social media expression. Working on this project has shown that there are significant differences in the way users communicate on differing social media platforms. Users consciously and deliberately use these platforms for different purposes and to differing ends. The women I spoke to would probably agree that they are “silent” about their opinions on Facebook, but on Tumblr they are anything but.

With careful attention to the affordances of specific Internet platforms, it becomes clear that platforms such as Tumblr can challenge and even contradict the way we think about social networks more broadly. College age women have taken the structural characteristics designed into Tumblr and used them to carve out Internet realms that meet their needs for anonymity and connection. These features emerge as constructive and valuable aspects for online community building, and provide a foundation for future researchers to think about the kind of Internet environments that make space for women’s voices online.
CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION: HOW SHOULD A FEMINIST BE?

This project is titled “Fragmentary Girls” in recognition of the legacy of women who have created mediated spaces for thinking, expressivity, and fun. Like the zines that sprang from the Riot Grrrl movement, Tumblr is both playful and chaotic. It is filled with personal narratives and political diatribes (Piepmeier, 2009). Participatory media, both print and digital, provides a space for the “messy careening” between these polarities – a process through which feminist theorizing and local knowledge-production take place (p. 10).

I use “theorizing” here deliberately, as a way-out of making intellectual claims to Capital-F-Feminist-Theory. Scholars such as Barbara Christian (1988) have argued for a move from feminist theory to feminist theorizing. She distinguishes between the noun and the verb forms, criticizing theories for being “fixed” and stagnant, desiring “to make the world less complex by organizing it according to one principle” (p. 68). Feminism feels like this sometimes, contested in a way that makes the perspective seem singular and monolithic.

As a young feminist scholar, I’m often paralyzed by the threat of “actually” – of really, truly feeling that something is empowering on the level of my own experience (or the described experiences of my participants), only to be met with a broader, structural critique that reveals to me that no, in fact, these activities are actually oppressive. Actually it makes us complicit participants in our own domination. Actually, it does a disservice to feminism and harms the feminist project. There is only one theory in these kinds of critiques, and it means scholarship is measured and almost never enough.
Throughout this work, I have made every effort to resist the urge to evaluate the “truthfulness” of participants’ identifications. From an academic perspective, their pages are rife with incongruity. Opening Alex’s Tumblr now, I’m greeted by a grid containing a fashion model’s perfect, tanned, rear-end covered in glitter, alongside a poster demanding Justice for Tamir Rice. It’s easy to say these things can’t exist together, or to turn to keeping score. Contradictions do exist, in people’s lives and in our theories. How do we move forward, without having to remedy every contradiction in the present?

Inspired by Sherry Ortner (2013), I accept that at the level of discourse, the participant is always right. “Regardless of their subjective relationship to what they are saying, they none the less say what they say” (p.31). I am less concerned with whether a comment stream about Hermione Granger is “truly” feminist (or 2nd wave, or 3rd wave, misguided, or choice) according to some preselected criteria. Rather, my focus is on what users explicitly call feminism – and what their expressions of this perspective can tell us about how they view Tumblr, how they view social media, and how they view themselves.

For participants in my focus groups, the expression of personal feelings and thoughts about feminist issues were almost inseparable. As we see on page 50, in one breath the girls talk about heartbreak and in the next a misogynistic co-worker. The anonymity of Tumblr allows their expressions to be obscured from the person they’re criticizing, but shared with an audience of supportive peers. Can we extend this thought to another level? To Tumblr providing a space for societal criticism, shielded from those who may feel defensive or attacked as the norm is questioned?
A similar parallel can be found in the nature of social interaction on Tumblr. Because commentary can really only take place through “reblogging,” people are far more likely to interact with content that reflects their own interests and opinions. This means that networks are built between users who post content that they find relevant and interesting, and may want to post to their own page. When a post is reblogged, the response is interpreted as empathetic understanding, a sharing of feeling, rather than sympathy or judgment. Imagine a stream of content that reflects experiences similar to yours, and a response system that signifies “me too.” These networks are often (rightfully) criticized for being “echo chambers” or spaces of group think. But perhaps there are some voices that need to be echoed in order for us to find our own, especially if these voices are marginalized. Judith Butler (1988) argues that recognition is the wellspring of “the feminist impulse” – moments when one realizes “that my pain or my silence or my anger or my perception is finally not mine alone” (p. 522). In realizing that something you feel is a shared, cultural experience one is united and empowered in “certain unanticipated ways” (p. 522).

I’d like to suggest that we need to think harder and more openly about where feminist theorizing happens. We need to look beyond the discretely political sphere, to the affordances of social media that allow girls to share their thoughts – of all kinds, both personal and political. I think we will find that they are not that different.
APPENDIX A

CONSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH STUDY

University of Massachusetts Amherst

Principal Investigator: Samantha Shorey
Study Title: Tumblr and Selective Expression

1. WHAT IS THIS FORM?
This form is called a Consent Form. It will give you information about the study so you can make an informed decision about whether to participate.

2. WHO IS ELIGIBLE TO PARTICIPATE?
Anybody 18 years of age or over can participate in this study.

3. WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY?
The purpose of this study is to find out how users of Tumblr express their taste and personality through curating a personal webpage.

4. WHERE WILL THE STUDY TAKE PLACE AND HOW LONG WILL IT LAST?
Participation in this study involves participation in a focus group, which will take place on the Smith College campus. If you are willing, you may be contacted to participate in a follow-up interview.

5. WHAT WILL I BE ASKED TO DO?
In order to take part in this study, you will first be asked some demographic questions over e-mail. The study aims to talk with people who have a variety of backgrounds and different levels of participation in Tumblr communities, whether that be reading, curating, or generating content. Therefore, you will be asked questions about your use of Tumblr. Although anyone can participate in this study, if you do not use the Internet many of the questions will not be relevant.

If selected to participate, you will meet with the researcher for a focus group involving 5-7 other participants. You will be asked about your motivations and attitudes about your behavior online and the behavior of others. You will also be asked questions about your choice of words and images for use on Tumblr. You don’t have to answer any questions you aren’t comfortable answering. I will ask you for permission to audio-record our talk. If you decline, you will not be able to participate in the focus group. An individual interview may be an alternative.
6. WHAT ARE MY BENEFITS OF BEING IN THIS STUDY?
You may not directly benefit from this research; however, the researcher hopes that participation in this study may expand your own understanding of the creative process through Tumblr use.

7. WHAT ARE MY RISKS OF BEING IN THIS STUDY?
The risks associated with participating in this study are minimal to none. A possible inconvenience may be the time associated with participating.

8. HOW WILL MY PERSONAL INFORMATION BE PROTECTED?
Participation in this study is anonymous. Publications will only use pseudonyms, and any details that could potentially identify an individual will be removed or changed. In other words, your participation in this study would be confidential.

The researcher will keep all study records on a project-specific thumb drive that will be stored in locked desk and/or office. You will only be identified by a letter-code in these records, and the document relating real names to the code will be locked in a separate filing cabinet. This document will be destroyed three years after the research has been published. Only the primary investigator and any research assistant will have the keys and passwords to this study’s information. At the conclusion of this study, the findings may be published in an academic journal, an academic book, and/or a general readership publication.

Please keep in mind, that although I will do everything I can to make sure that my data is confidential the nature of focus groups prevents me from being able to guarantee that. Please respect the privacy of your fellow participants and don’t repeat what is said in this focus group to others.

9. WILL I RECEIVE ANY PAYMENT FOR TAKING PART IN THE STUDY?
Nope.

10. WHAT IF I HAVE QUESTIONS?
Take as long as you like before you make a decision. I will be happy to answer any question you have about this study. If you have further questions about this project or if you have a research-related problem, you may contact the principal investigator (Samantha Shorey, 541-554-6505). If you have any questions concerning your rights as a research subject, you may contact the University of Massachusetts Amherst Human Research Protection Office (HRPO) at (413) 545-3428 or humansubjects@ora.umass.edu.

11. CAN I STOP BEING IN THE STUDY?
You do not have to be in this study if you do not want to. If you agree to be in the study, but later change your mind, you may drop out at any time, including during the focus
group. There are no penalties or consequences of any kind if you decide that you do not want to participate.

12. SUBJECT STATEMENT OF VOLUNTARY CONSENT
I have read this form and decided that I will participate in the project described above. The general purposes and particulars of the study as well as possible risks and inconveniences have been explained to my satisfaction. I understand that I can withdraw at any time.

Participant Signature: ______________________  Print Name: ______________________  Date: ______________________

I agree to maintain the confidentiality of the information discussed by all participants and researchers during the focus group session. If you cannot agree to the previous stipulation, please see the researcher as you may be ineligible to participate in the study.

Participant Signature: ______________________  Print Name: ______________________  Date: ______________________

By signing below I indicate that the participant has read and, to the best of my knowledge, understands the details contained in this document and has been given a copy.

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent: ______________________  Print Name: ______________________  Date: ______________________
APPENDIX B

BASIC INFORMATION EXIT SURVEY

Thank you for your participation in this discussion! Please take a few moments to complete this questionnaire. You can decline to answer any of all of these questions.

1. What is your name? (This is for my purposes only, so I can identify speakers on the tape. Your name will not be given out and will be removed from all transcripts.)

______________________________________________________________________

2. What is your age? __________

3. What year are you in school (freshman, sophomore, junior, senior)? __________

4. What are your parent(s) or guardian(s) occupation(s)?

______________________________________________________________________

5. How do you describe your race or ethnicity? _____________________________

6. How do you describe your sexual orientation? ____________________________

7. How long have you been using Tumblr? ________

8. What is your Tumblr URL?

______________________________________________________________________

9. About how much time do you spend on Tumblr per week? ________

10. How many Tumblr ‘followers’ do you have? ________

11. How many Tumblrs do you follow? ________

12. What are a few of your favorite Tumblrs to read? If you only know the title, that’s okay!

______________________________________________________________________

______________________________________________________________________
BIBLIOGRAPHY


