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MAKING SPACE ON THE DIGITAL MARGIN: YOUTH FANDOM COMMUNITIES ON
TUMBLR AS SPACES FOR MAKING THE SELF AND RE-MAKING SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Making Space on the Digital Margin: Youth Fandom Communities on Tumblr as Spaces for Making the Self and Re-Making Society

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The role of online spaces in contemporary youth cultures is an increasingly relevant and vibrant topic of research in a variety of analytical and methodological traditions. This dissertation joins a growing body of work which explores the complex relationship between youth and emerging media through deep interpretive engagement with contextualized questions of meaning and experience. This approach recognizes the diversity of young people's interactions with the digital world and their agency in shaping those interactions. I herein present an ethnographic account of young people who are part of the fandom community on social networking site tumblr, a group united by shared appreciation for books, films, television shows, and other media texts. Their connections run much deeper than these interests, however, as does the meaning their engagement in this space holds for them as individuals and as a community. I explore, in turn, how their practices of friendship and community-building diverge from those expected on more popular social platforms more integrated with offline social life; how they experience and manage "internet privacy" in ways which respond to the specific social pressures they face as young people; their perception and construction of authenticity in online self-representations without explicit

ties to "verifiable" offline identities; and their approaches to discussing issues of social justice and human rights outside the bounds of conventional politics. I ultimately situate my analysis within a larger context of childhood studies scholarship addressing young people's experiences of and responses to social and cultural marginalization. I argue that this community serves as a space of ambiguity and possibility in which young people can engage in forms of cultural resistance, establishing divergent ways of being better suited to their needs and priorities than those of their offline social worlds. The perspectives and experiences of the young people of fandom tumblr thus provide a window into the broader transformative power of digital youth cultures, encouraging us to consider the myriad ways in which young people use these emerging social spaces to shape their lives, their communities, and their world.

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Introduction: Welcome to Tumblr

Thomas Edison was a Witch

In late 2013, a user posted an image to their tumblr¹ blog of a "texting mitt" – a U-shaped, two-handed "glove" with a transparent window designed to allow a smartphone to be used in harsh weather without exposing the device to snow or the user's hands to cold. "Meanwhile in Canada," the caption read: "behold the texting mitt, a sign of how low we have sunk." Other users were more appreciative of the idea. "Sometimes you do need your phone while walking outside, whether for light or communication or directions," argued one commenter; "I've needed to text people while outside several times this week I'd rather not literally risk frostbite to do it" added another. A third was less interested in debating the specific innovation at hand than in criticizing the broad narrative of technology and social decay: "durr hburr technology is bad fire is scary and thomas edison was a witch".

Several other users went on to express their appreciation for this particular turn of phrase. One even used a printing company's website to generate an image, seen in Figure 1, of a stock photography model wearing a T-shirt featuring the comment. This exchange would go on to be liked and shared by other users nearly 200,000 times. The phrase "durr hburr technology is bad fire is scary and thomas edison was a witch" and the T-shirt image itself would eventually become well-known references within the tumblr community, used in reaction to statements and viewpoints seen as technophobic or needlessly critical of change.

¹ Although tumblr's staff and corporate ownership spell the platform's name "Tumblr", most users omit the capitalization in everyday discussion of the site. I have elected to follow this convention outside of any direct quotes which maintain the capital T.

Of the 27 tumblr users I interviewed for this project, two referenced this phrase during our conversations. Each of the resulting exchanges spoke to questions at the heart of this project. Hazelnutcorgi², a 20-year-old media anthropology student who would become one of my key connections in the tumblr community, invoked this reference while discussing attitudes toward social media, to illustrate her feeling that many people are overly willing to criticize and dismiss spaces like tumblr simply because they are new and different, without appreciating their benefits. She made this point in a general sense, but also spoke to what tumblr offers – in terms of both its technological affordances and its community – that other social platforms do not. As I remarked to her at the time, this put me in mind of the interest I had in framing online communities as deeply contextualized, and studying young people's engagement with tumblr not as representative of larger relationships between youth and emerging technology, but in terms of the particular meaning and value they found in this community.

Nicewerewolf, another undergraduate student and the first tumblr user I interviewed in my research, related the "thomas edison was a witch" phrase specifically to ageist discourses which paint social change as frivolous and degenerative when it is associated with youth. She spoke of tumblr as a space where young people defy stereotypes of disengagement, and work to help one another and to improve their world. At one point, she referenced the James Bond character Q, recently recast as a man much younger than Bond himself, who based on his age was initially met with suspicion by other characters regarding his expertise and ability to contribute. Much of this conversation brought to mind my interest in young tumblr users' engagement, through fandom and through tumblr, in discourses of political and social significance in which young people are often silenced or

² Unless otherwise noted, all urls (screennames) in this dissertation are pseudonyms. Chapter 1, which discusses my research methodology, goes into more detail on how and why these are assigned.

made unwelcome – the analysis of which was the most clearly defined research goal I had when I began this project. However, nicewerewolf also approached this topic in a way which defied strict categorization, mixing notions of explicit pushback against ageist norms and ideologies with talk of tumblr as a space of identity building and interpersonal support.

These conversations, the popularity of the "thomas edison was a witch" reference, and the more generalized positivity I have observed among tumblr users about technological and social change – often in the context of perceived opposition from older generations – have all guided the analysis of the tumblr community and young people's experiences thereof which forms the basis of this dissertation. My initial questions of contextualized meaning, users' perceptions of the value of the tumblr community, the use of tumblr for political engagement, and the pervasive influence of fandom in each of these areas have helped me to see tumblr in the more cohesive sense in which I present it here: as a space of cultural resistance.

Researching Participatory Culture

In 1998, Sefton-Green described what was then an emerging issue in both academic study and public consciousness of young people and digital media: *children (or youth)* and *new technology* are terms and concepts both fraught with assumptions at once deterministic and contradictory. Children are viewed simultaneously as "savage and innocent; pure and tainted; ignorant and intuitive", while new technologies "are fragmenting society, yet uniting it; they are destroying education or re-making it; they are transforming culture and communication or merely conferring privilege on a few" (p. 2). Well into the next decade, Buckingham (2006) asserted that this tendency to see young people and emerging media through a lens of universalizing determinism had taken hold as a "generational rhetoric" characterizing contemporary youth as defined, for either good or ill, by a unique connection

to technology. Six years later, Zemmels (2012) described the majority of academic work and social commentary on youth and media as still retaining one of two shallow, universalized views: either that of young people as "digital natives", preternaturally competent with digital technology and destined to become smarter, better informed, better connected adults than previous generations as a result; or that of young people as subject to "media effects", helpless victims of technology fated to become ignorant, disconnected, unsympathetic, and unhappy adults. Jensen & Neuman (2013) would go on to argue that media studies generally has been hamstrung by a disciplinary culture prioritizing the search for massive deterministic media effects across large populations, despite a continued lack of conclusive evidence for such trends, over the study of more contextualized, nuanced, and modest interactions between people and technology.

Despite this ongoing paradigmatic trend, there have, of course, been contrary voices. Henry Jenkins, Mizuko Ito, and danah boyd have been among the most prominent, and in a recent collaboration, describe one of the fundamental components of their shared approach thus:

So much is projected onto youth that it is often difficult to discuss what they are doing, and why, without observation being obscured by ideas of what they *should* or *shouldn't* be doing. Youth are rarely seen as deserving any agency and, yet, they are also judged based on what they choose to do. It quickly becomes a lose-lose situation, justifying restrictions and paternalism. Part of what we collectively struggle with [...] is the need to unpack what people think about youth and technology versus what we are able to see through our research. (Jenkins, Ito, & boyd, 2016, p. 34)

This point about the need to respect young people's agency in media contexts goes beyond acknowledging their right to shape their own experiences; it is also vital to understand their role as participants in and co-creators of culture in the context of digital spaces. Jenkins, Ito, & boyd argue that the making of culture is inherently participatory, a collaborative act of producing meaning, and that to insist that this *remains* true in the specific context of young people in a "media-saturated" world is actually a significantly less radical position than to assert that it does not. Ultimately, they describe a research paradigm focusing on the participatory aspect of youth media culture as "both a descriptive model and [...] an aspirational one" (p. 183) – descriptive, in its focus on centering the analysis of collaborative and communal production of knowledge and culture in studies of digital media; aspirational, in that it embodies a hopeful sense of the opportunity digital media spaces provide for young people to resist dominant structures of institutionalized power.

In some cases, the focus in research within this paradigm is on (ostensibly) "mainstream" practices of "mainstream" youth culture – the way "ordinary" young people use popular emerging technologies like instant messaging and Facebook (or, in the recent past, text messaging and MySpace) to enable interaction among local friend groups, and pursue social activities and rituals that have defined youth culture since long before the advent of these technologies (boyd, 2014). Elsewhere, the focus is on the practices of niche youth subcultures such as those of self-described "fans" and "geeks" (Ito, et al., 2010), or on practices surrounding particular social goals and forms of engagement such as identity construction (Stern, 2008) or participatory media activism (Jenkins & Shresthova, 2016). The uniting thread is the broadly conceived attempt to foreground "what young people are doing with media" over "what media is doing to young people".

It was into this relatively small, but undoubtedly vital and growing, tradition of scholarship that I wandered somewhat unknowingly in 2013, as I embarked on a short-term research project on tumblr for a course on cyberethnography. Realizing toward the end of this project that I had questions about tumblr's culture and community which reached far beyond the scope of a twenty-page term paper, I began to consider tumblr as a site for my dissertation research, which would eventually take shape as an attempt to understand, in a broad sense, what this space and community mean to the young people who make up the majority of tumblr's most active and dedicated users.

Youth culture and fan culture are central to tumblr's overall community, a product of the demographic dominance and deep engagement of young fans in this space. As a result, this study has become an examination of what young fans in particular have created and continue to create with the tumblr platform as their canvas, and the value it has in their lives. What I present here is an exploration of the meaning tumblr's community and its cultural norms and practices have for the young fans who are at its cultural heart – meaning that is deeply contextualized, built on personal experiences and embedded in systems of cultural significance. In Geertz' (1973) words, I aim to portray tumblr as "another country heard from" (p. 23), a testament to the variety of human experience in the digital age and an analysis of the value of a kind of space and community often rendered invisible in public discourse and debate about young people and media.

Blog Meets Social Network

The social internet of the mid-2000s was a very different place from that of 2017. Facebook was still limited to college and high school students, and had a user base of under 20 million (Adweek, 2008). MySpace was the social media platform of choice for most young people. Twitter had just launched, and despite its obviously innovative nature was

still considered "lame and small" by serious bloggers (Madrigal, 2010). The concept of the "viral video" was just emerging thanks to newcomer YouTube. Blogs were still a newly relevant, powerful, and somewhat mysterious force, whose political influence was the focus of much more conversation and analysis than their use for personal expression, and use of the now-quaint term "blogosphere" was still at its height (Google Trends, 2017).

Then-19-year-old software engineer David Karp was fascinated by the relatively new idea of short-form blogging – "tumblelogging", as he and others called it at the time. He saw demand for a platform dedicated to blogging at the scale of sentences rather than paragraphs, which could be more public than Facebook, less restrictive than Twitter, and both more social and less involved and demanding than traditional blogs (Shafir, 2008). He created a platform he initially called "Tumblehub", and then "Tumblespot", eventually settling on "Tumblr" shortly before the platform opened to the public in February of 2007.

Karp's vision, from the beginning, revolved around transforming blogging and social networking into a multimedia platform that would make personal expression "radically easier and more intuitive" (Bercovici, 2013). In February of 2017, the staff at tumblr created a blog to celebrate the platform's tenth anniversary. Among the posts they shared was one by Karp, in which he offered a retrospective on his original vision for the space he created:

2006[:] *The net is vast and infinite.* The web browser has become a multimedia powerhouse. 'Social media' is upending news and entertainment. [...] But for all this progress, some of the internet's brightest promise is fading. The wide-open and whimsical frontier of the World Wide Web is being reshaped by strict, narrow platforms. Our pictures, videos, music, journals, articles, links, *status updates*, are spread across a dozen different networks – each specializing in a single medium.

The infinitely expressive canvas of HTML has been eclipsed by directories of vanilla-white profile pages. Our digital identities are fractured and engineers make the rules. [...] The premise [of Tumblr is] to make space for each individual's full range of expression. A median between the author's *unfiltered* and *editorial* voice. With complete control over design and presentation, so anyone can create something that truly represents themselves and that is truly unique.

Though this characterization of tumblr as a blank canvas without structural limitations on expression is perhaps more marketing rhetoric than objective description, it does serve to make clear that Karp's goal was for tumblr to emphasize personal expression in a social context. This led the platform to adopt a feature set which places it in a murky grey area between blogging platform and social network. The content-focused features and relatively open presentation of the former combine with the extensive affordances for interpersonal communication and interaction of the latter to produce something unique in its technological offerings, which have in turn shaped the culture and community which have emerged on the site.

The homepage at www.tumblr.com offers little immediate insight into the experience of using the tumblr platform. Apart from a recently-added "What is Tumblr?" link at the bottom of the screen, which directs users to a quick tour of the platform's features, the only thing which gives any hint as to what the platform is for is the slogan, "Come for what you love. Stay for what you discover." Buttons to either log into an existing account or sign up for a new one are placed prominently in the center of the page, and links to download the mobile app for either Android or iOS are also highly visible. Otherwise, the screen is dominated by a background image chosen at random from those posted by users.

Photographs of donuts, paintings of fish, animated gifs captured from TV shows – almost anything can and will appear here that isn't tagged "NSFW"³. (Figure 2 offers an example: an illustration of what appear to be cat-cactus hybrids. Reloading the page on the day I captured this screenshot saw this image replaced with an animation of Wario, a character from the Super Mario universe, and then a picture of a woman and her dog.) This striking reliance on users' own creative output to produce a first impression for potential new users is the first sign that something about tumblr is different and unexpected, a clear contrast to the clean, informative approach of Facebook and Instagram's login/signup pages, or the collection of trending topics that welcomes new users to Twitter, Reddit, or Google+.

I rarely see this login page anymore, as I mostly access tumblr from my home computer and smartphone and have little cause to log out. For most of the users represented in this research, the situation is similar; these are people who use tumblr very extensively, and tend to stay logged in unless they happen to be using a shared device. A handful of popular tumblr posts humorously allude to this by responding to comments about the login screen with questions like "who even logs out of tumblr in the first place?" Some ascribe to the platform a "Hotel California"-esque inescapability, and in fact I was amused to realize, while writing this section, that I did not even know where in the interface the "log out" button had been moved to in the site's last user interface redesign almost a year earlier.

This relatively minimalistic entry point is thus all but invisible to users who are deeply engaged with the tumblr community on a daily basis; instead, opening tumblr takes them directly to the much busier and more interactive space of the "dash" (short for "dashboard"). The dash fits broadly into the category of newsfeed-style systems used by

³ "Not Safe For Work", a catch-all term covering images of a sexual, violent, or otherwise potentially offensive nature on the basis that one would not want to be seen viewing them in the workplace.

many social media platforms. A single scrolling column of content from other blogs the user has chosen to follow – with the occasional advertisement or sponsored post slipped in – takes center stage. The majority of posts are plain text, static images, or animated gifs, with occasional audio or video posts interspersed throughout. The most recent posts are shown first, and the feed scrolls downward into eternity, loading older content automatically. Posts lack any indication of the time and date they were posted, lending the feed an air of timelessness as one continues reading, but reloading the page after a few minutes and often seeing dozens of new posts added to the top of the feed gives some hint as to the volume of content posted and shared among fandom tumblr users. Surrounding this central column of content are buttons to create new posts and a sidebar of recommended blogs and posts. In the web browser interface, the dark blue background is sparsely filled despite the level of activity, particularly on modern widescreen monitors which leave vast empty expanses to either side of the main column of content. The experience and layout on a mobile device are similar, except for the comparative lack of wasted space and the omission of the sidebar of recommended content; there is room for neither on a small screen, and the vertical orientation makes it easier for post content to fill the available space. (See Figure 3 for a comparison of the desktop and mobile dash interfaces. Note that content has been obscured to protect users' identities.)

Interacting with the dash is not merely an experience of consuming content; tumblr's various social features are all to be found here as well. The primary form of interaction for most users is "liking" or "reblogging" individual posts. Liking a post notifies the user who posted it, and saves it to a private list of liked posts accessible through the dash, but does not share the post publicly.⁴ Reblogging, on the other hand, shares the post to one's own

⁴ As of July of 2016, it is now possible for users to make their liked post lists public. This option, and particularly the decision to enable it by default on new accounts, was met with derision from many

blog (with the possibility of adding a comment in the process), and is thus similar to Facebook's "share" feature or Twitter's "retweet", except for the key difference that it copies not only the original post, but the entire visible chain of comments. This often produces multiple versions of posts which circulate simultaneously, as, for example, two users might reblog a post from its original source and make different comments, creating two alternative posts which both continue to be reblogged, and may have different comments added to them by users, and so on. With the exception of users who maintain blogs solely for the purpose of exhibiting their own work (which is rare, at least among fandom users), reblogging is not only the most commonly-used interactive feature of tumblr, it is also the source of the majority of content on a given individual's blog – perhaps unsurprisingly, as reblogging requires a great deal less time, energy, and thought than creating an original post.

Commenting on reblogs of one another's posts is the primary way in which users communicate with one another, but several other options exist. It is possible to reply to a specific post, allowing a user to add a comment which appears in the post's associated notes without reblogging the post to their own blog. This feature is useful in various situations – for instance, when one finds the content of a post objectionable and wants to confront the op⁵ without spreading that content; when one wants to comment on a post that does not fit with the intended themes or "feeling" of their own blog; or when a friend shares something personal in a post and one wants to express support without sharing that personal content beyond its intended audience.⁶ Users can also send each other "asks" – short messages

users, who felt it essentially erased the difference between liking and reblogging, and I have yet to see a user choose to leave this option enabled.

⁵ Short for "original poster", the term "op" is in common use on tumblr as both a second- and third-person pronoun, as well as a descriptive reference; it is used in various contexts with and without an article.

⁶ The notion that some posts are more "personal" than others, and that it is less appropriate to share these, is discussed in depth in Chapter 3.

which can be replied to publicly or privately. As of late 2015, these users can also talk privately through a real-time chat system. Use of this feature is, for many users, relatively rare and limited to a small pool of good friends, but I have made more extensive use of it than most as I conducted all of my ethnographic interviews for this project over this chat system.

The other side of tumblr's interface consists of users' individual blogs, which serve as public archives of the content posted and shared by each user. These are located at subdomains of tumblr, in the format `http://url.tumblr.com`, where *url* is the "name" chosen by the user. While Karp's vision of unstructured expression is watered down significantly in the standardized space of the dash, with its universal layout and style, individual blogs retain much more of this ideal in their completely customizable layout, appearance, and functionality. Hundreds of ready-made, customizable themes are on offer from tumblr and from third-party designers, but more skilled and ambitious users can code their own themes from scratch in HTML, and even add complex features such as animations and background music. It is in this space that tumblr breaks most clearly from the traditions of social networking platforms, most of which work hard to standardize visual brands and user experiences across all aspects of their services. The choices made here often reflect users' priorities and personalities; my own blog, for example, as seen in Figure 4, abandons strict chronological presentation to fill more of the screen by spreading content across three columns, perhaps revealing both my disregard for strict organization and my preference for accessing tumblr on a computer as against a mobile device. It should be noted that the importance of custom themes is declining thanks to the increasing use of tumblr's mobile application, which enforces a standard layout on individual blogs, and the introduction in 2016 of an option for desktop users to view individual blogs' content in a standardized "pop-out" panel on the dash. It may be that the vision of a near-limitless canvas for

expression will soon no longer apply to the way most people experience their and others' tumblr blogs.

Ten years on from tumblr's initial debut, much has changed in the digital landscape around tumblr, and behind the scenes in its operation. Social media in general is increasingly multimedia driven, undermining tumblr's original unique selling point to some extent. Blogs have decreased in visibility as a medium, if not actually in prevalence (Taylor C., 2015). Tumblr has grown far beyond the two-person company with a few hundred thousand users it was in 2007, though its active user base of 45 to 50 million (Bercovici, 2014) pales in comparison to, for instance, Facebook's nearly two billion (Fiegerman, 2017). Yahoo purchased tumblr in 2013, and was itself bought out by Verizon in 2016, these acquisitions bringing changes to the platform's priorities, and small but meaningful revisions in design and functionality, as "monetization" became the word of the day. Despite all of this, many of tumblr's features and systems still largely resemble their original incarnations, and the platform's essential emphasis on combining personal expression and social engagement remains unchanged.

Buried in the Averages: "We Georg, who live in caves"

Karp (who remains tumblr's CEO) describes tumblr in 2017 in terms which echo his original vision for unbounded expression and sharing of creativity, but also acknowledge the culture and community that have emerged among the platform's users, largely as a result of the engagement of young people. He calls tumblr "one of the most creative, lively, thoughtful, supportive, and open-minded corners of the internet", defined by "a generation of artists, writers, creators, curators, and crusaders".

Another post on the tenth anniversary blog, written by an anonymous tumblr employee, tells a complementary story:

Tumblr was born in 2007. Less than a year later, Tumblr saw the emergence of its first homegrown meme: #GPOYW, or Gratuitous Picture of Yourself Wednesday. Coined by @yourdp in April of 2008, it made its way to BuzzFeed by September and eventually evolved into a daily activity (as just #GPOY). By 2009, it was added to Urban Dictionary. After that, there were Fuck Yeah Tumblrs and #WhatShouldWeCall Tumblrs, soft grunge and Tumblr pink, Superwholock and the Hawkeye Initiative, the Skeleton War and preserved human toes, the Science Side of Tumblr and Studyblr, and even two extra hours in the ball pit. We asked each other about our shoelaces (stolen from the President, of course) and what air was. Every Tuesday was never a problem. No matter what part of the Tumblr community you are in, this is the history we've created together.

Unlike Karp's relatively nonspecific and accessible (and, perhaps, more PR-friendly) nods to shared creativity, discourse, and idealism, this post calls back to cultural movements and moments in tumblr's history in such specific jargon as to be all but impenetrable to those who are not part of the community. Through this choice of tone and vocabulary, and its explicit reference to "the tumblr community", this post positions tumblr not just as a cultural marketplace where people come to exchange ideas, but as a culture in its own right. Users' responses to this post, invoking terms like "mishapocalypse" and "tumblarity crash", echo the post's use of obscure insider references to produce a sense of shared heritage and cultural unity among the platform's users.

Though tumblr's tenth anniversary was no more than a gleam in David Karp's eye when I joined the platform in 2013, it was witnessing interactions similar to this that first led me to become interested in tumblr as a research site. What was it about this platform, I

wondered, that engendered this kind of engagement? What made tumblr feel, to many of its users, like a *community* with a cohesive culture, a meaningful history, its own norms of interaction, its own vocabulary and unique forms of expression? And what was the particular meaning and value of this kind of online experience for the young people in the 13-to-25 age bracket that make up as much as half of tumblr's active user base – an especially striking figure when one considers that this age group makes up only 29% of Facebook users, and 23% of internet users overall (Lipsman, 2011; Neal, 2014)?

This sense of shared identity and experience is not universal among tumblr's hundreds of millions of registered users, nor likely even among the 45 to 50 million who are considered "active" users by virtue of their visiting the platform at least once a month. The above post, with its cryptic references to shoelaces and human toes, might well be as inscrutable to many tumblr users as to someone totally unfamiliar with the site. The culture it speaks to is one of a smaller "core" group of users whose intense engagement with the tumblr community is perhaps best explained with reference to one of their own self-effacing inside jokes.

One night in late 2016, I received an auto-generated email from tumblr congratulating me on having made my 5000th post. This works out to an average of just under 10 posts per day in the eighteen months I had spent conducting my research. Most of these were reblogs, many of which I did not even comment on before posting, but nonetheless this is still a rather extraordinary amount of activity – especially considering the fact that the average tumblr user posts roughly once per week (Tumblr, 2016). And yet, based on my long-term observations of hundreds of tumblr users over the past two years, I know that while my level of engagement with the platform may be well outside the average, there are many others whose activity equals or exceeds my own; I have even seen users complain about reaching the platform's limit of 250 posts per day.

This contradiction between official statistics and users' experiences might be termed the "We Georg paradox", after a popular text post with a fairly convoluted background. For well over a decade, spurious factoids claiming that the average person accidentally swallows a certain number of spiders every year have circulated on the internet. In early 2013, a tumblr user made a text post humorously attempting to reconcile this with most people's perceived reality of never swallowing spiders at all:

'average person eats 3 spiders a year' factoid actualy [sic] just statistical error. average person eats 0 spiders per year. Spiders Georg [sic], who lives in cave & eats over 10,000 each day, is an outlier adn [sic] should not have been counted

This post would go on to be shared hundreds of thousands of times, and spark one of tumblr's many text-based memes, the original phrase being remixed again and again to humorously describe anything that bucked a statistical trend. Around the same time, an article in USA Today comparing tumblr with other social networks claimed that tumblr users "spend an average of 2.5 hours per month 'tumbling'" (Happe, 2012). While this may be accurate for the majority of the site's 45 to 50 million monthly visitors, buried within these figures is a legion of dedicated users for whom this statistic is not only laughable, but unimaginable as truth. The reaction of this more active tumblr community was one of stunned, self-disparaging disbelief: "more like 2.5 hours a day" commented one user, who was then one-upped by another claiming that "2.5 hours an hour" was, in fact, a more realistic figure. A third responded,

'average person spends 2.5 hours a month on tumblr' factoid actualy just statistical error. average person spends 0 hours per month. We Georg,

who live in caves & spend over 23 hours on tumblr each day, are outliers
 adn should not have been counted

To these people, tumblr means something difficult to understand or put into words. The greatest paradox it is necessary to overcome in order to understand what tumblr is, and what it means to its most avid users, is the fact that they routinely criticize every aspect of the platform, the company behind it, and the culture among users themselves, and yet it remains an important part of their lives. These users refer to the site in terms like "hell" and "cesspool", stating that they only remain active because tumblr is in some inscrutable way inescapable. One popular post describes the average user who has been active for more than three years as "done with this website's shit and feels trapped but also uses it as an emotional crutch, always screaming internally". Despite this, they exhibit a level of engagement that most social media platforms can only dream of, and in less sarcastic moments describe their continued excitement and appreciation for tumblr and make it clear that the community and culture are what keep them coming back. "Tumblr can be problematic culturally and in how it works," admits one user, "but I really love my time here because there are so many fun and creative people, and when some new update ruins something we find a way to make it work and turn our disappointment into a meme, and maybe it's just because my tumblr friends are such great people but 95% of the time I just really enjoy spending time on this website".†⁷

Tumblr, Fandom, and Youth

Many of these dedicated, "2.5 hours an hour" users are part of "fandom tumblr", a large collection of fluid and overlapping communities devoted to social and creative activity

⁷ The dagger symbol is used throughout this dissertation to indicate that a quote from a publicly accessible tumblr post has been edited to protect users' privacy. This is discussed in detail in Chapter 1.

centered on any one of hundreds of special interests. The majority of these interests are fictional media texts of some sort, from the DC Comics franchise to *The Lord of the Rings* to the animated series *Steven Universe*, but tumblr fandoms do exist which are centered on other interests, most notably celebrities of varying statures such as bands and YouTube stars. Fandom has had a close association with online communities for years; as fans have traditionally been geographically isolated and in perpetual need of forums in which to communicate across distance and disseminate creative products of fan culture, it made sense that they would become early adopters of the internet (Hellekson & Busse, 2006). Fans developed a symbiotic relationship with early digital media, supporting its growth as it fuelled their increasing access and visibility (Duffett, 2013). From usenet groups and email listservs to fan groups on Facebook and fan film makers on YouTube, the internet has been steeped in fan culture at every stage of its development. Tumblr, as a platform built for both content sharing and social interaction, is a logical space for fan communities to gravitate towards, and they have done so in great numbers; fandoms on tumblr number in the hundreds and fans likely in the hundreds of thousands.⁸ Though other groups of highly engaged users exist, and many users who count themselves members of fandom tumblr also identify with other parts of the community, tumblr is in many ways defined first and foremost by fandom culture. In fact, the centrality of fandom to tumblr culture is such that tumblr's staff themselves have, on their own blog, referred to the site as being "ruled by fandoms" (Tumblr Staff, 2015).

⁸ This is, admittedly, a *very* rough estimate, but I believe it to be correct within an order of magnitude. Given that the most popular fandom tumblr users often reach follower counts in the low tens of thousands, this can be considered an absolute minimum. Based on the fact that fandom users tend to deviate sharply from the monthly use time and post count averages for the site as a whole, it is reasonable to assume they account for no more than around 10% of the site's registered users, or about 5 million. The most popular fandom posts typically receive no more than 1 or 2 million notes, though many users may reblog such posts multiple times.

This made fandom tumblr an obvious choice as a particular segment of the tumblr community in which to situate my study, a choice which was reinforced by my particular interest in the attraction and meaning tumblr holds for young people, and fandom tumblr's overall youth even when compared to tumblr's user base as a whole. As mentioned above, large-scale data suggests that roughly half of tumblr users are under 30, but even this, from what I have observed, obscures the overwhelming youth of the highly active core community of fans which are at the center of tumblr culture. In the course of my research, I have found that nearly everyone I have encountered whose age I could discern has been in their early teens to mid-twenties. Occasional opportunities to access a larger sample of the tumblr community have borne out this impression. I have seen two posts, with a combined total of over 13,000 responses, asking users to reblog and respond with their ages; though it would not have been practical for me to attempt to look through all of these responses, I glanced over the most recent few hundred and found that nearly all the users responding were giving ages between 14 and 25, and only two of those whose responses I saw said they were over 30. Posts in which older fans explicitly state their feeling of being out of place on tumblr are also common enough to suggest that my perception is shared by others outside of this dominant age group.

Much of the day-to-day activity within fandom tumblr revolves around the sharing of commentary and creative works relating to fandoms' key texts, but there is also a significant amount of material not explicitly fandom-related which nonetheless circulates in fandom communities. I follow around 140 users on tumblr, all of whom identify themselves in some way on their blogs as members of fandoms. On an average day, I might scroll through my dash for ten minutes and, among the things posted and shared by these users, find gifsets (posts consisting of between two and ten animated images) captured from recent episodes of TV shows; paintings, sketches, and other artwork by users, sometimes directly related to

fandoms and sometimes not; discussion of "headcanons" (things about a fictional setting or character which a fan believes to be true but is neither supported or disproven by the text itself) about a popular book; discussion of news, social issues, and world events; amusing videos shared from YouTube or Vine; selfies or pictures of users' pets; jokes and memes often relying on obscure or nonsensical humor; analysis of how issues of social injustice are reflected in a recently released film; and frank discussion of experiences with depression and mental illness. This is hardly an exhaustive list, and the constant supply of diverse and often surprising content is part of the community's appeal. Direct interaction between users in this community most commonly takes the form of reblogging content from one another, sometimes commenting on it in the process, or liking each other's posts. Use of the reply, ask, and chat systems is less common, but carries a connotation of being closer to "actual" conversation and is, for many, a key aspect of making friends and finding community.

Fandom tumblr, then, can be roughly defined as a group primarily consisting of teens and young adults, who devote significant time and energy on a daily basis to participation in creative, social, and personally expressive activity which is centered on, but not always directly linked to, appreciation for various media texts. The experiences of many of these young people, in their deep cultural and social engagement with the platform and the time they spend interacting with and through tumblr, break significantly from the "average" user's experience and have made them a driving force in tumblr's wider culture and community.

Making Spaces

For these young fandom users, tumblr is a place of building identity and community – for making the self and (re-)making society, both within the space of tumblr and in ways that affect their lives and worlds beyond the metaphorical walls of this digital forum. Many

of the young people I have spoken to over the past two years see their use of tumblr as a technologically-enabled escape not *from* the "real" but *to* it, defining this as a space of more genuine connection, more honest self-presentation, and more open dialogue than they have access to elsewhere in both the digital and physical worlds. Understanding why they perceive tumblr in this way requires looking at what brings these people to tumblr, how they form connections and communities once they get there, how these communities provide for personal and social needs, and what they do with the space and resources these communities offer.

In the first chapter of this dissertation, I examine ongoing foundational questions and issues in the study of both childhood and digital cultures, and outline the reasoning behind some of the theoretical, methodological, and analytical choices I have made. These choices have generally rested on a fundamental decision to focus on tumblr as a social *environment* rather than a social *artifact*, and to address both the contextualized experiences of the young people in this study and the age-based social structures which influence those experiences. This particular way of framing my research has helped me to address questions revolving around what young people have made and continue to make of fandom tumblr, and why tumblr often seems, in their experience, to provide more opportunity than other social environments to create the kind of space and community these young people seek.

Chapter two details the processes by which users find and form communities, social networks, and friends on tumblr. Its role in this dissertation is primarily to "set the stage" for what comes later, but I also aim here to provide insight into how these social processes differ from those of other social contexts, and what it is that sets tumblr apart as a social space. At the same time, I describe the way in which tumblr users categorize and divide social spaces by reference to norms and expectations of connection and interaction, and

despite consciously maintaining distance between tumblr networks and offline networks, downplay the significance of the digital/physical divide. Ultimately, I propose that the key value of tumblr for its young users is as a place where, unlike in online spaces more closely tied to the social networks of the physical world (such as Facebook), they are able to escape the rules and norms typically imposed on their social and personal activity in the offline world. On this basis, I situate tumblr (and, by extension, any number of other online social spaces mostly untethered from offline connections) as a modern incarnation of an archetype of youth space with a long history: like the arcades and pop shops of decades past, it is a "marginal" space of social interaction, a space newly emerged as a product of cultural and technological change, over which the norms and social controls of other everyday spaces of interaction have not yet asserted themselves. As a result, it affords possibilities for young people to establish their own patterns of interaction which better serve their needs as a community.

Chapter three, in some ways, builds on the discussion of how tumblr's isolation from other social spaces is prioritized and maintained by users. Here, however, I focus on individual privacy as opposed to the establishment of separate social networks. My primary argument in this chapter is that conventional understandings of "internet privacy", which are based on individual management of particular kinds of personal information, fail to take into account different privacy-related priorities, practices, and experiences shaped by cultural context and social status. I contend that young people, as a class, face different threats to their privacy than adults do, and as a result must adopt different strategies and tools to control the flow of what they consider privileged information about themselves. Tumblr's pseudonymity and the fandom tumblr community's aforementioned separation from offline social networks create beneficial conditions for maintaining privacy, but equally or perhaps more important are the social norms which have emerged in the fandom

tumblr community which support users in managing information despite the platform's relative dearth of explicit or detailed privacy controls.

Between them, chapters two and three set out some of the vital conditions of possibility which enable the forms of expression and interaction I discuss in chapters four and five. Chapter four deals with identity and authenticity. To begin with, I broadly join a number of other scholars of online culture in attempting to dispel the idea that online personae without explicit links to identities in the physical world are less "authentic" than those deeply tied to "verifiable" offline selves. The flexible identity presentation inherent in such spaces, while it can enable certain forms of manipulation or dishonesty, often in fact engenders a deliberate, reflexive presentation of self built on a shared ideal of constructing authenticity; this much, though far from universally understood or accepted, has been argued quite successfully in the past. Moving beyond this general point, I argue that the particular form this ideal of authenticity takes, and the authorial practices users adopt in order to achieve what they see as genuine and honest self-representation, differ from one online context to another, shaped by cultural forces unique to particular online communities. Where other communities have been observed to value iterative processes of conscious self-construction, or a kind of "cultivated randomness" that suggests a true "inner self" loudly communicating its unfiltered thoughts to the world (Stern, 2008), fandom tumblr has come to prize a kind of authenticity defined by free, unconscious self-revelation that emerges as the byproduct of interaction. Though such a thing is dubiously possible at best, tumblr users' ideal and goal is a kind of self-representation which is unscripted and natural, in which showing oneself to the world is achieved simply by *being* oneself and letting the truth of one's values and personality escape in bits and pieces as one creates fandom content, posts about the minutiae of life, or trades jokes with friends.

Chapter five discusses political discourse on tumblr. The thematic emphasis on emergent properties of interaction within fandom tumblr culture – in contrast to expression with a clearly defined purpose or highly deliberate content – is similar to that in my discussion of identity presentation. Here, however, the focus is on interaction which is politically and socially meaningful. While I came into this project interested in the space and tools tumblr might provide for the assertion of public voice on issues of social significance, I have found that various forms of mundane, everyday political "talk" are more common and salient in the lives of young fandom tumblr users. I investigate, in this chapter, how this intra-group "talk", in contrast to an assertion of "voice" which would aim to speak up and speak out to channels and institutions of social power, fosters connective social learning and gives rise to new ways of framing ideas and issues. In doing so, it enables young people to communicate, organize, discuss, and debate without having their activity and words subsumed by frames of meaning exterior to their own priorities and experience.

One of the users I interviewed in the course of this research described the dividing lines in her social media experiences by saying, "Facebook is for family, Twitter is for friends, and tumblr is for me." She and others described more popular and mainstream platforms, like Facebook and (to a lesser extent) Twitter, as obligatory; like having a phone or email account, maintaining accounts and profiles on these platforms is an expectation and a convenience, and as such has little in the way of deep personal meaning. Tumblr, on the other hand, is a space young people choose to engage with, and for those in the active core of the fandom tumblr community, that engagement involves a significant devotion of time and energy. I have found, through my observations and conversations over the past two years, that the central reason these young people see this engagement as meaningful and worthwhile is that this is a space largely free of the social constraints and expectations

imposed upon them in the physical world, which often follow into their experiences with other social media platforms.

This description is reminiscent of Rasmussen's (2004) idea of "children's places" – the places of meaning young people find and create for themselves, in contrast to those constructed by adults to house them and shape their lives and experiences in particular ways. Children's places have often been located at the margins, found in the space and time "in between" places (like school and the home) defined by adult control, or in the space and time set somehow apart from the primary social spaces of adults – the woods, back lanes, and vacant land accessible, but often invisible, from the sidewalks, paths, and plazas that define public space for those not pushed to the margins (Belich, 2001). Not all children's places are spatially marginal in this way, however; some – like the favorite climbing tree in the corner of a public courtyard – exist within the same social spaces that adults frequent, but remain invisible to adults because they are unaware of their significance to children (Rasmussen, 2004).

In a sense, tumblr occupies both of these locations. On one hand, it is "off the beaten path" within digital space, less well-known and less integrated with offline life compared to more popular "must-have" services like Facebook, and thus exhibiting a certain level of invisibility from without. On the other, its lack of physicality gives it a portability and unobtrusiveness which allow it to be accessed from various physical spaces without the notice of others occupying those spaces – a trend which is only increasing as accessing tumblr through its associated mobile app becomes increasingly popular. The meaning of fandom tumblr as a "marginal" space is further underscored by the fact that the majority of users are girls and women, and that other marginalized groups – particularly those who identify as LGBTQIA, neurodivergent, and/or sufferers of mental illness, but also those of minority racial and religious groups – are far better represented here than in society at

large. These groups, too, of course, have also been pushed out of the "central" spaces of society, forced to make meaningful places in the liminal and hidden spaces of their own communities (Tonkiss, 2005).

To call such spaces marginal, however, may be a disservice to the centrality of their meaning to those who find homes there. Awan (2005), citing bell hooks' idea that the delineation of borders between the spaces of the dominant and the marginalized is itself a practice of silencing, argues that

location on the margins is a reality for all minority groups but it is most often seen as an unwanted place, a place that is occupied only through default – when there is no other choice. [The challenge is] to look at the margin as more than a place of pain and deprivation, to also think of it as a place of resistance; a place to locate home. The marginality that is the truth of our existence can then be transformed into something positive, it can become the site of creativity and intellectual rigour.

Tumblr users do not express a feeling of having been "pushed" to tumblr, but of having been pulled; they are not there because of the antipathy of other spaces, but because tumblr is where they have found friends, community, understanding, and a place to be themselves. This is not a place of retreat. Tumblr, though owned, managed, and coded by adults, was founded by a teenage entrepreneur on particular ideals of expression and community he felt the social internet was lacking, and it has been subsequently shaped by the values and activities of teens and young adults over the past decade. Fandom tumblr tells a story of young people who see tumblr as being "for them" because, as a community, they can make it what they need it to be. In their lives, this is a space defined not by its

location on the margins of the digital social world, but by its centrality of meaning to their own social experiences.

Chapter 1: Methodology and Approach

Artifact or Environment?

In the fall semester of 2016, I taught a special topics undergraduate course I called Youth Culture & Digital Communities. In one class, I posed a question about ethical responsibility to my students as we were discussing research methodology in online contexts:

If you're studying a community of bloggers, do you consider blog posts and comments to be texts or 'sources' of some kind? Or do you consider them social interactions? Blogs are 'public', but are they deliberate public statements, like a published memoir, or are they social interactions that happen to occur in public space, like telling a friend something personal while walking down the street? If they're the former, your ethical obligation as a researcher is to give due credit by accurately and thoroughly citing the author; if they're the latter, your ethical obligation is to protect the privacy of a subject involved in participant observation by *obscuring* their identity. These are mutually exclusive obligations – you can't follow both.

A faculty member who happened to be observing my class that day told me a week later that she was still turning this question over and over in her mind, at a loss to find even an approach to attempting to answer it. My students, I am happy to say, were able to agree almost unanimously on, if not a conclusive answer, then at least a worthy test of any answer which might be considered for a particular project or context: "Whichever does the least harm."

This question involves more than ethics, however; it impacts every aspect of how research is conducted and analyzed. In my view, this is the central question of framing research that relates to digital culture: are participatory digital media platforms *representations* or *expressions* of culture and human experience, or are they *spaces and places*, like those of the physical world, in which cultures form and human experience plays out?

Caliandro (2014) refers to digital spaces as "cultural artifacts", framing them as *products* of the combined contributions of people – programmers, designers, users – acting on them within the physical world. This is in contrast to Boellstorff's (Boellstorff, 2015) argument that digital spaces are "places", or even collections of places, forming unique contexts in which action and interaction play out at a distance from the physical world. Boellstorff's approach would seem to follow Sterling's (1992) description of "cyberspace" as "the place between the phones" – that is, the electronic landscape generated by connected devices which is "real" and "strangely physical" to its users, despite having no measurable substance.

The distinction between these approaches, and debate over their respective merits, is representative of a broad debate about both the authenticity or "reality" of digital social spaces and the applicability of traditional cultural research methods to them. This debate manifests in, among other things, ongoing disagreements about basic terminology in the kind of study I have undertaken here. Those who position digital interaction either as secondary or as necessarily part of a larger whole which includes offline contexts and cultures tend to favor terms like "connected ethnography" and "networked ethnography" (Domínguez, et al., 2007), which imply a study taking account of novel forms of interaction rather than exploring a digital space. These terms also implicitly qualify the methodology itself. Terms like "ethnography of the internet" or "ethnography of virtual worlds"

(Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, & Taylor, 2012), on the other hand, position the digital fieldsite as a cultural space and the subject of an ethnographic study much the same as that which would be conducted in a more traditional space; in fact, Boellstorff (2015) notes that his preferred term is "virtual anthropology", with "an unqualified ethnography as the modality" (p. 65). In making decisions regarding methodology, analysis, and theoretical framing, I have largely favored this latter paradigm.

Places of meaning are, of course, shaped by cultural practices and social interactions, and my intention in contrasting them with artifacts is not to suggest that interactions on tumblr or anywhere else occur in a space which simply exists as a neutral or meaningless container for activity. In fact, my central argument about tumblr's importance is predicated on precisely the opposite presumption: that places are more than locations, both ascribed meaning by their inhabitants and giving meaning to the interactions taking place within them (Agnew, 2011). By drawing a distinction between treating digital platforms as places and treating them as artifacts, I intend simply to point out that the latter has the capacity to reduce them to something representational or reflective, or to a mere channel of communication affording contact across or between places. I have chosen to follow the approach advocated by scholars like Boellstorff, and treat tumblr as much as possible as a meaningful place which is produced by and provides a context for interaction, because this framing foregrounds processes of collaborative meaning-making and the formation of community. It also reflects the deeper analytical and rhetorical goals I established for this project from the beginning, and in particular my desire to illustrate the importance of contextualized analysis of young people's use of participatory digital media, focusing on meanings, practices, experiences, and systems of cultural significance.

Structure or Experience?

I am aware of a certain irony – but also a space of opportunity – in positioning myself as a researcher at the interface of two fields neither of which can quite agree on how to name itself. "Childhood studies" (Qvortrup, Corsaro, & Honig, 2009), "children's studies" (Lenzer, 2001), "child and youth studies", and "the new sociology of childhood" (James, Jenks, & Prout, *Theorizing Childhood*, 1998) are all terms referring to much the same academic movement. This movement is founded on systematic critiques of what still remains, in Lee's (2001) terms, the "dominant paradigm" in scholarly approaches to understanding childhood – a framing which treats the category of childhood as imbuing a state of incompleteness, universalizes young people's natures and experiences, and cares more for "outcomes" relating to adult futures than for children's present childhoods (Green & Hill, 2005). Such critiques began to coalesce into something recognizable as an academic field three decades ago, around the work of scholars like Qvortrup (1985), who coined the oft-repeated argument that children should be understood as "human beings" rather than "human becomings"; it has, however, been argued that this was not so much a paradigmatic shift as an effort to turn attitudes which had long persisted among a small but productive minority of scholars into a cohesive theoretical movement (Tisdall & Punch, 2012).

Regardless of the history, there remain minor but still relevant divisions in how the field is constructed and identified. Coates (2001) points out that terms which reference a singular "childhood" foreground social structures, while others which reference plural "children" foreground experiences. "Children's studies", is, she thus argues, the most inclusive term yet coined, because it implicitly declares that "the subject of study is plural and designates living people who are currently children"; "after all, Women's Studies is never called 'Womanhood Studies' [because] no monolithic figure of Woman, no singular experience of being a woman at any point in history or culture, is sufficient to constitute an

arena of study" (pp. 140-141). Those favoring the more structural terminologies are often equally convincing in assigning priority to the analysis of childhood as a social institution, "a particular configuration of ongoing relations that give social shape and cultural meaning [which] precedes and frames any specific child, socially and temporally speaking" (Cook, 2002).

None of this is meant to suggest, of course, that such relatively minor differences in terminology create any true sharp divides among scholars who apply to themselves any selection of these terms. Nonetheless, the continuing diversity of approaches to naming and framing the field means that scholarly work relating to children and childhood – even when it agrees on eschewing the "dominant paradigm" – must continuously confront fundamental questions of theoretical approach similar to those facing research on digital cultures. For my part, I see value in prioritizing the analysis of both experience and structure, both the multiplicity of children's lives and the singularity of childhood's positioning as a social status. A view of childhood as contextual and a critique of universalizing thinking is fundamental to my rhetorical and research approach, but at the same time, I feel that valuable points of analysis are missed if childhood is not recognized as generally conferring a marginalizing and exclusionary status, however diverse and contextually embedded the appearance and experience of that status might be. I therefore attempt, throughout this work, to speak to experience and structure in turn where most appropriate to my observations and analytical goals. Meanwhile, I refer to the field in question, where necessary, as "childhood studies", mostly because this is the name used by the department and program within which I have conducted this research.

James and Prout (1997) argue that ethnography is a particularly useful methodological approach for integrating experiential and structural analyses, because it

allows the researcher to access sociological truth *through* lived experience, and foreground the importance of both.

"Fieldwork-based research encourages researchers to focus on the ongoing roles which children play and the meanings they themselves attach to their lives. [...] Ethnographic material which focuses on the present, ongoing social lives of children rather than their past or future [...] engage[s] in and respond[s] to the process of reconstructing childhood in society." (James & Prout, 1997, p. 5)

Childhood, in Qvortrup's (1993) terms, constitutes "a classical minority category"; as such, children's experiences can neither be separated from nor understood without regard to their overall treatment as an excluded and marginalized group. I recognized from the beginning that this work would need to engage with questions of social structure and inequality to produce a full and honest picture of young people's experiences with any participatory media context. Relationships between lived experience and the wider positioning of childhood and youth as social categories and ideological objects were thus a point of interest for me from the start, and as my research went on, they repeatedly asserted themselves as vital components of analysis. As a result, my methodological and ethical choices were shaped by the desire to both prioritize the contextualized diversity of children's experiences and confront the larger structures of inequality which shape young people's lives.

Defining the Field

Among the first things informed by my decision to focus on fandom tumblr as a cultural space was the way in which boundaries were drawn for my field site and sample of

participants. Treating the content and interactions hosted by tumblr as cultural products or artifacts might have led me to attempt to bound this study by cultural categorizations imposed by the offline world – to focus only on American users, for instance. By treating tumblr itself as a cultural context, and the primary one in which its users interact, I have ended up with a geographically and culturally diverse sample of users, including young people from Canada, the United States, England, Scotland, Ireland, Poland, and India, and most likely many more countries, as I did not actually ask even users I interviewed to volunteer their locations.

This theoretical framing downplays the significance of users' offline cultural contexts and interactions to some extent, something I believe has both disadvantages and advantages for my research. On one hand, it would be foolish to suppose that offline background and context do not inform tumblr experiences. The world beyond tumblr affects social interaction within the platform on a daily basis; I have, for example, witnessed users from various other parts of the world criticizing what they see as a United States-centric view of social issues on tumblr, clearly pointing to national and cultural divides among the site's users. At the same time, while most relationships among tumblr users remain within the bounds of this single platform, users often have a handful of close friends who are part of both their tumblr and non-tumblr social circles, and their relationships and experiences are clearly shaped by this overlap with their offline cultural contexts, immediate locales, and personal backgrounds. (Two of the users I interviewed are siblings, for instance, one of whom volunteered for an interview after the other put him in contact with me.) I therefore cannot discount or ignore the importance of offline connections, relationships, contexts, and experiences in shaping users' experiences of tumblr. Indeed, much of what I have observed suggests that the meaning users find in the fandom tumblr community is deeply related to their experiences in other social contexts, including offline

ones, if only because many come to tumblr seeking something they cannot find elsewhere, often because of some combination of interests, values, age, and other aspects of social location.

On the other hand, users are clearly both situated in and contributors to the construction of this digital culture regardless of their offline backgrounds. Furthermore, the vast majority of the average fandom tumblr user's connections to others through tumblr exist *only* through tumblr, and are not significantly limited by offline considerations. Most significantly, I believe that prioritizing and privileging the digital context in observations is part and parcel of constructing tumblr as an anthropological space. The necessity of constructing at least somewhat artificial boundaries around a semi-imagined cultural context is hardly a peculiarity of digital ethnography; anthropology as a field has long grappled with the artificiality of constructing sites of study "through the shifting entanglements of anthropological notions of 'culture areas'" (Gupta & Ferguson, 1997, pp. 8-9), as informed by nation, religion, language, race, and history, as well as by the interests and perspectives of individual ethnographers (St. Pierre & Pillow, 1999). No culture or community is impermeable; whatever field site an ethnographer chooses, its members will not spend the totality of their lives within it, nor will they necessarily feel that it defines their experiences in any meaningful way, as the mere existence of an ethnographic account might suggest. Increasing calls for multi-sited research freed from the constraints of conventionally bounded fieldsites aim to address this deficiency and achieve a larger, more integrated view of experience by following people and concepts as they traverse cultural contexts, but this approach leads to its own problems, beginning with the practicality of observation in such a moving and amorphous field.

I prefer to follow the approach advocated by Candea (2007), who argues that we should trade in the assumption of the fieldsite as a "found object" conveniently bounded for

our benefit not for an unbounded approach, but for a deliberate construction of the fieldsite as "an *arbitrary* location defined by the researcher as a framework for a study *of something else*" (pp. 24-25). In this view, the decision to explicitly *construct* a bounded site of study is an epistemologically productive choice, because analysis can be drawn with greater clarity when the limits of one's knowledge and perspective are deliberately situated and acknowledged. In the case of this study, the foremost such arbitrary-yet-productive boundary is that between tumblr and other sociocultural contexts, including the physical world, which are rendered primarily as points of comparison and sites of contextualizing experience. This is, I should make clear, not merely my own paradigmatic choice, but congruent with the statements of participants, who consistently construct tumblr as a space held apart.

This decision to treat tumblr as a cultural space and context did not, of course, mean that I could treat it as a single culture. To do so would have been not only methodologically difficult, but theoretically dishonest, as it would have betrayed my central goal of demonstrating the need for highly contextualized studies of digital youth culture. Thus, I chose to focus on fandom tumblr, and even within this vaguely defined culture and community, attempted initially to single out specific fandoms for analysis. This proved more difficult than I anticipated. For one thing, fandom communities have significant and complex overlaps in membership; most fandom tumblr users would not consider themselves a member of only one fandom, or indeed only three or five. In addition, my attempts at constructing a clearly bounded field here were hampered by the extreme pace of cultural change within tumblr communities, for which even my personal experience on tumblr before embarking on this project did not prepare me. Both digital culture and youth culture are in many ways defined by constant and rapid change, as spaces of social reconfiguration, political mobilization, identity reinvention, and cultural remix (Brake, 1985; Ito, et al., 2010;

Hands, 2011). One need only watch as tumblr users explicitly document the rise and fall of memes on a bi-weekly basis to understand how quickly elements of discourse and points of cultural engagement shift within this space, as this exchange between two users amusingly describes:

yall complain about ad targeting but then reblog weird ass memes like
bode and here come dat boi and then mutate jokes until they're
completely unrecognizable 'oh yeah why the fuck would tumblr think i
wanted to see an ad for amish clickbait articles' because your interests
make no sense, pal

'what could we sell to the kids this month? what are they into?'

'i literally have no fucking clue, jim.'

What surprised me more was the pace at which entire *communities* seem to rise and fall. I originally identified three specific fandom communities I intended to study, and had put a great deal of thought into each choice. The Marvel Cinematic Universe fandom drew my attention for its comparatively large size, and the dimension added by its continuity with the more established (in the online and offline worlds) Marvel Comics fanbase. The *Hunger Games* fandom intrigued me for its status in youth popular culture generally and its overt political engagement. Finally, the "Rise of the Brave Tangled Dragons" fandom, a crossover community founded on fans' appropriation and remixing of the animated films *Tangled*, *Brave*, *Rise of the Guardians*, and *How to Train Your Dragon*, piqued my interest because of its creative output and comprehensive re-imagining of the themes, characters, and settings from four disparate texts as constituent parts of a single whole.

Between the time I began preparing my dissertation proposal and the time I began my participant observation – only a space of about five months – I found the cultural ground had shifted significantly under my feet. The Rise of the Brave Tangled Dragons fandom was essentially dead. Occasionally, tumblr users would post long treatises offering their thoughts on how this had happened, often summed up by concluding that the crossover ideal had collapsed under its own weight as fans made continued attempts to add new popular animated films such as *Frozen* and *Big Hero 6* to the mix. In its place, a more diverse and open but less cohesive "animation fandom" had begun to emerge. The television programs *Steven Universe*, *Gravity Falls*, *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, and *The Legend of Korra* rose to the status of key texts, with *Voltron: Legendary Defender* and *Yuri on Ice* joining these soon after airing their first seasons in 2016. Meanwhile, the Marvel Cinematic Universe fandom began to disintegrate as many fans became frustrated with what they saw as poor representation of women and minorities, as well as poor plotting and character development, in *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (released in mid-2015) and *Doctor Strange* (late 2016). Many fans began to engage mostly with the *Captain America* sub-franchise, while others found themselves drawn to the nascent but quickly expanding DC Comics film and television universes. The *Hunger Games* fandom suffered perhaps the most ignominious end of all: once seen as a politically radical set of texts with the capacity to inspire real-world rebellions⁹, the *Hunger Games* trilogy is now most often referenced as a punchline about tropes of, in the words of one popular tumblr post, "mediocre white girls" implausibly saving the world in stories that distract from real-world injustice more than they address it. Unlike in the cases of the Rise of the Brave Tangled Dragons and Marvel Cinematic Universe fandoms, there has been no obvious rise of a new community to take the place of the *Hunger*

⁹ Phrases and imagery pulled from the books became common sights amid protests in North America in the early 2010s, and Katniss' three-fingered salute was widely adopted by protest movements in southeast Asia in 2014.

Games fandom; if tumblr were to be taken as representative of young people's literary tastes in 2017, it would seem that the age of the young adult dystopia is well and truly over.

As a result of these continuing shifts, not only would it have been untenable for me to attempt to study the same fandom communities I listed in my proposal, it would also have been extremely difficult to maintain *any* such boundaries through the 22 months of this project. As a result, this dissertation speaks to the experience of young people in many different corners of fandom tumblr – most of whom consider themselves "multifandom bloggers" and belong to several of these overlapping and shifting communities. The wider animation fandom and both the Marvel and DC fandoms are privileged somewhat in their representation, a holdover from my initial attempts to focus on the specific communities listed in my proposal, but many others are represented as well. Users I interviewed and those who were part of my participant observation sample counted themselves members of communities centering on, as examples: the *Star Wars* and *Jurassic Park* film franchises; the television series *Stranger Things*; the *Lord of the Rings* book and film trilogies; the video game *Life is Strange*; and the YouTube comedy group Rooster Teeth.

The Ambiguity of Youth

Within these communities, my primary interest was in the experiences of young people. Maintaining this focus, at times, posed challenges because fandom tumblr is populated by users of a wide range of ages. A key feature of childhood in modernity is its segregation from adulthood (Gillis, 2009), and most ethnographies of childhood take place in spaces either co-constructed with others in their age groups or designed by adults to house them (Rasmussen, 2004; Green & Hill, 2005). Those studies which do take place in multi-age environments in the physical world benefit from the fact that children and adults

are usually relatively easy to discern from one another based on appearance¹⁰, making it possible, at least in broad strokes, to isolate the experiences of young people.

In contrast, there is ample evidence that online communities organized around shared interests and identities – like fandom tumblr – are often highly diverse in age (Norris, 2002), and certainly are not clear child spaces like schools or play areas. Meanwhile, the explicit visual or social cues on which we might rely to identify young people in the offline world either do not exist, or are fragmentary and unevenly distributed – many users occasionally post selfies, for instance, which might give a general sense of their ages, but many others choose never to reveal their physical appearances at all. It can therefore be much more challenging to isolate young people as research participants in the digital world, even if deliberate deception by users regarding their ages is generally unlikely.¹¹

Complicating all of this further is the question of how "youth" as a category is to be defined and operationalized. Tumblr's official age minimum of 13¹² made this an obvious lower limit for my observations (though it is reasonable to assume people younger than 13

¹⁰ I hasten to add, however, that this is not foolproof; I worked as a research assistant on a survey project in 2016 in which it turned out that a couple in their early twenties had successfully convinced two separate teams of researchers that they were a teenage girl and her 30-something father.

¹¹ The question of tumblr users misrepresenting their ages, either in interviews or as they publicly present themselves on their blogs, was regularly raised by people I spoke to about my research. In general, this is unlikely to be a factor of any significance. Despite popular narratives of middle-aged predators pretending to be teens online in order to get close to their underage targets, it is actually far more common for young people to pretend to be adults online than vice versa, the result of adulthood conferring a privileged social status which users would be more likely to deceptively claim than cast aside (boyd, 2014; Caspi & Gorsky, 2006). Furthermore, since there is no obvious benefit to lying about one's age in order to participate in a study for which there is no financial or material incentive, I certainly do not believe this kind of deception is likely to have been at work in any of the interviews I conducted.

¹² This minimum exists because of the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act, a United States law which prohibits companies from collecting personal information on users under 13. Though I do not discuss this rule or tumblr's enforcement of it directly anywhere in this dissertation, it is worth keeping in mind as an example of the privacy concerns placed on young people by governmental and corporate forces which they themselves may not share, as I discuss further in Chapter 3.

do use the site, and some of them may have ended up among the users I observed and interacted with), but setting any kind of upper boundary was both practically and theoretically problematic. I initially decided that I would not follow any blog run by a user whose age I could not verify as 19 or under, based on a clear statement of age or high or junior high/middle school student status in their posts or blog description. This was hardly foolproof – to begin with, blog descriptions often go without updates for years, and in fact my own said I was 28 until a month after I turned 30 – but it seemed reasonably functional. I was more concerned with what I might be missing by excluding users who did not choose to publicly divulge their ages at all; perhaps this choice is tied in some way to experiences with or feelings about tumblr, or social media in general. However, short of sending a message to every user whose blog I came across asking their age, there was really no way to avoid this problem.

Another concern arose in the fact that while I could easily control the sample of users I followed, I could not similarly control the sample of users whose posts I saw. Because the majority of posts on any fandom tumblr user's blog are reblogged from others, there was no way of knowing the ages of the users actually creating much of the content I saw in the course of my time as a participant observer. My concern on this point lessened over time, however, as I increasingly came to understand that the curatorial aspect of the tumblr blog can make the act of reblogging just as much a component of self-expression for many users as posting original content. This impression was backed up by the statements of several of the users I interviewed, such as one who explained that "collecting your favorite things" is "a way to explain [your]self". Apart from this, original posts are at least easy to discern from reblogged ones, so I was able, where appropriate, to place greater emphasis in my observations on original posts made by users I followed, and on comments they added to posts they reblogged.

Interviews became a more difficult place to enforce a strict age maximum as, despite my specifying in my early recruitment posts that I was looking to interview users in their teens, a number of users in their early twenties volunteered to be interviewed and I was hesitant to turn them away. I eventually raised the "official" maximum stated in my later recruitment posts to 21. In the end, of the 27 users I interviewed, roughly half were over 18. The two youngest were 14, and most fell between 16 and 20. A single 23-year-old outlier volunteered late in the project, and I did decide to conduct this interview and take her responses into account, except when they seemed to clearly differ from others' on the basis of age.¹³ This slight relaxation of the age requirement was, I believe, somewhat offset by the fact that many of these users had been part of the community for years – although, as Punch (2002) reminds us, the recollections of adults are not to be taken uncritically as data regarding childhood.

More significant than the ages of individual interview participants is the fact that this process gave me cause to consider conceptual definitions of "youth" and "youth culture", and how these figure in my analysis. It was, I think, significant that all of the users over the age of 18 who volunteered to be interviewed – and, from what I can tell, the majority of fandom tumblr users in the 19-23 age range more generally – were college or university students. Post-secondary education is increasingly prominent as a rite of passage into adulthood in the minority world, and most post-secondary students see themselves as adults only "in some respects" (Arnett, 1994). This fits with a broader conception of youth as a transitional or boundary status, and one constructed through gradients rather than binaries. The question of when and how "adulthood" begins is not only one with which

¹³ For instance, she related that running a popular blog in a fandom of mostly younger teens made her feel the need to be "a good mom". Her comments suggested a feeling of being subject to social pressure, as an adult woman, to be nurturing or a "positive influence" on younger members of her community. This might have been a fascinating dynamic to explore had I had a more age-diverse sample of interview participants; as it is, I will just call it a possible direction for future research.

childhood studies routinely grapples as a field (James & James, 2012), it is one which has become increasingly difficult for contemporary society to answer in any meaningful way as the traits of stability and completeness which supposedly define adulthood become increasingly difficult to come by for many adults (Lee, 2001). "Youth" as a category bridges the hazy divide between childhood and adulthood, and is broadly understood to begin between the ages of 10 and 15 and end between the ages of 18 and 25, though some definitions stretch this all the way to the mid-30s (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, n.d.). The legal status of young people changes abruptly at several specific points in this age range, most strikingly at the age of majority (18 in most of the minority world), but the cultural, social, and economic status of childhood recedes more gradually. Accordingly, some scholars characterize youth as a performative status, decoupled from both chronological age and legal standing and constructed instead through positioning in a liminal cultural space understood as neither childhood nor adulthood (Evans, 2008). This status is both ascribed by others and claimed by young people themselves, as they actively negotiate the expectations and boundaries of a socially constructed "full adulthood" (Valentine, Skelton, & Chambers, 1998).

Much of my analysis rests on understanding fandom tumblr as a space of "youth culture", defined, as youth cultures often are, not by strict delineations of age but by patterns of social change, difference, resistance, and rebellion (Krinsky, 2008). In this context, a hazy cultural definition of youth is more apt than a binary categorical one; a university student living at home and economically dependent on their parents, for instance, while having the legal rights of an adult, is still in a position to be affected by the lack of social privilege granted "youth" as a category. It is also important to consider the fact that users themselves define tumblr as a youth space, recognizing that its culture is driven by young people in their teens and early twenties even if they are not its sole demographic.

This is in contrast to spaces like Facebook, which tumblr users often refer to either as the domain of adults or as a space for intergenerational interface, such as communicating with relatives.

I do not wish to downplay the relevance of the transition from the status of legal minor to that of legal adult, or for that matter of the differences in social status between high school students and post-secondary students. Certainly, both are dramatic shifts in the life of any young person, bringing new responsibilities, rights, and challenges, and protections. The differences in the ways individual young people occupy and perform the status of youth are equally – or perhaps more – relevant; a 21-year-old living with their parents, for instance, may be conceptualized as fitting into this category very differently from a 19-year-old living independently. Young people of different ages, cultural backgrounds, and economic circumstances experience the marginalization of youth and take part in youth culture in different ways. In drawing conclusions about fandom tumblr as a culture and community defined by people who occupy many different points within the broad liminal category of "youth", I have attempted to speak to their shared experiences and perspectives without overlooking their diversity.

Keeping it Digital

Differences of opinion abound among digital ethnographers regarding whether or not observation should be confined to online spaces of interaction. Taylor (2006), advocating for participant observation which crosses boundaries between online and offline, argues that it is vital to "attend to the interweaving of these spheres" because there are "phenomena that are unique to both spheres and also occupy spaces of overlap" (p. 19); this is particularly true when relationships among participants cross from online to offline contexts or vice versa. Boellstorff (2015), on the other hand, argues that online

communities should be studied "in their own terms" and the virtual interface should therefore constitute the primary or only means of interaction for the researcher. This "does not mean ignoring the myriad ways that ideas from the actual world impinge upon [the virtual space]; it means examining those interchanges as they manifest in the virtual world, for that is how residents experience them" (p. 64).

I took the latter approach both as a philosophical choice and as a practical requirement. My desire to focus on fandom tumblr as a bounded cultural space, and not to have my observations or analysis unduly shaped by constraints of geography and offline cultural context, led me to decide that my research would take place entirely online, within the tumblr context. I did not, for example, travel to participants' homes or other physical contexts from which they access tumblr to observe their physical interactions with the devices which served as connections to this online space, or the relationship between their use of tumblr and interactions with people and places in the physical world. My initial intention was to conduct interviews over Skype, as in-person interviews were essentially out of the question for practical reasons (ie, they would have limited my participant sample to those living relatively close to me). When tumblr introduced a real-time chat system in late 2015, I decided to utilize this instead, as it more closely fit my goal of keeping my research restricted to the specific platform I wanted to analyze. Tumblr's chat system is a very rudimentary text-based offering, without even the expressive potential offered by features like the extensive emoji and "sticker" support of options like Facebook Messenger. My committee members rightly challenged me to consider – beyond the vague notions of "authenticity" from which I started – the pros and cons of conducting interviews through this limited medium rather than, for instance, by phone or videoconference. I found I had to weigh my desire to keep my interviews "situated" within the typical context of interaction between tumblr users against, for instance, Gobo's (2008) charge that non-verbal aspects of

"speech", and thus the full meaning intended by an interlocutor, cannot be represented without face-to-face interaction. Indeed, I found myself struggling in both participant observation and interviews to produce that ideal medium of ethnographic writing, "thick description", without the benefit of a physical environment or even a simulacrum of one; it is perhaps no accident that digital ethnographers so often choose immersive graphical worlds as fieldsites rather than more conventional content platforms like tumblr (Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, & Taylor, 2012).

In the end, however, I decided that interviewing users about their tumblr experiences through the same tools they use to communicate with each other was an important way of taking the virtual context seriously as a research site, and situating meaning and knowledge within the virtual space. To privilege offline speech is to treat virtual interaction as somehow inauthentic, as if "valid only if always corroborated with interaction in the physical world" (Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, & Taylor, 2012). Furthermore, as Murthy (2011) observes, whatever loss or corruption of speech happens when an interview takes place through a text-only medium must also happen when a face-to-face interview is transcribed. Therefore, rather than chase an unattainable ideal of authentic reproduction of speech, we should focus on representing the voices of interlocutors as honestly as possible. This includes acknowledging that speech in digital communities is always technologically mediated, and that to dismiss this mediation as a polluting influence is to render the digital world itself ethnographically inaccessible as a whole.

Conducting participant observation and interviews entirely through the digital medium of tumblr was also a pragmatic choice, which I feel helped to break down social barriers between me and my young research subjects. As Green & Hill (2005) caution, there is an ever-present social power imbalance between children and adults that can result in multiple problems for research accuracy.

Children often find it difficult to dissent, disagree or say things which they think may be unacceptable. Children may have difficulty in believing that any adult will take their views seriously if their daily experience of adults dictates otherwise. At the same time children [...] learn very early on that they are part of a 'kids versus grown-ups' dynamic. (pp. 10-11)

As a result, adult researchers can easily come to be seen as potentially untrustworthy, judgmental, or antagonistic.¹⁴ In response to this problem, researchers like Thorne (Thorne, 1993) and Mandell (1988) advocate for the adoption of a "least-adult" role, in which, to the greatest extent possible, child-adult differences are suspended and the researcher participates in children's social worlds "as a child". The greatest challenge in adopting such a role is usually the obvious and ever-present physical differences between children and adults (Mandell, 1988). I was clear about my age in my blog description – notwithstanding my previously noted failure to update this in a timely manner – and interview volunteers were explicitly informed of my graduate student status in the project details I provided to them before they consented to be interviewed. Still, I hoped that the lack of overt and constant physical cues marking my age in interactions with my fellow tumblr users would help to break down the social barriers that would normally exist due to our disparate ages, at least to some degree, no matter how thorough my attempts at becoming the "least-adult". To the extent that such things can be ascertained, I believe the medium I chose for

¹⁴ It is worth noting that the relatively broad definition of "youth" I adopted in this study meant that the complicating influence of adult-youth social dynamics was more of a concern in some cases than others, or had the potential to manifest differently as I spoke to young people of different ages and backgrounds. While a first-year undergraduate student might still have the feeling of communicating with an "authority figure" in a research interview with a doctoral candidate, for instance, this is based more on an idea of academic standing than the strict social category relationship that exists between an adult and a young teenager. Regardless of their precise nature or provenance, however, minimizing the impact of perceived hierarchies or inequalities in the context of interviews was something that was on my mind throughout the project.

conducting interviews did indeed help to overcome this issue. One user I interviewed, a 16-year-old who worried that he might not "sound mature or very educated" and asked initially if he should make an effort to sound professional ("like no swearing no emojis?"), quickly seemed to find his comfort zone and used expressions like "aayYyyyYE" that young people would not ordinarily use in dealing with an adult perceived as an authority figure. He also happened to mention that one of his best friends on tumblr is six years older than he is, and describe tumblr as a place where people can interact casually with others they might not ordinarily see as potential friends or peers, which I took as some level of confirmation of the platform's potential to overcome social barriers between age groups.

My decision to conduct interviews exclusively through the tumblr chat system also arose from a series of arguments and compromises with Rutgers University's Institutional Review Board (IRB), based on ethical concerns I raised regarding informed consent procedures. While it was relatively easy to obtain IRB permission to engage in participant observation in the technically "public" space of tumblr without going through the process of getting individual informed consent forms signed for every user I encountered, approval for conducting interviews became a stickier point. My IRB proposal included a request to waive the usual requirement that parental consent be obtained to interview any person under the age of 18. I made this request for three reasons. The first was more a philosophical objection than anything else; it is my feeling that the procedure of obtaining informed consent from parents and merely "assent" (which does not require the subject to be informed about the nature of the research to the same level of detail) from children is a denial of agency and constructs children as less than full persons. It also, by generating a situation in which children may wish to participate but be prevented from doing so by parents, directly contravenes children's right to a voice on matters of interest to them as defined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. As a childhood studies scholar I

generally believe it is my moral obligation to take a stand against this kind of treatment of children in research.

Of more immediate and practical concern is the potential of this requirement to bias samples and influence responses. Coyne (2010) points to several problems in this category which have been demonstrated in past research: parents may presume the role of decision-maker for themselves and treat children as if they do not have the right to decline to participate; even in the absence of overt parental pressure, children may agree to research in order to please parents who have already given consent; children may give responses based on what they believe parents would find acceptable, even if promised confidentiality; and parents' refusal to give consent may exclude children wishing to participate whose voices would be invaluable. The latter is perhaps the greatest threat to research integrity, since parents' refusal to give consent might easily be directly tied to particular trends in family dynamics or other elements of children's experiences, the exclusion of which would skew results. To Coyne's list, I would add the fact that, in research such as mine where "first contact" is with young people themselves rather than with parents, participants may self-exclude from research based on their comfort level with seeing their parents come into contact, even peripherally, with the context of research.

This possibility brings me to the most significant issue presented by the standard requirement for parental consent: that any parental involvement in research with children has the potential to reveal information, however unintentionally, which may put children in danger of severe personal consequences. I was well aware from both previous research and personal contacts that tumblr often serves as a safe place for users to discuss things about themselves and their lives that they do not wish to share, or feel unsafe sharing, with people in their offline social circles – including their parents. Abuse, rejection, and neglect from parents has been documented as a result of disclosure merely of young people's

participation – not of any details of their behavior or statements – in studies of LGBTQIA youth (Mustanski, 2011, p. 677) and of teen drug and alcohol use (Coyne, 2010), tobacco use (Santelli & Rogers, 2002), and sexual activity (Rew, Taylor-Seehafer, & Thomas, 2000). Given the power parents wield to coerce information from their children and the technologies at their disposal to surveil their children's internet use covertly, even a minor incident which incites a parent's curiosity could lead to an elevated risk of disclosure of private information – for instance, by way of a parent simply locating a child's tumblr blog and all content they have posted on it. I therefore felt that a responsible research protocol aiming to maintain a minimal level of risk for all participants must ensure that the research process itself did not create a situation which might threaten the boundary between offline and online identities in even a minor way.

Based on these concerns, I wrote to the IRB requesting a waiver of the requirement of parental consent, citing the federal regulation that makes such a waiver possible when parental consent is "not a reasonable requirement for protecting children" (Department of Health and Human Services, 2011). The IRB initially rejected this proposal entirely, even going so far as to argue that "the rationale for the waiver, that the children might share sensitive information, is the reason the request for waiver is not appropriate", and that the parental consent requirement was justified because children might be "engaging [...] in activities that parents would not approve of if known"! Frustrated at the board's apparent lack of understanding that it was precisely the fallout from parental "disapproval" from which I wished to protect research participants, I reached out to the IRB office administrator, who helped me revise my proposal and strengthen the case for the requested waiver. The revised proposal was quickly approved, and participants were permitted to sign informed consent forms on their own behalf regardless of age. One concession I had to make in this revision process was a promise to collect no personal data from interview

participants whatsoever – inclusive of real names, locations, and even genders. Any information I have on these traits was gleaned from users' public blog descriptions. I also promised not to collect any contact information outside of the tumblr platform itself, including email addresses. Consent forms were sent through the tumblr chat system and users "signed" them by typing their tumblr screennames.

Presentation

My theoretical framings of both digital culture and childhood have also shaped my presentation of my observations and analysis in this dissertation in several ways. Early in this chapter I forwarded the idea that decisions on how to construct research contexts and communicate data should be informed by the principle of doing the least harm. My desire to take tumblr seriously as a cultural space rather than a collection of cultural artifacts would have, on its own, encouraged me to regard posts as "social interaction" which must be protected rather than "documents" which must be clearly referenced. The more important line of reasoning, however, is my desire to be respectful of young people's agency and responsive to their rights and their socially constructed position in society. Because of the specific potential for harm in the disclosure of their online activities, but also because they themselves tend to construct fandom tumblr as a space of "private" interaction, I feel it is important for me to do everything possible to avoid breaching their privacy, even in the context of "public" posts.

As a result, most of the tumblr posts I quote in this dissertation have been slightly reworded, to avoid the possibility that a reader might simply be able to Google a phrase from my research and find the blog of the user who posted it. Words have been replaced with synonyms, clauses have been reordered, and identifying references such as locations have been removed. Quotes altered in this way are marked throughout this document with

dagger symbols (†). The only public posts which have not been altered in this fashion are those which have accumulated more than 10,000 shares and likes; as discussed in a later chapter, extremely popular posts tend to take on "a life of their own" and become more well-known than the user who posted them, and it is reasonable to consider these shared artifacts of the fandom tumblr culture. Users whose posts have become this popular are well aware of the potential attention this brings them, and those who wish to escape this notoriety usually do so, most often by abandoning their blogs and starting fresh under new identities. Of course, quotes from interviews have not been altered, as these were conducted through tumblr's private messaging system and do not appear anywhere they might be found by others.

Similar concerns guided my decisions when it came to how I identify research participants. Although tumblr urls are already, in effect, "pseudonyms", they also constitute established and important identities in the tumblr context, which I feel it important to protect as much as I would "real" names in a more traditional ethnographic project. I also do not want to run the risk that something said in an interview might be traced back to a participant by anyone in their offline social circles who happened to know their tumblr url. However, I could not simply assign pseudonyms at random. Even in "traditional" offline ethnographic work, choosing pseudonyms is always an act of compromise between obscuring individual identities and maintaining identifications which resonate similarly with cultural, historical, and personal background (Saunders, Kitzinger, & Kitzinger, 2015). In the case of tumblr urls, which are self-chosen identifications reflective of interests, identities, and personalities, this is even more important. As such, I have attempted to replace users' tumblr urls with pseudonymous urls which maintain the "flavor" of the real urls they represent. This includes incorporating similar fandom references; using similar grammatical structures (eg, urls in the format "adjective-noun" replaced with pseudonyms

in the format "adjective-noun"); maintaining the user's choice of whether or not to include dashes (the only punctuation allowed in tumblr urls) between words; including identity markers (such as those referring to LGBTQIA identities) included in the original; and making pseudonyms as close as possible to real urls in length.¹⁵ None of the pseudonymous urls I have chosen are currently in use by a real tumblr blog, but it should be noted that this is in no way guaranteed to continue to be the case, as I felt it both unnecessary and inappropriate to "reserve" 30 or more urls under my account on the basis of this possibility.

The discussion of urls brings me to a few final, more stylistic choices which emerged from the principles outlined in this chapter – ones regarding orthography. Tumblr urls are never capitalized, either in the context of how the platform itself presents them or when users refer to one another. I maintain this pattern in this dissertation, despite the fact that I realize seeing "names" written without initial capitals may be slightly confusing for readers. Similarly, I also consistently refer to "tumblr" without an initial capital letter, as this is how most users tend to write the word, and I would prefer to follow their conventions rather than those of the "outside world" or the platform's corporate ownership.

Quotes from interviews have been left, for the most part, as they were typed by participants; only misspellings which were clearly unintentional have been corrected. For example, if a user consistently did not use punctuation, it has not been added. Non-standard words and phrases have not been changed, and where users neglected to start sentences with capital letters, this has not been corrected. On the other hand, misspellings that appear to simply be typos or spelling errors (eg, "becase" instead of "because") have been

¹⁵ I did consider asking participants to choose their own pseudonyms, but this has been known to present its own problems, not the least of which is the fact that participants may be more likely to accidentally reveal pseudonyms they choose themselves, either inadvertently or intentionally (Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, & Taylor, 2012).

corrected. Abbreviations and obscure tumblr vernacular have been explained in brackets where appropriate.

Choices and Perspectives

In general, I do not maintain that the choices I have made in framing, carrying out, and presenting this research are ultimately "correct". My primary goal in this chapter has not been to argue for any single "right way" of doing research with online youth cultures and communities, but rather to explore some of the key decisions which must be made in doing this kind of research, and explain my rationale for my own approach. My ultimate goal from this project's inception has been to advocate for a contextual approach which, in essence, sees online youth cultures as "real" cultures, rather than reflections or products of young people's patterns of interaction with technology. Only a research approach which focuses on participatory media spaces as cultural spaces in their own right, and foregrounds the lived experiences of young people in context, would present a compelling example of the value of this kind of research.

At the same time, I believe any research on youth culture must be framed within an understanding of childhood as a marginalizing status, and address the structures of inequality to which young people are subject. By this, I mean that attention must be paid to revealing such structures in the analysis of young people's lives, but also that research must itself work to overcome adultist structures and suppositions which persist in academia. It is for this reason that I have stood most strongly by my convictions regarding my ethical responsibilities to the young people I have met through tumblr when these have clashed with conventional research practice with children and youth, as in the question of the potential conflict between confidentiality and parental consent.

What follows is an account of one of innumerable online communities built by young people – and at that, one which, like any culture, is hazily bounded and ever-changing. In fact, it is quite likely that by the time this dissertation is read by anyone in its entirety, parts of it might have passed from a narrative of a culture as it is to a history of a culture as it was. This account is presented from a particular perspective, within a particular frame of analysis, and with particular rhetorical goals in mind. Another scholar studying the same community would undoubtedly write a completely different dissertation – if only because they would find different patterns and questions presenting themselves as points of focus, and different concepts emerging as bases of analysis. What matters is not so much this specific narrative of life in fandom tumblr, but the broader points it makes about the value and meaning online communities and cultural spaces have for young people, and the potential in approaching these communities and spaces with a particular kind of academic lens.

Chapter 2: Building Community

This is Real Life

Though I had followed hazelnutcorgi's blog for some time, and often shared her posts on my own blog, our first real interaction came when I sent her an ask about a recently released book we had both just finished reading. We exchanged a couple of messages on that subject, but didn't talk much until a mutual acquaintance suggested that she might be interested in my research. I soon discovered that hazelnutcorgi was an undergraduate student working on a degree in media anthropology, and while her primary focus was in film and fan studies, she also had an interest in interactive media and digital cultures. She happily volunteered to be interviewed as part of my research on tumblr, but we ended up having other conversations as well. At one point, as might be expected of two irredeemable media anthropology nerds, we ended up having a fascinating conversation on the nature of "reality" in online spaces. Hazelnutcorgi explained that she had been consciously trying to phase the term "irl" (an abbreviation for "in real life", referring to anything that happens offline) out of her vocabulary, saying that while this term points to a meaningful difference and is a useful shorthand for making clear that an experience happened outside of the internet, she preferred not to imply that online activity was anything less than "real".

This objection to the assumption of a binary opposition between the online and offline worlds was echoed by many of the users I interviewed, who were less interested in drawing distinctions between online and offline than between tumblr and other social spaces they inhabited on a regular basis, whether "online", "offline", or somewhere in between. This de-emphasizing of the divide between the digital and physical worlds is not particularly novel; for as long as there have been media researchers and commentators labelling contemporary youth as the "internet generation", there have been indications that

such labels are deeply ironic, applied to young people who do not see digital technology as a defining factor in their lives and experiences but simply another tool for purposes of social interaction, self-expression, learning, and entertainment (Herring, 2008). What is noteworthy, however, is the way these young people reject notions of online/offline dualism while also working deliberately to maintain tumblr as a space isolated from the rest of their social worlds.

The Physical, the Digital, and the In-Between

While online social spaces and experiences have been treated as fundamentally novel and exotic in a great deal of academic discourse (Herring, 2008), and the subject of significant moral panic in society at large (Krinsky, 2008), they are increasingly normalized within a growing paradigm which questions the validity of a worldview separating the "real" from the "virtual" (Chayka, 2015; Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, & Taylor, 2012). Much of this work deconstructs the online/offline binary by pointing to the ways in which daily life in the physical world is increasingly augmented by digital interaction, or constructing online socialization as equivalent to offline socialization in some fundamental way. Bird (2014), for instance, argues that mobile technologies have "eroded the real/virtual dichotomy" by bringing the use of digital tools into people's lives as they move through physical space. Meanwhile, boyd (2014) suggests that teens' engagement with digital media is primarily an effort to access public life in a society which increasingly restricts their access to physical space, and to find new opportunities to take part in the same social practices and rituals that have defined adolescence for decades.

Broadly speaking, this approach normalizes online socialization and deconstructs online/offline dualism by describing the increasing integration of the digital and physical worlds. But what of digital spaces that are not so integrated with offline life – or perhaps

even actively resist this trend of integration? Ito et al's (2010) comparison of "normative" online engagement patterns among adolescents with those common among cultural outliers and "geeks" suggests that while the former may indeed be defined by this trend of digital-physical integration, the latter often still exhibit a significant distinction between online spaces of meaning and young people's wider social worlds. "While the dominant and normative social media usage pattern is to connect with friends, family, and acquaintances," Ito et al observe, "some teens – especially marginalized and ostracized ones – often relish the opportunity to find connections beyond their schools" based on shared practices, interests, and identities (pp. 89-90). They go on to point out that the practice of forming new social ties online, as opposed to using digital tools to maintain existing ones, carries a heavy social stigma – one which I would argue is not addressed, and might even be reinforced, by a rhetorical shift toward legitimizing digital social interaction by gesturing to its integration with offline life and relationships.

Fandom tumblr is very much the kind of interest- and identity-based, non-normative community Ito et al describe here, and perhaps unsurprisingly, its users tend to strongly and deliberately resist its integration into the rest of their social worlds. When users assert that their experiences on tumblr are "real", then, they are not attempting to erase the divisions between it and their surroundings and experiences in the offline world, but positioning it as important in their lives *in its separateness*. In effect, they are implicitly arguing that the real/virtual dichotomy is spurious not because online and offline are inextricably intertwined, but because things that are wholly "virtual" can still be "real" if they have meaning to those experiencing them. This is reminiscent of Boellstorff's (2015) argument, in his analysis of Second Life, that "real" interactions are simply those in any forum which have genuine value, meaning, or consequences for those experiencing them,

and that virtual spaces are "distinct, yet connected, real domain[s] of human experience" (pp. xxii-xxiii).

Most fandom tumblr users display a clear desire to maintain tumblr as a context separate from the rest of their social worlds. At the same time, they prize "real" connections with one another above all else. The emotional importance users ascribe to the communities and connections they build through tumblr flies in the face of conventional discourse which perceives the internet as a place where social interaction is less than authentic. Their insistence that these communities and the identities they express therein are *more* authentic than their offline equivalents also challenges the notion that we can understand spaces like tumblr simply by tearing down the division between online and offline, or defend their authenticity by remarking on how intertwined they are with the "real world". In short, fandom tumblr forces us to examine what it is that makes a social space feel genuine, and what it is about both this community and the "offline" world (and its digital augmentations) that makes tumblr feel, for some young people, like a better place to forge connections with others and to be themselves.

In this chapter, I aim to provide some insight into the community fandom tumblr users have built (and continue to build) through this platform, and discuss how the practices, norms, and networks that define this community are made possible by tumblr's status as a "marginal" space. This status is in part the natural result of tumblr's relative novelty, its small core user base compared to other platforms, and users' shared enthusiasm for niche interests. Newly emerged and highly specific spaces of social interaction often exhibit a kind of cultural ambiguity which can enable marginalized groups, including youth, to engage in public expression and discourse outside of dominant social norms (Brinkman & Brinkman, 1997; Burton, 1983). Perhaps more meaningful, however, is the role of users' active resistance to the integration of tumblr with the rest of their social lives in

constructing fandom tumblr as a space of possibility for young people who find themselves unwelcome or their expression limited elsewhere. The young people of fandom tumblr, I contend, resist this integration in order to maintain this community as a space set apart from the norms, expectations, judgments, and institutions of everyday life, where they – at least to some extent – make the rules.

Introductions to Tumblr: "the friend that dragged you here in the first place"

Tumblr's official slogan, "Follow the world's creators", neatly implies both that tumblr is a powerhouse of creative energy with wide appeal and that the average user is intended to use the site to consume rather than to interact. A slightly wordier description of the site is found in the brief guide tumblr offers for new users:

We made it really, really simple for people to make a blog and put whatever they want on it. [...] Turns out that when you make it easy to create interesting things, that's exactly what people do. All those great, random blogs your friends send you, those are Tumblr blogs. We'll help you find and follow blogs like that, and we'll help other people find and follow yours. (Tumblr, What is Tumblr?)

The text then encourages users to find things they enjoy and reblog them, add commentary, and "make [them] your own" (Tumblr, What is Tumblr?). The implication is clear: tumblr exists for people to consume and share content. This is a clear marketing statement, and is reinforced by the way the functionality of the platform seems keyed to a content-focused approach and dismissive of purely social features; aspects of tumblr like messaging, comments, and replies are the subject of constant criticism from users, who find them lacking in features and poorly thought out.

Despite this emphasis on content from tumblr's corporate ownership at Yahoo,¹⁶ most fandom users are not brought to tumblr by the promise of creative content. When asked what first prompted them to join tumblr, only one of the twenty users I interviewed described being drawn in primarily by content, saying, "I wanted a place where I could see HTTYD [*How to Train Your Dragon*] stuff and Harry Potter stuff, and it seemed like there was a lot of that on here." A few others recalled independently searching for communities in which they could interact with others who shared their interests, and finding their way to tumblr through links or web searches: "I joined tumblr because I was very enamored with *Rise of the Guardians* and tumblr was the only place I could find pretty much anyone else that also liked the film." The vast majority, however, described friends (or, in a few cases, a sibling) telling them about tumblr and encouraging them to join. These friends described tumblr to them as a place where they would find new communities and friends with whom they could explore interests and parts of themselves that were not as appreciated or understood elsewhere. This included, but was not limited to, fandom interests. For instance, one user said, "after I started watching *Doctor Who* [my sister] thought that I would enjoy the site and I signed up right after she showed it to me"; another recalled, "[my friends] figured that since I'm a writer, an artist, and a huge geek, that I would enjoy [tumblr]".

These statements echo Ito et al's (2008) definition of *interest-driven* participation in digital spaces:

Interest-driven practices are what youth describe as the domain of geeks, freaks, musicians, artists, and dorks, who are identified as smart, different, or creative, and who generally exist at the margins of teen social

¹⁶ Verizon purchased Yahoo shortly before my research concluded. It is difficult to predict what impact this will have on tumblr, if any, and for the moment, Yahoo still exists as a subsidiary corporation and still owns and manages tumblr.

worlds. Youth find a different network of peers and develop deep friendships through these interest-driven engagements, but [interests] structure the peer network and friendships. It is not about the given social relations [...] but about both focusing and expanding on an individual's social circle based on interests. (p 10)

This kind of engagement with the digital world is not defined – at least, not exclusively – by a desire to satisfy one's interests with informative or entertaining content; rather, it is defined by a desire to find a community with which to *share* one's interests. The importance of material like fan art, gifsets, character analysis, etc is, in other words, not located in the material itself but in the social experience it fuels. It seems that this drive to seek out communities of people who share their specialized interests and identities is what attracts people who go on to become avid users of the tumblr platform. Although as users' time on tumblr goes on, defining their participation as purely or even primarily interest-based becomes less and less tenable, it is with exactly this kind of engagement that many start their tumblr journeys.

Popular text posts circulating on tumblr strengthen the impression that being introduced to the site by one particular friend is an almost universal experience. In one post with just over 471,000 notes, a user asks "where does your first follower even come from", to which another responds, "the friend that dragged you here in the first place". Interestingly, the friends who facilitate entry to the community in this way do not always remain friends, within or outside of tumblr. When I asked users if they still followed the people that introduced them to tumblr, a significant minority told me those friends had stopped posting in the intervening time, or that their friendship had waned or their interests diverged and as a result, they no longer kept in touch. One user told me that she

had never even exchanged tumblr urls with the friend who introduced her to the site, and that after two years, she "still [doesn't] know her tumblr to this day".

This may seem a strange concept – why would someone join a social platform on the advice of a friend, and not use that platform to connect with that friend? – but fandom tumblr operates under a unique set of social expectations. One of the most fundamental is the clear separation between tumblr and the rest of one's social world. Most people in this community maintain a relatively strict policy of not sharing their urls with people they know from other contexts, preferring for tumblr to be its own discrete social world. Widely sharing one's tumblr url – for example, by posting it on Facebook – was described by one user as "a snafu", and even sharing it with close friends was termed "a huge indicator of either trust or naivete". I discussed this phenomenon in detail with several users I interviewed, enquiring about how this separation functioned and what its benefits were, leading to exchanges like this one with tumblr user fastporcupine:

fastporcupine: i rather not have people i know irl follow me

researcher: so is there no one from outside of tumblr that knows your url?

fastporcupine: im pretty sure some of my friends have seen my url
but they dont follow me, but one of my really close
friends followed me but i blocked her
and no tumblrs just full of people i know from the
internet

researcher: so what's the benefit of that for you?

fastporcupine: well i mean it just allows me to be myself and have my own internet life without it invading the people i know and having them ask about some of the things i blog and some of my personal posts

researcher: what do you think it is about tumblr that makes this a particularly good place to have that kind of separate online life?

fastporcupine: honestly bc [because] u can meet anyone on tumblr and like

u might not know people irl in a particular fandom but on tumblr ull [you'll] always find someone w [with] the same interests

and people are usually always supportive

Fastporcupine's assertion that the separation between tumblr, as a space for connecting specifically with those who share one's interests, and the offline world directly enabled her to "be herself" is one of many statements I heard from users directly linking a nebulous conception of personal authenticity to interaction within this specific social space and a disconnection from other spaces. In her case, this feeling is directly tied to a sense of freedom to express her personal thoughts and feelings without consequences within her established social circle outside of tumblr. She notably inverts what might be the expected use of the term "invade", worrying not that others would "invade her privacy", but that in sharing the wrong things, or too much of herself, in other contexts she would be pushing a level of openness and familiarity onto others with which they might not feel comfortable. The idea that tumblr serves as a record of one's thoughts – especially, in the words of

another user, "the things I don't talk about to other people" – is shared by many, and highlights the level of trust involved in the decision to share one's url with a friend, even the one responsible for one's introduction to tumblr in the first place.

During another interview, I mentioned the apparent ubiquity of the experience of a friend facilitating one's introduction to tumblr. This user, undomesticatedbigfoot, responded with surprise at the notion that anyone might have found their way to tumblr by any other means, asking, "isn't that what happened to you[?]" I had not thought about this question, since it was academic interest that led me to create the account I had spent most of my time on tumblr using for over a year. Undomesticatedbigfoot's question prompted me to recall my initial entry to the world of tumblr in 2013, not as an academic but as an ordinary fan looking for a place to interact with other fans. To my amusement, I found that not only was undomesticatedbigfoot correct – I had, indeed, found my way to tumblr on the urging of a friend – but my experiences almost precisely followed the pattern described by fastporcupine. Though I know the url of the friend who brought me to tumblr, I have never followed her blog, and never shared my url with her. This was partly because our fandom interests did not particularly align, but more than that, it was because we both seemed to instinctively see tumblr as a place to create new networks, rather than replicate those from the offline world. After having that personal tumblr account for almost four years, I still have only shared its url with two people I first met offline. Only one person I did not meet through tumblr knows the url of the younger account I created when I started this project in 2015.

It is difficult to speculate on how fandom tumblr users so quickly acquire this understanding that urls are extremely privileged personal information outside of tumblr itself. Given that the norm on most social media platforms is to keep everything connected, and sharing one's url widely on Facebook takes only seconds while it would be logical to

assume gaining an understanding of the different norms on tumblr would take much longer, it is remarkable that more users do not make this "snafu" early in their tumblr experiences. None of the users to whom I posed the question of how they understood so quickly that tumblr urls were not commonly shared indiscriminately could offer an explanation. Upon reflecting on my own experiences, however, I concluded that perhaps this understanding came to me implicitly before I even signed up for tumblr, from the fact that others in my existing social network – at least some of whom are probably using tumblr, given the platform's popularity – have not shared their own urls with me. The "islanding" of tumblr thus becomes, in a way, self-perpetuating.

This islanding is another significant departure from how Yahoo seems to think tumblr should operate for most users. Perhaps the most obvious sign that tumblr is intended by its corporate developers to be integrated into users' wider social networks is the option it offers allowing a user's blog to be easily connected to their Facebook or Twitter account, with the ability for every post made to tumblr to be automatically shared to either platform. In 2014, a tumblr user made a post asking others to "Reblog if your Tumblr is NOT connected to your Facebook." Another user soon added a gif of Ezme from the Disney animated film *The Emperor's New Groove* shouting, "Why do we even *have* that lever?" (see Figure 5), implying that they believe no reasonable person would want to see their tumblr blog linked to their Facebook profile, and that even offering the option is silly and pointless. Clearly, many users agree; this post currently has over 1.1 million notes. The fact that the gif being used to communicate this assertion is drawn from a film with a relatively significant following on tumblr helps to mark this response as one coming specifically from the fandom community.

So what is it about keeping tumblr separate from the rest of life that makes it easier to, to borrow fastporcupine's words, "be yourself and have your own life"? From my own

experience as well as conversations with other users, I was left with the sense that what tumblr offers, first and foremost, is a lack of "baggage". On tumblr, as one user put it, "you can be anyone you want to be" – not, I should clarify, in the sense of pretending to be someone you're not, but in the sense of being unburdened by identities you might feel trapped in in day to day life. Fastporcupine gave the example of "trans/genderfluid people [...] that have a new name, they can go by that name [on tumblr] and feel no pressure to use their [...] birth name". Others mentioned anxiety about having either their fandom interests or their more personal posts "scrutinized" by those who know them from other contexts if they were to allow tumblr to become integrated into their larger social worlds. As Ito et al (2010) note several times, interest-driven communities often form around interests and identities that are marginalized or misunderstood. It makes sense that a place like tumblr, which has come (through no apparent intention of its creators) to serve as a platform for these kinds of communities, would establish a convention of isolating itself from the wider social world in which that marginalization occurs. It is noteworthy, also, that the only user I spoke to who more widely shared her tumblr url with existing friends – specifically noting that she "went to high school with all [her] first mutuals" – did not become part of fandom tumblr until much later, at first using tumblr with these friends as a way to exchange personal thoughts and "random funny pictures". It seems that a more friendship-driven approach to tumblr, like the one this user describes, might do less to encourage keeping tumblr as an isolated social space.

Early Days: "I really had no idea what I was doing"

The convention of tumblr remaining separate from offline life presents a unique challenge for new users. Where establishing a presence on Facebook often means searching for people one already knows, many of whom Facebook might automatically find and suggest adding as friends, users new to tumblr need to form new social networks essentially

from scratch, generally with a maximum of one or two previously known individuals with whom to start connecting. Add to this the sheer scale of the platform, and it is easy to see that for a newcomer, tumblr can present a confusing and overwhelming experience. With over 300 million blogs and an average of 45 million posts per day, finding what you're looking for is a daunting proposition, made no better by the fact that, as users often point out, the platform's search functionality is disappointing at best. In fact, finding what you're looking for has been made *more* difficult by a series of updates to the platform over the last few years. It was previously possible to search tumblr by "tags" – keywords added to posts by users to describe their content, categorize them within the user's own blog, and enable others to find them.¹⁷ While tags still exist, however, tumblr's search function now returns any post which contains the search term(s) in its text – an important difference, since a search of the words users employ in tags to categorize their own posts is much more likely to find relevant blogs than a search including the full text of every post on the site. Another removed the ability to track tags, which had allowed users to set up a list of tags they were interested in, view the number of new posts in that tag since their last search, and easily search that tag again at any time. Users – especially those relatively new to tumblr – frequently used these features to find blogs to follow, and no equally suitable replacement has appeared or seems to be on its way. As I have gone through the process of establishing a new network of fandom connections on tumblr twice, once before these changes and once after, I can speak to the fact that not being able to track tags, and thereby keep a constant eye on activity in certain fandoms, made this process more difficult the second time around.

This disorienting experience is, if not by devious design then at least by convenient coincidence, in Yahoo's financial interest. Users do not pay for tumblr – there is no fee to

¹⁷ This is the "official" purpose of tags. In practice, they have been adapted for multiple uses by tumblr users, some of which will be described in detail later in this dissertation.

create or maintain an account, no "premium tier" of membership offering extra perks or privileges, no monthly fee users can pay to remove advertising from their dashes. The only way tumblr collects any money directly from ordinary users is through the selling of premium blog themes – and with the use of such themes considered a newbie mistake worthy of intense mockery by veteran users, who point to the hundreds of free themes available from hobbyist designers on tumblr and elsewhere, this is unlikely to ever be a large business. Thus, as with other social media platforms, the money is in advertising, and advertising on tumblr mostly takes the form of sponsored posts and blogs. It is therefore to Yahoo's direct benefit for new users, lost in the midst of the sheer volume of blogs available for them to follow, to begin their tumblr journeys with recommended content instead of striking out on their own.

Yahoo sells tumblr to advertisers as a cultural touchstone of the digital world, where enthusiasm and creativity centered on specific topics unite people into communities that thrive on sharing ideas and art with one another. Business-oriented news sources, adopting the same content-focused perspective, discuss tumblr's value to advertisers in terms of "a massive scale of highly engaged consumers eager for interesting content" (Savitz, 2013). They also warn of the threats it supposedly faces from newcomers like Snapchat and Giphy (Fiegerman, *How Yahoo derailed Tumblr*, 2016) – content-focused platforms that lack most of tumblr's community and social features. The recommendation systems employed both within the platform's interface and through emails reflect this vision, presuming that what users want to be directed to is "quality", "original" content.

Signing in to tumblr for the first time, a user arrives at a welcome page posing the question "What're you into?", offering recommended blogs in categories such as "museums", "celebrities", "funny", "travel", and "cute". Clicking through to some of these categories and taking a cursory glance at the blogs being recommended begins to reveal the

monetization strategies at work. Blogs from sources like the Huffington Post, Vogue, Time Magazine, and Concordia University are represented, along with the blogs of painters, webcomic artists, and financial advisors, and even niche humor blogs like "If Paintings Could Text" and "sad desk lunch". It is unclear how many of these blogs have paid to be recommended to new users, but one might assume the blogs of large corporations and institutions, at least, have paid significant amounts of money for the privilege. Yahoo's emphasis on content is made clear, again, by the way this recommendation system operates, presenting the site's content as organized into neat categories that bely the rambling messiness of many users' blogs.

Recommended blogs are also delivered to users by email, unless they choose to opt out of these mailings. In my past use of tumblr as a relatively ordinary private citizen, I have always chosen not to receive emails from tumblr, but I decided early in this project that there might be something academically interesting about these emails, so I left them enabled on the new account I created for research purposes. Along with the almost daily notifications of new followers on my blog, I received messages on a roughly weekly basis with subjects like "Your blog cravings, satisfied", "5 blogs worth your follow", and "Today's trending blogs". Inside each was an eclectic selection of blogs, each represented by a truncated description of ten to fifteen words and, in many cases, images from three recent posts. These messages directed me to everything from the official tumblrs of Harvard University and the Globe Theatre to the blogs of ceramics artists, Swedish pop bands, and fashion photographers. As time went on and I established a network of connections on tumblr, these emails showed no attempt to match their recommendations with the content I had demonstrated an interest in or the communities of users within which I was active. The assumption seemed to be if these emails bombarded me with a large enough selection of

sponsored blogs in a wide enough variety of categories, eventually I would have to find one worth following. As yet, I have not.

The recommendations do not stop as a user becomes more established, though they do arguably become less invasive and more relevant. Emails do not stop unless specifically turned off, but the welcome page only appears once. After that, logging in takes one directly to the dash, where alongside the main column of posts from followed blogs is a sidebar containing a list of recommended blogs. At least one of these is usually sponsored, and marked as such, but others are selected based on the user's interests, presumably on the basis of posting similar content to blogs they already follow or having followers in common. Sponsored and recommended posts are also inserted directly into the content on the dash. The latter is a recent addition which has not been popular among users, some of whom I have seen point out in posts vaguely directed at tumblr's development staff that there may be reasons they *don't* follow certain others with whom they share interests, and furthermore that being able to choose who and what appears on their dashes is, to them, an important part of the tumblr experience.

This is yet another point of significant divergence between the use patterns the corporate forces behind tumblr expect from the average user and the way fandom tumblr users actually use the platform. When asked about their early experiences and how they found blogs to follow, only one user I interviewed mentioned ever following a blog that tumblr had recommended to them. For my part, I follow 140 blogs on the account I created for my research, and perhaps two or three of these were recommended to me by tumblr. In general, fandom users exhibit a pattern of stumbling into communities by searching for users whose interests match theirs and then exploiting second- and third-degree connections: "I would search things I thought were interesting and then just follow as many blogs as possible," recalled one user. "I learned to look [at] the blogs the people I was

following were reblogging from and to check those blogs out too." "I really had no idea what I was doing," admitted another. "This probably lasted maybe six months or so [...] I just kind of reblogged everything that I came across."

This early "follow spree", which nearly every user I spoke to recalled going through, was in most cases followed by a slower, more deliberate process of unfollowing users with whom they turned out not to have so much in common after all. At some point, this gave way in turn to an ongoing process of following and unfollowing through which users continually refine their tumblr networks to better reflect both their content interests and their social needs. A significant amount of time and effort goes into all of this, but the reward is equally significant: a network of social connections based on personal choice to a much more significant degree than any other in the average teen or young adult's life.

Like the absence of "baggage", this freedom to construct social networks for themselves from the ground up is a particularity of tumblr to which users ascribe great value. Over and over, users described both offline social networks and online platforms like Facebook and Twitter as being dominated by connections determined by outside forces – proximity, institution, or social expectation. Young people are typically expected to make their friends in the rather artificial social environment of schools, hierarchical "places for children" in which they are segregated into biological-age cohorts and their interaction takes place under adult supervision and rules (Rasmussen, 2004). This is hardly a recipe for finding friends who share one's interests and values, and this is especially true if those interests are outside the norms of mainstream culture (Ito, et al., 2010). "Offline friends are usually made because of shared classes," explained 17-year-old high school senior ice-cold-hooligan, "which is helpful but I don't have that strong of a bond with them."

Facebook, meanwhile, has become dominated by social norms that dictate connecting with family members, coworkers, classmates, and all manner of distant "real-world" acquaintances. The social norms and expectations surrounding Facebook (and other highly social platforms highly integrated with offline life) also do not make it easy to experiment with potential connections the way tumblr users do with their quickness to follow and unfollow, especially in their early days on the platform. Connections with anyone but people one regularly spends time with in the physical world are dismissed as "fake" and unimportant, and teens, especially, are criticized for friending "random" others (Cuthbertson, 2016; Lenhart & Madden, 2007); meanwhile, being unfriended or unfollowed has become an important and highly negative violation of social expectations (Bevan, Ang, & Fearn, 2014). In contrast, continuously tweaking and experimenting with one's network by following and unfollowing blogs is so expected a pattern of interaction on tumblr that I regularly see users make posts assuring one another that unfollowing them is perfectly okay, and will not be seen as a personal affront. In short, tumblr provides an opportunity to create a community of one's own choosing which is, to various extents, lacking under the particular conditions and norms of other social spaces young people inhabit.

Though the users I interviewed generally treated the constraints and norms of offline society and highly integrated online spaces as simply *existing* without particularly discussing the structures behind them, it is worth noting that these are at least in part a function of social power dynamics between children and adults. Jenkins (1999) and boyd's (2014) work speaks to this in some ways. Both argue that young people have moved into the digital world to create social spaces and networks of their own because of the increasing circumscription of their social lives offline, which has occurred as a direct result of an ideology among adults that insists children's well-being is directly correlated with adult supervision and control. No longer as able as young people in past generations to create

their own places of meaning and construct their own social networks offline, contemporary youth have taken to the internet, and found in social media a kind of new, culturally flexible space that opens up possibilities for accessing public life. It is worth noting, however, that, as Trotter (2013) puts it, "Facebook has been slowly colonized by the very forces teens signed up to escape: watchful parents [and] too-old adults". Even a few years ago, teens may have been able to, in boyd's words, find "a public of their own" on Facebook or Twitter. As those sites have become increasingly tied to offline social life, however, they, and the networks and activities teens can access through them, have become increasingly subject to the same social norms and controls as offline social spaces – norms and controls that are primarily constructed by adults.

What tumblr offers is a space in which young people can create their own networks unhampered by the expectations and pre-existing social dynamics of the physical world and its augments. Though Yahoo attempts to shape these networks through recommendations, sponsorships, and highlighted posts, users for whom this ideal of a "freeform" social space carries great importance generally reject those attempts, sometimes quite vociferously.

Followers and Notoriety: "it's nice to get a reaction"

Tumblr users may have an exceptional degree of control over the users they follow, but the process of being followed by others is much more unpredictable. Connections between users on tumblr function much like they do on Twitter or Instagram: there are no groups or other formal systems for bringing people together en masse as there are on Facebook, and individual connections are non-reciprocal, with one user able to follow another's blog without approval (though users can block one another from seeing their posts) or any requirement that the second user connect in any way with the first in return. Follower counts are not public data on tumblr unless users choose to share them, and are

not taken particularly seriously or directly associated with any real form of status, although the occasional post relating follower counts in specific ranges to titles like "egg", "hatchling", and "super hella dragon" does circulate within fandoms. Users are sometimes described by others with the ill-defined term "tumblr famous", but one user I spoke to whose follower count was over 10,000 – many times the average¹⁸ – rejected this term, seeing herself as just another ordinary user.

Practices intended only to build up a larger follower count (such as the infamous "follow for follow") are uncommon in fandom tumblr and self-promotion for the sake of self-promotion is frowned upon; instead, users employ practices specifically intended to help them connect with others who genuinely share their interests. A common example is posting a list of one's fandoms and other interests, with a request that others reblog the post if they share any of these, thus not only allowing the op to find a new connection, but potentially helping a significant number of people grow their tumblr networks. Users with large follower counts "promoting" lesser-known or new users is also fairly commonplace.

The most effective way of gaining followers on tumblr, however, is simply to make one's own posts, since users often click through to the originating blog of a post they enjoy in order to look at that user's other posts and potentially follow them. The more notes a post gets, the more likely this is. While this might make it seem as though users who produce high-quality creative content are likely to be directly rewarded with followers and potential friends, in fact, the general feeling among users is that this is not the case. Several of the users I interviewed described feeling that it was impossible to tell in advance whether or not a post would get any attention or lead to any new followers, and there is certainly a

¹⁸ A small "survey" I conducted by making a post asking users to reblog it and tag it with the number of users who followed them and the number they were following revealed that for the majority of users, each number was between roughly 100 and 600.

level of unpredictable luck to this. However, there are certain kinds of practices which seem to make it easier to build a base of followers, and these tend to center on notions of subtly but intentionally building community through the posting of particular kinds of content relevant to particular interests.

One interesting phenomenon which emerged from my discussions with users in fandoms of different characters and scales is the double-edged sword of posting content in these different kinds of communities. My original assumption had been that posting content relating to more popular fandoms and interests would tend to help amass followers, and this is certainly the case for some. Elkcentral, a 20-year-old college student who has been on tumblr for some time, named "relevance to a popular show/movie" as one of the key determining factors of whether a post will "blow up" (that is, gain a large number of likes and reblogs), placing this alongside "humor" as a valued trait in content. Among the users I have interacted with, those whose follower counts number in the thousands or tens of thousands tend to be those who have been active and producing original content in fandoms with large tumblr communities for several years. Such users sometimes become the equivalent of "household names" in their tumblr fandoms, seen as leaders and core figures in their communities. On the other hand, being active in smaller fandoms can have its perks as well, and lead to gathering an audience which may not be as large, but is often valued more highly by users on the basis of deeper and more consistent engagement. Several users I interviewed expressed feeling that smaller fandoms tend to be closer-knit communities in which it is easier to get to know people. 17-year-old carelesandwrong, who primarily identifies herself on her blog as a member of the relatively small fandom centered on YouTube group Rooster Teeth, said "it's like towns vs cities", explaining that small fandoms give users the opportunity to develop a familiarity with the entire community rather than merely a small selection thereof.

Regardless of the scale of the community in which one is trying to establish oneself, the importance of posting original content is clear. Many users express a desire or even a sense of obligation to "contribute" to their fandoms, and a feeling of not fully belonging if they lack the artistic skills or impulses to produce fan art, fanfiction, and other forms of the remix creativity that drives fan culture, and there is a sense that these sorts of contributions are what bring followers, notes, and more generally, awareness of one's presence. 18-year-old dastardlyartist, an aspiring writer and artist active in several fandoms including those devoted to the television series Supernatural and Doctor Who, told me that she was "working [her] way up the ladder of tumblr popularity" as she both improved her artistic skills and gradually discovered what kinds of posts would be appreciated most by others:

dastardlyartist: my writing and art don't usually receive much
attention. I'm hoping that will change in the future.
[...]

researcher: what kinds of things do you write/draw/make?

dastardlyartist: I draw photo realistic portraits of actors and
characters that I like. I always need a reference
image though, which I suspect is what makes the
pictures less popular. People would rather see
original fan art, which I've tried, but just can't seem
to get the hang of.

The role of original posts' artistic quality in generating attention for a user is not as simple as this might make it seem, however. My own experiences, as well as those of other users I interviewed, point to the key role of working toward a certain ideal of "authenticity"

in the self-representation that emerges from the collection of content on one's blog. This includes original artwork, which is often valued more within fandom communities for being personally expressive or in some way novel within the community than for aesthetic merit. Fandom tumblr, as a culture, values creativity and originality, but it also values personality, something dastardlyartist hints at when she notes that even photorealistic paintings – which require an impressive level of technical skill to create – are less appreciated if they are based directly on reference images than if they are original in content and composition.

It is also worth noting that what constitutes making a "contribution" to one's fandoms can be defined quite broadly, and can include primarily social activities as well as creative ones. One post in which the op laments that they do not feel they possess the right creative talents to contribute to their fandoms has been answered with comments that define "contributing" as including activities such as reblogging others' art, engaging in discussions with other users, writing reviews of fanfiction, posting recommendations of favorite blogs, and even "converting" people to the fandom (ie, introducing them to the fandom's source text and encouraging them to become part of the community).

With such a diverse range of ways to be active in fandom communities, it perhaps makes sense that many users would make efforts to establish particular roles or niches for themselves in these contexts. For the users with the largest followings, reputations within fandoms are built on consistently contributing something unique. Some users, for instance, might become known as the people to follow for in-depth character analysis posts, or for behind-the-scenes news about upcoming films, or for amusing image manipulations. Hazelnutcorgi expresses some pride in being known for "ruining people's days with sad jokes"†, and clearly understands her relative fame within her fandoms as being related to her particular sense of dark humor.

I will return to these notions of authenticity and fandom "niches" in greater detail in chapter four, as they relate to the concepts of identity construction and presentation on tumblr as well as to that of community. For the moment, the primary point I wish to make in regard to patterns of how users gain followers within fandom tumblr is that it is much more complicated than posting "quality" content in a popular fandom. Despite Yahoo's marketing of tumblr as a platform for consuming and sharing masses of "interesting" and "creative" content, users follow each other for reasons concerned at least as much with relationships and community as with any notions of filling their dashes with any definition of the best tumblr has to offer. They prefer to seek out others they see as projecting "real" selves on their blogs and bringing unique voices to the community, because following, to these users, is not merely a mechanism for determining the kind of content one sees. It signals the beginning of a relationship, which is continued through actions such as reblogging, replying, commenting, sending asks, tagging the other person in posts, and using the chat system to communicate in real time. Hazelnutcorgi summed this up nicely by explaining that the value of followers and notes is not in seeing them as any measure of status or accomplishment, but in the potential that being known brings for interaction: "it['s] nice to get a reaction out of people", she told me, and to see others respond to the things you write and create.

Friendships and Community: "once a mutual, a mutual for life"

Finding blogs to follow is easy. Gaining followers is less predictable, but essentially a certainty, at least to some degree, for any reasonably active fandom blog. Finding *friends* is more difficult. Friends on tumblr usually start out as "mutuals" – users who follow each other's blogs. Although the platform does little to formally recognize this status, the idea of a qualitatively different kind of connection existing between two users who follow each other is strong among the user base. Mutuals generally make up a minority of a person's connections on tumblr (especially if that person runs a popular blog with thousands of

followers, as it would be unusual to follow anywhere near that many blogs in return), but they are the basis of friendship and close community on the site.

Users I interviewed described mutuals – even those they do not interact with directly on a regular basis – as important and emotionally meaningful connections. The way they describe these connections complicates the view of fandom tumblr users as engaging exclusively, or even primarily, in "interest-driven" participation. It also questions Ito et al's (2010) assertion that "friendship-driven" practices center exclusively or primarily on local friends met through school and activity groups. Fandom tumblr users follow a pattern of shifting gradually, over the course of months or years, from a clearly interest-driven form of engagement to one which defies this kind of categorization. As followers become mutuals and mutuals become friends, tumblr becomes less a space for engaging with one's special interests and more a comfortable community. One user, who joined tumblr in 2012 at the age of 14, said she and her mutuals had "grown up together". Another discussed, at length, the deep connection she feels with her mutuals and the way this connection overrides changes in her interests:

fastporcupine: some months there will be random bursts of fandom things [on my blog] bc i get obsessed w something and that's been happening more frequently

researcher: so your fandom interests kind of come and go?

fastporcupine: yeah totally

researcher: what does that mean for connecting with other people in fandoms? like in terms of following blogs and having mutuals and such, do you find those connections come and go too?

fastporcupine: well mutuals kinda keep you in a fandom, so im close w all my mutuals bc we keep each other in our fandoms and also drag each other into each other's other fandoms. but no once a mutual a mutual for life. like once u feel like ur falling out of a fandom u can hit up a mutual of that fandom and ur back in deep.
[...]

researcher: what makes that bond so meaningful?

fastporcupine: well i mean like mutuals always reblog each other's posts and reply and like stuff so even if u dont talk, u will always be mutuals. it's just that when somebody knows u so much already and knows the real you through ur blog it's hard to not be friends w them

researcher: so any of those things, reblogging, leaving a reply, those can be just as important for maintaining a friendship as having a private conversation would?

fastporcupine: yeah definitely

A significant amount of effort goes into the maintenance and performance of connections between mutuals, even those who do not consider one another "friends". Posts that encourage users to share bits and pieces of personal information, or to ask each other

questions that range from the mundane ("Can you drive a stick shift?") to the deep ("Are you good at hiding your feelings?") to the oddball ("what creature visits your dreams most often?"), are prevalent and widely shared, and most responses to these come from mutuals. Fandom content often appears in these posts even when it would seem to have no direct purpose; for example, a list of "Disney asks" prompts users to simply send the word "Ariel" to another user as shorthand for asking where they think they belong, or "Peter Pan" as shorthand for asking if there is something from their childhood they still love. When users receive personal questions from followers, the answers are often posted publicly, making the interaction part interpersonal bonding, part public performance of friendship, and part presentation of self to the wider community.

The difference between "mutuals" and "friends" is hazy. Users I spoke to generally described mutuals as being, at the very least, "low-key friends". One popular post declares that "if we mutually follow each other there's at least a 20% chance I've referred to you in a real life conversation as 'someone I know'"; another user's tags on this post, which were copied into a comment by a third user when they reblogged the post,¹⁹ read, "'someone I know' #I know someone who' #I HAVE THIS FRIEND'". Many users drew a distinction by describing friends as mutuals they "talk to", which generally includes exchanging private messages and asks on a regular basis. For some, making this transition can be a nerve-racking proposition, and several of the people I interviewed described sometimes feeling too shy or anxious to initiate a conversation with another user. One indicated that "certain people feel more approachable than others", and these are the users with whom it is easier to make friends. Several others described friendships often starting by accident; ice-cold-hooligan gave the example of how she became friends with hazelnutcorgi, saying, "I asked

¹⁹ This is a relatively common practice if the tags in question are seen as humorous, informative, or relatable, and are not overly personal.

her about why she was reblogging so many posts about toilet paper [one night], and we just started talking and now we're friends."

On the other hand, tumblr users sometimes take very deliberate steps to overcome their own shyness or help others do the same. Posts with simple calls for closer connections (eg, "mutuals send me a 'hey'") abound, and this post encouraging mutuals to share contact information currently has over 414,000 notes:

okay if we're mutuals u can

- ask for my phone number
- snapchat
- instagram
- facebook
- skype
- twitter
- kik

this has been a psa²⁰ thank u

Specifically inviting others to ask for this kind of information signals that the user making or reblogging this kind of post is open to new friendships, potentially contributing to their apparent approachability as described by the user quoted above. Sometimes existing friends will take matters into their own hands with someone who is having particular difficulty making new friends on tumblr, as exemplified by one user I interviewed, who explained, "back then [when I first joined tumblr] i was super shy so my

²⁰ The term "psa", short for "public service announcement", is used on tumblr to indicate information a user thinks it is important for others to be aware of.

friend had to stage an intervention [...] she pretty much told everyone that follows her to go talk to me and alas, i made some friends". Despite feeling "terrified", this user met some people who are still friends over two years later.

Despite the fact that the communities in which these interactions take place are geographically distributed and initially formed based on marginalized interests and identities, these practices are a departure from what Ito et al (2010) describe as typical for interest-based participation, and align much more with the typical practices of "friendship-driven" engagement, concerned with "day-to-day negotiations" of "affiliation, competition, [...] self, reputation, and status" (p. 16). The personal interactions between mutuals through practices like sending and inviting asks, and the explicit efforts to deepen connections and transform mutuals into friends exemplified by posts encouraging more personal kinds of communication, demonstrate the same kind of overtly socially-oriented "hanging out" behaviors that typify friendship-driven engagement.

Indeed, tumblr users do not just describe other users they consider friends as being equally important to them as offline friends; in many cases, they define them as being functionally equivalent. "Internet friends are kinda like illegally downloaded friends," declares one popular post. "You don't get the physical copy but you still get all the great content". Quite a few users I spoke to went further than this, saying that tumblr friendships are ultimately stronger and more important than offline ones because they are built on more solid foundations. In a society that, as discussed earlier, generally expects young people to form friendships in what are ultimately very artificial and constraining social environments, the opportunity to seek out friendships with others based on shared perspectives, interests, values, and experiences is something to be prized. Ice-cold-hooligan described tumblr friendships, compared to offline ones, as "in a sense stronger, because

we're so many miles apart yet I feel that I'm closer to them than I am with my friends offline. I also tend to share a lot more similarities to them."

The post quoted above demonstrates an important nuance to the previously discussed separation between tumblr and the rest of users' social existences: this separation can be somewhat asymmetrical. Though saying that mutuals may ask for non-tumblr contact information does not mean that a user will give out this information freely to any mutual who asks, it does seem that social connections can move from tumblr to other contexts more freely than vice versa. This supports the notion that the emphasis on keeping tumblr "separate" from other social contexts is due to the perceived constraints of those other contexts in terms of topics that can be freely discussed, people with whom one can forge connections and friendships, and self-presentations that are possible. Allowing someone who has already been privy to the deep personal expression that characterizes tumblr for many users to "cross over" to a space of shallower, more constrained interaction like Facebook is easily seen as less emotionally risky than the reverse.

Bringing people from "isolated" online contexts into one's wider social world is seen by many users as a natural outcome of the possibility tumblr affords for meeting people who share one's interests and values but whom one would never have met by more conventional means. This view is detailed in a popular post titled "Why meeting someone online isn't weird at all":

-
- Our generation grew up with technology and the internet
 - Since we all grew up with technology, we know all about internet safety.
 - If you're going to meet in person, you're going to sure as hell confirm their identity before you do so because you're not an idiot.

- We aren't naive enough to believe out of billions of people on the planet, our soulmate or even best friend is going to live next door.
 - Joining blogging communities involves socialization
 - Gaming online with thousands of people? You're bound to click with someone
 - Everyone is connected through the interwebs
 - It's easier to find someone you relate to online compared to in person
 - Not everyone is trying to catfish or abduct you
-

The argument that it is "naïve" to believe one's "soulmate or best friend is going to live next door" is particularly striking, given that young people have often been criticized using precisely that word for thinking that their online friendships are genuine. In general, the argument here, and the argument that many users made in interviews, is that friendships made through tumblr are not unusual or emotionally different from offline friendships in any fundamental way. Instead, the difference users see is primarily in the social limitations and conditions of possibility in each context. Tumblr, as a space defined by interaction within chosen networks free from the social expectations of offline life and integrated online spaces, offers thousands of potential friends from around the world, more diverse in their backgrounds, interests, and identities than any school cohort might be.

Freedom to Build

In each of the interviews I conducted, I asked what it was that, in each user's opinion, made tumblr "different" from other social media platforms. Perhaps the most telling thing about the responses I received was not the particular content of any one of them, but the fact that, despite the question not specifying what kind of differences I was interested in, every answer I got related to the culture and community users experienced through the site.

The question could just as easily have been interpreted to refer, for instance, to the substantial differences in functionality between tumblr and other social platforms – the wide range of media types it supports, the unique way reblogs carry comment threads with them, the customization features, and so on. Only one person remarked on these kinds of differences, and even he also discussed the site's community. (Although I obviously have no responses from users outside of the fandom tumblr community to which to compare these statements, it seems likely that these responses represent feelings about the social meaningfulness of fandom tumblr specifically; those with different patterns and priorities of engagement with tumblr might well have foregrounded technical functionality.)

For some, the sense of tumblr as a unique community was tied up with notions of its users as creative and interesting people. "On [tumblr], I am surrounded by people with good ideas and creativity. I can reach out to people. I feel more appreciated for [...] having good ideas," said high school student and filmmaker *adriaticofficial*, who went on to specifically link this feeling to tumblr's isolation as a social space. Tumblr's creativity was also linked, by others, to the openness of its community and the way posts tend to be shared for reasons other than the perceived quality of content. *Carelessandwrong* remarked, "tumblr has so much creativity that you don't get to see elsewhere because other sites like only to show the best of the best [whereas] here you can actually see artwork that you like and not just art that is [technically perfect]".

Others, in describing the uniqueness of the tumblr community, focused more on its status as a "safe spot", where you "don't have to worry about people u know irl judging you". For many, this simply meant that they could indulge their interests and passions more openly, and "nerd out" about subjects like animation or musical theater with a community that would understand those interests rather than judge them for them. "People on tumblr aren't afraid of being a little wild and crazy, or sharing the things they love," said

dastardlyartist, while adriaticofficial remarked, "I can be more happy [here]. I don't have to act serious, or worry, or 'grow up'. I can be enthusiastic." In keeping with the idea of fandom tumblr as a community which most users join out of a desire for interest-driven interaction with others, this notion of "nerding out" recalls elements of what Ito et al (2010) describe as "geeking out", a mode of interaction defined by "intense commitment or engagement with media or technology, often one particular media property" (p. 66). I favor the term "nerd" here not only because it is the more common parlance on tumblr (and was used by significantly more people among the users I interviewed), but as a nod to slightly different practices and forms of status. Ito et al describe communities engaged in "geeking out" as relying on practices requiring highly specialized skills and assigning status based on technical proficiency and knowledge. This is not the case on tumblr, where there is in fact a longstanding discourse mocking any attempts to establish "geek cred" over someone else, and dismissing conventional judgments of whether or not one is a "real" fan as elitist and exclusionary.

For some users, the sense of safety and acceptance was also associated with more significant aspects of their identities which they felt the need to hide in most other spaces; several LGBTQIA users described being open and proud about their orientations and identities on tumblr long before they were comfortable being out with their families or local communities, or in other more mainstream online spaces. "It's not like I can go on Snapchat and be like 'Howdy y'all I'm bi!' the people at school would have a field day", said simplisticswashbuckler, who explained that her conservative Christian parents would probably kick her out of the house if they learned about her sexuality.

Some users made comments focusing on the ease with which they could find and interact with like-minded people on tumblr. Undomesticatedbigfoot said that "everyone on [tumblr] is so much more approachable" than people on other forms of social media, saying

that although this was partly because of shared interests, "also there are a lot of people that honestly just wanna talk too, and are super friendly with whoever hits them up".

Meanwhile, dastardlyartist explained that, as someone with serious social anxiety, she finds tumblr a more comfortable, lower-stakes social environment, in which she is less "scrutinized" and generally finds it easier to strike up conversations with people.

Not once did I receive an answer to the question of what makes tumblr different from other social platforms which cast tumblr in a negative light. No one pointed out a way in which Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, or Snapchat was superior, in terms of its technological affordances or its community. There may be something of a selection bias here; I have wondered if people who had more positive feelings about tumblr might be more likely to volunteer for this kind of interview. Nevertheless, it is telling that no one expressed even mixed feelings. Many of these users did, elsewhere in these interviews, criticize various aspects of tumblr, from the way advertising is handled to the "intense" and "angry" climate that sometimes emerges among users around political or controversial topics. Clearly, tumblr is not seen as being without flaws – but when compared to anything else, it comes out on top.

Moreover, it became clear to me through interviews and observations that in asking this question, I was focusing on a somewhat artificial point of comparison. That is, tumblr is not, in most users' minds, in the same category of social spaces as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, or Snapchat. One user I spoke to went so far as to refer to tumblr as "the anti-social media", an amusing triple entendre that simultaneously calls attention to the attraction tumblr holds for outcasts and introverts, the way it enables users to socialize at their own comfort levels from moment to moment, and the way users construct it as qualitatively different from other social platforms. To young people for whom online social activity holds little novelty, tumblr and Twitter do not belong in the same category simply because they

are both "social networking sites". Over and over, users drew a distinction not between categories of online and offline, but between tumblr and the rest of their social worlds. Other social platforms were described as essentially part of offline life, with the same connections and the same expectations.

As Becker (2016) points out, what we continue to imagine as "new" forms of technology are not actually new anymore – an entire generation has grown up never knowing a world without personal computers, and the first Facebook users are now in their 30s. Many social networking platforms have been successfully integrated into everyday life, and social norms and controls relating to their use are well established. On Facebook, for example, research has found that clear norms exist in relation to friending and unfriending, posting and sharing specific kinds of content, interpersonal conflict, and the use of Facebook for business purposes. While these norms, like those in offline settings, vary by age, gender, and other elements of social location, overall, they are consistently defined and enforced, and they generally reflect offline norms (McLaughlin & Vitac, 2011).

Because opportunities and contexts for social interaction are continually changing, novel spaces where norms are ambiguous and marginalized groups are able to assert their own ways of being always exist *somewhere*. When social norms, expectations, and systems of control managed to exert themselves in the pool hall that had been the domain of youth through the 1910s, young people moved on to the newly-minted penny arcade; when the same happened to the ice cream parlor in the 1950s, they moved to the rock & roll club (Burton, 1983). This is not to suggest that young people are in continual "retreat" from the encroachment of adult social control, but rather that spaces of social and cultural ambiguity hold a kind of possibility for building communities and structures which answer better to non-normative needs and priorities, and that, consequently, excluded groups – including young people – tend to seek out such spaces.

Around the turn of the 21st century, the emerging context for interaction that mainstream adult society had not yet learned to navigate and control was the internet in general. "Cyberspace" was still considered a reasonable word, and in even the most populous and well-known of digital spaces (AOL chatrooms and graphical MOOs, the latter a term I will admit I had to look up), social norms and group dynamics diverged sharply from their offline equivalents (Suler, 1996). When the millennial generation was in its teens, in other words, everywhere you went online, you were in some kind of novel and culturally ambiguous space, disconnected at least to some significant degree from offline life. This is no longer the case for the teenagers of the mid-2010s. Thanks to a succession of social platforms that specifically aimed to augment offline social activity rather than offer an alternative to it, online and offline identities and social networks have collapsed into hybrids and the boundary between digital and physical has broken down into a fuzzy space of augmentation and integration (Chayka, 2015). Where, then, are the "marginal" spaces of social freedom for young people to be found in 2017?

One answer – of many – is tumblr, and this is not simply by happenstance. Tumblr users have consciously resisted the integration of their platform with the offline world, and thus resisted the absorption of their community into the social norms and networks that dominate the rest of their lives. In so doing, they have been able to maintain tumblr as a space in which they feel relieved of the baggage that follows them from their offline lives to other corners of the digital world. On tumblr, they can engage with interests and identities that may be less understood or accepted in their everyday worlds of school, family, and Facebook; create networks and communities that defy the constraints of conventional social spaces; experiment with self-presentations and find unique ways to fit in, contribute, and express themselves; and make friends with whom they often feel an intense emotional closeness despite their geographic distance.

Research on tumblr is still scant, and much of what exists consists of large-scale quantitative studies. One of the few academic forays into tumblr that has attempted to take an interpretive approach to a particular community on the site is Bell's (2013) work on tumblr's "queer social justice community". Bell's interpretation of the site's culture is not kind; she refers to tumblr as a "toxic" space of "rigid, pedantic and counterproductive" mores that limit discourse and interaction, essentially arguing that the façade of a social order supposedly freer than the mainstream creates its own repressive norms. This is not an entirely unfair judgement, and many users who criticize tumblr's at times charged and argumentative atmosphere may agree with much of it, but it misses the point of what makes tumblr unique and important. Tumblr does not pretend to be free of judgement, ingroups, outgroups, status, expectations, or even cruelty. The important point is not whether tumblr is or is not "freer" than mainstream offline society, or the online spaces deeply tied thereto; the important point is that it has remained sufficiently free *from* the influence of mainstream offline society that it has been able to produce its own particular set of social norms at all.

Tumblr offers unique conditions of possibility to young people for building communities specifically because it has defied integration. While much of the social space of the internet has transitioned in the last fifteen years from something new, different, and separate to an extension of offline life, fandom tumblr remains a firmly digital island. As the social norms, expectations, and structures to which young people are subject in offline life have adapted to apply to popular online spaces like Facebook, tumblr has remained stubbornly apart of many of these external expectations and constraints, offering young people a place to establish their own ways of being and being together much as the youth of decades past did in the video arcade or the mall. In this chapter, I have examined how young people have taken advantage of this space of possibility to create a community in which the

norms of connection, interaction, and friendship feel, to them, less limiting than those they are faced with elsewhere, and less like they are imposed arbitrarily from without. Going forward, I will examine some of the particular norms and practices this community has established around notions of privacy, identity, and political discourse, and how these work to meet the particular needs of the young fans who have made tumblr what it is.

Chapter 3: Managing Privacy

A Paradox of Sharing

Bisexual Visibility Day has been celebrated on September 23 of every year since 1999. As with other observances celebrating marginalized identities, it is a significant event on tumblr. One way in which users who identify as bisexual celebrate this day is to post selfies. On Bisexual Visibility Day in 2016, a user I follow posted a selfie in which she wore a shirt in the colors of the bisexual pride flag (pink, purple, and blue), and displayed a rough facsimile of the flag drawn on her shoulder in what appeared to be highlighter.²¹ She smiled widely in the photo, and the first line of the caption enthusiastically wished everyone a good day, but immediately below this was a line that added a less positive layer to the post's impact: "I'M STILL CLOSETED OFFLINE! DO NOT SHARE!"† written in bold, italicized, all-caps text.

I was immediately struck by the bravery this post demonstrated. For a young woman who did not yet feel safe and comfortable enough to come out to her family, friends, or school community to post an image proudly identifying herself as bisexual where it might theoretically be accessed by anyone in the world is remarkable. I soon began to consider, however, that perhaps my interpretation of this situation did not reflect this user's experience. After all, the users I had interviewed had routinely described fandom tumblr as a safer space than the offline world. Simplisticswashbuckler, who (as noted in the previous chapter) plainly expressed fear for her physical safety in the event that her parents discovered her sexual orientation, told me that tumblr's fandom communities had been, in her experience, far more supportive of such diversity than other communities she had experienced, both online and in the physical world. She did not feel in any danger sharing this aspect of herself here. She referred specifically to the Harry Potter and How to Train

²¹ This image description has been slightly altered to protect this user's identity.

Your Dragon fandoms, noting the books' and films' themes of "acceptance" and "changing perspectives", and said she felt safe with members of those communities because "those themes get embedded in the hearts of the people who love those stories and just make people kinder". As I reflected on the Bisexual Visibility Day post described above in the context of statements like this, I recalled another post, titled "when ur family doesn't know ur gay"†, in which a young woman sarcastically answers her family's repeated questions about her "boyfriend" while waving a pride flag in the background. Perhaps, I considered, being out and proud on tumblr was not seen by these users as an act of bravery or even a public statement in the same way I was perceiving it.

As well as being an interesting insight into the connection between fandom and community, this example raises some questions about a concept that is often far more complex than it is imagined to be: internet privacy. At its most basic, privacy is the right to control the flow of information about oneself. This simple definition, however, masks the significant variety in its potential interpretations. What kinds of information are considered personal or privileged, how spaces are defined as public or private, how control over information is exerted, how potential audiences are categorized as acceptable or unacceptable recipients of certain kinds of information – all are open to interpretation and make the meaning of privacy different to different people in different contexts.

What is "Internet Privacy"?

In her research on MySpace and Facebook, Livingstone (2008) notes an apparent contradiction between young people's use of social media that arises from its being both a space for the deliberate and intimate presentation of self and a space in which privacy is not only valued but an active daily concern. I have observed a similar contradiction in my research on tumblr, amplified to some extent by the fact that tumblr is, at least in technical

terms, much *more* public than many other online spaces. Although sideblogs²² can be password-locked, primary blogs are open and viewable by all. Individual blog posts are indexed by search engines like Google. Neither posts nor information on users' blog descriptions (brief introductory statements featured in sidebar or header elements of most blog themes) or about pages (optional pages separate from the main blog screen featuring more in-depth information about the blog and user) can be restricted to specific audiences the way access to individual posts and profile elements can be limited on Facebook.

Individual users can be blocked, but while this makes it impossible for them to communicate with the user who blocks them directly through asks, chat messages, or reblogs, it does nothing to protect privacy as all the blocked user needs to do in order to visit the blog in question is log out.²³ Ironically, the fears many parents express that "anything you put online can be seen by anyone" – which are by and large unfounded in the contexts of most social networking platforms, with their extensive privacy controls – are entirely reasonable on tumblr. And yet, this is where many young people have chosen to go, much more than Facebook, to share their innermost thoughts and the parts of themselves they reasonably fear could bring them harm if the wrong person found out about them. Fandom tumblr users, from what I have seen, seem to view tumblr as *more* private than Facebook and other more mainstream online spaces, as demonstrated by, among other things, their willingness to share information – like their sexual orientations – which they feel would endanger them if shared in other contexts.

²² Users may have multiple blogs associated with a single account – a single primary blog and up to 99 "sideblogs", also known as "secondary blogs", although most users do not even have one and few would have more than two. Unlike primary blogs, sideblogs can have multiple authors and can be password-protected. However, only primary blogs can use tumblr's social features (such as following other blogs, sending asks, or chatting with other users).

²³ As of late 2016, it appeared tumblr might be moving to introduce an option that would let users restrict their blogs to viewing by logged-in tumblr users only.

Livingstone argues that this paradox of young people at once readily disclosing personal information and expressing concern for their privacy appears because young people define internet privacy in more nuanced and interactive terms than are allowed by either the dominant discourse of internet privacy or the tools at their disposal on social networking platforms. Rather than constructing privacy in terms of the disclosure of certain types of information, they prioritize extensive control over "who knows what".

The point is that teenagers must and do disclose personal information in order to sustain intimacy, but they wish to be in control of how they manage this disclosure. As Giddens says, 'intimacy is the other face of privacy'. However, [...] problems undermine teenagers' control over such disclosure. The first is that their notion of 'friends' is subtle while that of the social networking sites is, typically, binary [...] Being required to decide whether personal information should be disclosed to 'friends' or to 'anyone' fails to capture the varieties of privacy that teenagers wish to sustain. Indeed, being visible to strangers [...] is not so much a concern, notwithstanding media panics about 'stranger danger', as that of being visible to known but inappropriate others – especially parents.

(Livingstone, 2008, p. 10)

As discussed in the previous chapter, tumblr does not operate under the same binary system of "friends" and "non-friends" that defines Facebook and once defined the now-defunct MySpace. Although the follow system could be used to break down ties between users into basic categories of mutual followers, non-mutual followers (ie, one user follows the other but not vice versa), and mutual non-followers, none of these categories implies access to any information that is not available to the others. Regardless, as explored in the

previous chapter, users have constructed social meanings for "mutuals" and "friends", as well as "fandoms" and other community-centric terms, which go beyond the meanings imposed by the platform. In a similar way, they have adopted specific understandings of, and approaches to maintaining, privacy which help them achieve their goals in sharing and controlling information despite the relatively basic technological affordances of the platform.

The Conditions of Children's Privacy

Like "online" and "offline", "public" and "private" are not binary absolutes. Between the extremes of a conversation between two friends in a locked soundproof room and a raucous debate between public figures aired on international television stands a wide field of social contexts in which expectations of privacy are implicit, partial, and uncertain. Notions of "private" and "public" have traditionally been highly spatialized; the primary place in which privacy is expected is the home, the "personal castle" in which one is separated from curious eyes and ears by walls and, in many cases, by physical distance (Holvast, 2009). Mass media upsets this paradigm by creating virtual public spaces which transgress physical boundaries, increasingly allowing audiences ranging from governments to curious neighbors to witness people's behavior despite their being "behind closed doors" (Westin, 1970; Stefanone, Lackaff, & Rosen, 2010). Social media in particular has come to be seen as a threat to privacy because it holds an expectation of public activity and disclosure on the part of all users while at the same time invading and overlapping with spaces, like the home, the private nature of which has traditionally been thought of as sacrosanct.

This concept of privacy as the product of the home as "personal castle" may be treated as a normative expectation, at least in the contemporary minority-world context,²⁴ but it

²⁴ My participant group is fairly diverse in national origin, with interviewees hailing from at least seven countries on three continents and many more parts of the world likely represented within my

can hardly be said to apply universally in lived experience. Cramped or communal living arrangements, whether due to cultural priorities or lack of socioeconomic means, can make privacy more difficult to achieve in practice, and complicate the notion of the home as "private" space (Newell, 1998). Furthermore, respect for privacy is often granted by others based on moral judgment or otherwise subjective, arbitrary, or discriminatory criteria. Young people, as a social category, find themselves in a particularly poor position on both counts. They are disadvantaged practically – forced by law until they reach the legal age of majority, and often by socioeconomic circumstance in the years immediately thereafter, to share living space with those most likely to disrespect their privacy. Meanwhile, they are subject to moralizing social discourse which often does not find them "worthy" of privacy (Warren & Laslett, 1977). In fact, recent research suggests that constant and detailed surveillance of youth – at least those under the age of 18 – is not only widely accepted, but fast becoming the default condition under which young people live and families operate (Wingfield, 2016). The geography of children's privacy thus stands in stark contrast to the normative "personal castle" paradigm, a situation which is only exacerbated for children who are also marginalized on other axes such as socioeconomic status or sexual orientation.

If a private space is defined as a space in which one is able to retire into solitude and exert the maximum possible control over which of their thoughts and actions are known to others (Holvast, 2009), children and teenagers, realistically, can rarely be said to experience the domestic sphere as a private space. For young people, the "private" sphere of the family home is constituted through relationships of power, in which children are almost always the less powerful parties (Holloway & Valentine, 2000). Thus lacking power within the social

participant observation sample. However, only one of my interviewees – a girl from India – lives in a majority-world country, and tumblr is generally dominated by users from North America and Europe. I therefore feel it is reasonable to assume that broadly defined minority-world social norms form part of the context of interaction with and through tumblr for most users represented in my research.

environment of the home, young people tend to experience residences as "adult space in which children are often denied privacy, and 'boundary' disputes are common" (Matthews, Limb, & Taylor, 2000, p. 61). In Kraftl's (2013) words, "the private sphere is seen both as a place of refuge and as apolitical in the sense that individuals within it are free to make their own decisions [...] However, it is often the heterosexual/adult/married couple that is privileged" (pp. 115-116). This is due in part to explicit parental rules, restrictions, and efforts to directly undermine children's privacy – for instance, in cases of parents entering children's rooms and going through their possessions without warning or permission – but also to the arrangement and use of physical space within the home. Children are typically the least likely members of the family to have their own individually private spaces within the home to which they can withdraw (Qvortrup, Bardy, Sgritta, & Wintersberger, 1994), and in spaces they share with their families, may find themselves under constant scrutiny, as parents listen in on their conversations and read over their shoulders (boyd & Marwick, 2011).

The foundation of this pattern of children being denied private spaces is an ongoing, widespread belief that young people do not have the right to privacy where adult authority figures – particularly their parents – are concerned. Robson's (2015) survey of parents regarding their beliefs about children's rights in the home found that 85% believed adults "should be allowed to refuse their [children's] right to privacy" (p. 73). The language of parents being "allowed to refuse" a right is vital in understanding the situation of children's privacy, since although roughly half of parents have, in other studies, stated that their children should be "*able*" to speak privately with friends or keep a private diary, they often construct this "ability" as a privilege granted at their discretion, rather than as a fundamental right (Cherney, Greteman, & Travers, 2008; Casas, Saporiti, Gonzalez, & Figuer, 2006). Indeed, a significant majority of both parents and children conflate children's

autonomy rights (including privacy) with privileges, and appear to lack an understanding of rights, in the context of childhood, as inalienable rather than granted or restricted by an authority (Cherney, 2010). Although cross-cultural research has found respect for children's right to privacy to be lower among American parents compared to European parents, the denial of this right to children as a class is apparently a problem which transcends national boundaries (Cherney, 2010). Alderson (2008) even notes that discussion of Article 16 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child – which guarantees children's right to privacy – is entirely missing from children's rights publications by UNICEF UK, which comprehensively cover other participatory and liberty rights. Melton (1983) observes that American courts have shown a pattern of willingness to overrule children's right to privacy based on a lower standard of demonstrated interest than that typically applied to adults.

As a result, while the domestic sphere, with its physical separation from "public" life, provides a space of privacy and solitude for adults, it is where young people encounter the most clear and present threats to their privacy. They therefore have no choice but to conduct their social and emotional lives in "public" spaces (Kraftl, 2013) – where they can seek moments of privacy because, despite the presence of a much larger *potential* audience, they often find that they can exert more personal agency over information about themselves because no unwanted audience is (usually) paying specific attention to them. The teenagers boyd & Marwick (2011) interviewed describe spaces like workplaces, friends' houses, and the street as affording a level of privacy they do not have at home. Holloway & Valentine (2001) also describe children's bedrooms as spaces which offer some privacy within the "microgeography" of the family home, but note that such spaces provide only "a degree of" autonomy. Ultimately, children's ability to have privacy in their bedrooms, like their ability to keep private diaries or communicate privately with friends, is often seen as a privilege

"granted" by adults rather than a right of children; as such, the privacy granted by the child's bedroom is no less imperfect than that granted by the anonymity of "public" spaces, despite the significant functional differences between the two.

This situation of power imbalance impacting privacy concerns does not resolve itself abruptly when children reach the legal age of majority. Like the status of youth itself, it recedes gradually and is actively negotiated and navigated as young people position themselves on the boundary of adulthood. Older teenagers and young adults may be perceived as having more rights and greater social standing than younger children, but for those who continue to live with parents or guardians while in post-secondary education, for instance, the relationship often remains one of unequal power, and this can continue to affect young people's experience of privacy. Even those who live away from home while continuing to be financially or practically dependent on their families may find that they continue to experience a power imbalance that leads parents to attempt to exert control over them or invade their privacy; a college dorm room, for instance, might not constitute a "personal castle" of private space if it is paid for by a parent who uses this dependence to exert control. Two users I spoke to in the course of this research – both of them legal adults, and one of whom lived several hours from her parents' home – described a fear that the revelation of certain details about their relationships, identities, or lifestyles would result in their families withholding financial support for their education, and indicated that turning 18 and even leaving home had done little to resolve this issue. While clear imbalances in how the privilege of "privacy" is distributed in the family home may end when young people reach certain milestones, then, the cultural norms and practices which shape their ability to manage the flow of information about themselves are more complex and change more gradually.

It is worth noting here that the majority of the tumblr users I spoke to reported using the desktop interface rarely, preferring the mobile application despite its perceived technical flaws (of which there are many). While many simply named convenience as the primary factor in this decision, saying that they valued being able to access their blogs anywhere they happened to be or even "on the go", some younger participants indicated that it is because they see mobile devices as more private. 16-year-old galacticsteve, for instance, said:

Well I don't have a laptop or computer so I use my family's computer, which everyone can see. Sometimes some sexual content pops up. It's not a big deal honestly my parents would just be all 'wtf..' [what the fuck?] But idk [I don't know] I'd rather not. It doesn't pop up too often but you never know. I only use the computer if tumblr is acting up.

And sometimes it's nice to chill in my room alone. Well not fully alone, three pets. But yeah haha

This statement reveals a few interesting nuances to the geography of tumblr users' privacy in the physical space of their homes. Galacticsteve was not the only person to indicate that their choice to primarily use tumblr from a mobile device is at least in part due to the only other option being a shared family computer, and that having access to a personal laptop might alter their patterns of using the platform. Since wealthier families are more likely to be able to provide children with computers for their individual use (and children living in wealthier areas are more likely to have access to school-provided laptops), this is suggestive of the ways in which socioeconomic status might exacerbate children's relative lack of privacy. Also noteworthy is the reasoning behind galacticsteve's wish to browse tumblr in private. A general desire to be "alone" (with pets) and "chill" indicates

comfort in the comparatively private space of the bedroom without specifically invoking the vocabulary of privacy – a theme which permeates much of this chapter, as many of the statements made by the users I interviewed *relate* to concepts of privacy or publicity without explicitly invoking them.

The brief discussion of potential parental objections to content encountered on the dash, meanwhile, is interesting for two reasons. First, it attaches the significance of privacy when using tumblr to the content one sees, rather than only the content one posts or interaction with other users, alluding to the complexities of the relationship between children's right to privacy and their right to access to information and media. Second, galacticsteve treats the possibility of being seen consuming "inappropriate" content with a relative lack of gravity, suggesting that it would amount to little more than an awkward conversation. The experiences of tumblr users likely vary significantly on this point, along with the importance they ascribe to privacy in the physical world when accessing tumblr, based on any number of differences in family dynamics.

This need to adapt one's technology use in order to circumvent adult surveillance of both content consumption and social activity points to what boyd & Marwick (2011) call "the key hypocrisy surrounding teens and privacy" (p. 5). They argue that contemporary young people live their digital lives amid consistent expressions of concern from parents, researchers, commentators, and policymakers alike regarding their internet privacy practices, and a widespread discourse that children and teens do not care about privacy or understand the risks of sharing private information in the public space of the internet. Despite this, adults are very often happy to deny them the right to control access to information about themselves even in what should be the most protected of private spaces – their homes, bedrooms, diaries, etc. This creates a unique geography of privacy, which has

prompted the young people of fandom tumblr to adopt particular constructions of and approaches to privacy.

Privacy in Obscurity: "a bench on a crowded street"

One of the reasons tumblr users value the ability to maintain privacy in the physical world around their use of tumblr is that, for many, tumblr itself functions – like the workplaces and streets mentioned earlier – as a "public" space affording "private" moments and sub-contexts. This observation reflects the apparent "paradox" described earlier between the importance users ascribe to privacy on tumblr and the relative openness of the platform itself. This begins to make sense in the context of understanding that the geography of privacy is not the same for young people as for adults – that for children and teenagers, private spaces are not defined by the walls of the "personal castle", but by the absence of specific others who would attempt to systematically surveil their lives and by the camouflaging obscurity of being one of thousands in a "public" place. A user named reflectionfaces described tumblr to me as "the internet equivalent of sitting on a bench on a crowded street": statements, conversations, and interactions are private not in the sense of being unwitnessed, but more in the sense that they easily fade into the noise. One popular post describes this kind of obscurity with typical tumblr irony:

Tumblr is so funny bc [because] u could have 20,000 followers but then only get 3 notes on some posts which is basically the equivalent of performing a song in front of a sold out arena and hearing like...2 people clapping and one weak cheer

With fandom tumblr users often following hundreds or even thousands of blogs, and each of those potentially posting or reblogging dozens of posts every day, it is easy for

individual pieces of content to be overlooked or to become decontextualized, disconnected from any sense of the person behind them simply by virtue of being part of a steady onslaught of content from many users merged into the single space of the dash. In fact, the visual structure of the dash itself, which presents posts from each of a user's followed blogs using the same fonts, colors, and layouts – stripping them of the visual cues that would link them to specific users if viewed on those users' blogs themselves – helps create a kind of anonymity even in the presence of clearly stated usernames. Just as people speaking on a crowded street are identifiable by their faces and voices, but one is unlikely to pay attention to these unless they recognize someone they know, usernames on the dash might only seem deserving of attention if they are familiar, belonging to friends or mutuals.

Of course, just as a conversation or statement overheard on a crowded street in the offline world might end up being quoted and repeated over and over again if heard by the right person at the right moment, so too can a tumblr post spiral unexpectedly into popularity. My most popular post on the blog I started for this research has over 8000 notes, and one post on my personal blog has over 300,000; both exceed, by orders of magnitude, the activity I usually see on the average post and the follower counts of these respective blogs. As such posts are shared by thousands beyond one's followers and fandoms, and eventually find their way to other parts of tumblr outside the larger fandom community, they tend to become, in a way, anonymous in themselves, as they become more widely known in their own right than the blogs that spawned them. Ice-cold-hooligan discussed this phenomenon in my interview with her. Some of her friends, she told me, had referred to her as "tumblr famous" because some of her *Rise of the Guardians*-related posts have ended up on their dashes despite their not being in or following any blogs in that fandom; she disputed the term, saying that while these *posts* may have become well-known,

she herself was not in fact "famous" because "famous is if people [with whom you aren't already friends] were to talk to you. No one does."

Still, many users who have made posts that have gained hundreds of thousands or even millions of notes express regret regarding the attention this has brought them. Often, this is seen in the sidebars or about pages of their blogs, where they implore others to stop sending them asks regarding a popular post from years ago that is still circulating, or simply describe their frustration at the sheer number of notifications those posts still generate and how this makes their activity pages difficult to parse in order to see what is happening to anything else they have posted. This suggests that the desire among users described in the previous chapter to find a niche in the fandom tumblr community and gain a kind of notoriety for one's contributions exists in balance with a desire to be able to withdraw and be left alone when one wants to – which is, after all, the most basic meaning of the right to privacy (Westin, 1970). A post which has crossed my dash a few times in the past year describes this balance thus:

post hits 1k notes nice

post hits 10k notes oh no

As this post itself rose to popularity, the op reblogged it herself and commented "nice", and later, "oh no". The post now stands at just over 210,000 notes. In a similarly ironic turn, a user who earlier in 2016 made a post asking "why are 90% of urls attached to popular text posts deactivated?" deactivated their account at some point before this post reached 200,000 notes. This person probably did not leave tumblr altogether; it is more likely they simply shifted to a new account to get away from the unwanted notoriety. As reflectionfaces noted in our interview, the pseudonymous nature of tumblr and the

flexibility that comes with the possibility of having multiple identities not tied to each other or to "meatspace" – aka the physical world – allows users to escape this kind of baggage relatively easily while remaining part of the community. Reflectionfaces remarked that this ability to change identities and start fresh has its drawbacks, such as making it difficult to "keep track of people with a pattern of bad behavior", but also expressed a feeling that "being able to play around with identities [...] isn't inherently a bad thing, and for a lot of people can be really useful/important". "There is an important element of safety in anonymity that the modern internet culture has moved away from a bit," they continued, bringing to mind once again the process of integration with the offline world that many of the more popular online spaces have undergone in recent years and the importance fandom tumblr users see in maintaining their community as something restricted to its own particular online context.

Changing accounts and usernames is not done lightly, as tumblr users do tend to become attached to their urls, but it is still a relatively common practice. In the course of my research I have witnessed several users posting notices that they were migrating to new accounts, the urls of which they offered to provide to any mutual who messaged them and asked. Their reasons for doing so remained unstated in each case, but since it is much simpler to change the url of an existing blog (which would allow one's followers to automatically migrate to the new url) than to create an entirely new account, it is reasonable to assume that these users wished to get away from something. In leaving behind urls and accounts that had gained a level or kind of attention they did not want, these users were able to restore the privacy they had previously found in being one of many on the crowded street of fandom tumblr.

Defining the Personal: "a public diary"

The present concern for privacy in western society arguably dates to the nineteenth century, during which changes in both technology and society – for example, the invention of the camera and the introduction of gossip columns in many daily newspapers, respectively – conspired to make the daily lives of individuals more potentially subject to public scrutiny. In the mid-twentieth century, a new age of "listening and watching devices" (Westin, 1970, p. 69) spurred concerns for privacy focused primarily on the ability to keep information about one's identity, movements, and habits out of the hands of unspecified third parties – a focus which was by and large maintained as the contemporary discourse surrounding privacy in digital spaces emerged. The American Civil Liberties Union (2016), for instance, names "new technologies [...] making it easier for governments and corporations to learn the minutiae of our online activities" as the central problem of internet privacy.²⁵ The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights operates under a similar definition, stating primary concern about the possibility of "surveillance and/or interception of digital communications and collection of personal data, including on a mass scale" (2017). Research on social network users' attitudes to privacy likewise focuses on issues such as concern "that unwanted audiences will obtain information about [users] or their families" (Young & Quan-Haase, 2009, p. 266), including such details as their addresses, their work or class schedules, their political affiliations, or their romantic partners' identities.

²⁵ The concern for restricting access to "personal information" defined broadly along these lines does not always revolve around questions of individual safety, and indeed, it is likely that organizations like the ACLU are thinking in terms beyond this when they name this kind of data collection as a vital issue of human rights in the digital age. The collection of personal data for profiling and marketing purposes has, for instance, been criticized as turning users into "commodities" and entrenching capitalist inequalities and the power of media corporations (Bermejo, 2009; Bechmann, 2013). I have focused on the personal safety perspective here because it is the paradigm most often applied to assess and enforce normative informational privacy practices in youth.

It is this particular construction of concern for privacy, and this particular view of what should constitute "privileged" or "personal information", which many parents and other concerned adults in the twenty-first century wish to impress upon young people, and it is by this standard that young people's internet privacy practices are often judged. Henley (2013) notes that the common image of contemporary young people who "couldn't care less about privacy" is based primarily on their tendency to share particular kinds of information which their elders prefer to keep more tightly restricted – kinds of information which, in worst-case scenarios, can lead to issues like identity theft, legal problems, or damaged employability. Research on how young people manage their privacy in online settings generally focuses on the same question: how much about their basic identities and daily lives do they share that could somehow cause them trouble in the future were it to get into the wrong hands? Madden et al (2013), for instance, present an analysis of teenagers' online privacy practices based on the results of a study of how likely teens were to post photos and videos of themselves, their real names, the names of their schools or towns, their email addresses, or their phone numbers on social networking sites. Moscardelli & Divine's (2007) work establishes a context for these measures by outlining the specific fears that often underlie these particular notions of privacy management: profiling by corporations or government agencies, identity theft, and sexual exploitation.

Analyzing young people's privacy practices from this perspective leads to the emergence of certain apparent paradoxes in how they manage particular kinds of information. For example, young adults have proven significantly more likely than older adults to have checked and changed their Facebook privacy settings at any point (boyd & Hargittai, 2010), but also more likely to share photos of themselves and disclose personal information such as their relationship statuses, religious beliefs, and hobbies (Christofides, Muise, & Desmarais, 2011). A significant majority of teens keep most elements of their

social platform profiles private and take deliberate measures to control information about themselves online, yet few express any significant concern about the possibility of third parties, including government agencies and corporations, gaining access to their data (Madden, et al., 2013). No doubt, these apparent contradictions feed the belief among many researchers, commentators, and parents that young people simply do not care about protecting their privacy, or do not understand how to do so.

As with their views on what constitutes private and public space, however, there is evidence to suggest that young people's attitudes toward protecting personal information differ from those of adults not because of a lack of concern or capability, but because the different social conditions under which they live produce an entirely different idea of what constitutes "personal information" in the first place. Past research has found that young people tend to be more concerned with "social privacy" than with "informational privacy" – that is, they place greater value on the ability to manage what people they spend time with in their daily lives know about them than the ability to control the wider dissemination of information by and to third parties and larger institutions (van der Velden & El Emam, 2013; Lykens, 2015). This orientation toward social privacy logically changes the kinds of information that are treated as privileged. Personal data like locations, names, and phone numbers may be the logical currency of informational privacy, since it is this kind of information that can enable things like corporate profiling or identity theft. Social privacy, on the other hand, is primarily concerned with the kind of information that has the potential to cause embarrassment, conflict, or other kinds of interpersonal challenges – information about one's deeper thoughts, feelings, and opinions, or details about one's relationships and activities beyond daily minutiae.²⁶

²⁶ Reflecting on this in the context of some of the ethical questions I raised in my chapter on methodology, it is interesting to note that the information fandom tumblr users are more likely to

Perhaps the most obvious illustration of fandom tumblr users' willingness to share information conventionally regarded as "personal" is in the kinds of things users post in their blog descriptions and about pages. These descriptions generally contain basic identifying characteristics of the user. A list of their primary fandoms is the most common element, and those who identify with a particular creative pastime or niche in the fandom community will often make a statement to this effect, identifying themselves as writers/artists/etc or describing the kind of content they are known for posting. Age, first name or nickname, sexual orientation, and gender or preferred pronouns are also frequently stated. A smaller but still significant fraction of users include their nationality or race/ethnicity (especially if they are non-American or non-white, respectively); their occupation, college or university field of study, or school grade; any disabilities or forms of neurodivergence that apply to them; and even the results of personality inventories like the Myers-Briggs test. My own blog description, as well as stating that I am conducting research on fandom tumblr, lists my age, identifies me as a graduate student, and mentions a few of my primary fandoms. Every visitor to a tumblr user's blog might therefore be offered information about the user that, in other social contexts, would be considered private or privileged information, either for reasons of supposed safety and anonymity or because (as in the case of sexual orientations or disabilities) they would be considered "sensitive" subjects. Here, though, this kind of information serves both as a personal introduction and as a way of situating oneself in a larger tumblr culture that places high value on visibility and representation.

mark as "personal" and think more extensively about sharing is not something for which researchers have particularly clear guidelines, while the kind of basic demographic/identifying information for which users show less concern are subjects of particularly stringent rules for researchers.

The importance of sharing these kinds of small details about oneself as a personal introduction relates to the desire to project an image of personal authenticity – in a community which emphasizes the building of genuine personal connections and the notion of "being oneself", it makes sense that users would choose to share at least a few pieces of the kind of basic identifying information, like first names and ages, that would be among the first things known to friends met in the offline world. The foregrounding of this kind of disclosure that occurs when it is made a permanent fixture of the "front page" of one's blog, rather than being allowed to pass quickly into obscurity like most normal posts do, points to a desire to construct a particular kind of authenticity through self-disclosure – in Dobson's (2015) words, a kind of self-representation defined by "a premise of agentic, conscious, and 'authentic' self-authorship" (p. 10). This is something I discuss in greater detail in the next chapter.

This is not to say that tumblr users do not understand the potential risks in sharing these sorts of details publicly online, however, and those who have more reason to fear threats to their privacy tend to share less, and are particularly less likely to share even their first names. Unusually, but understandably given her level of concern about the possibility of her tumblr and offline lives connecting, *simplisticswashbuckler* has no blog description or about page at all. Most users, though, share this kind of information in moderation, with the expectation of safety built once again on the notion of obscurity by way of the "crowded street". When I asked *hazelnutcorgi* how safe she felt on tumblr in relation to conventional ideas of internet privacy, she replied:

in terms of practical safety, i'm not that good at that

i mean, i'm pretty sure that people who have been paying attention (more than the average person, yeah, but not 'creepy stalker level' paying attention) can find me

I make it no secret where I go to school

it's easy to find me on facebook if people actually look

i dont connect my facebook to my tumblr ever, but i do link to instagram,

which has my name and college and face

so people can google for me

While she freely admits that her information is not as secure as it could be, and that other tumblr users or others on the internet could track her down if they wished, hazelnutcorgi expresses no particular fear that this will happen. This is the attitude many tumblr users share toward the idea that information like their "name and college and face" might become known to someone who would harm them: it is treated, like the potential that one might become a victim of a violent crime in the offline world, as a possibility to be aware of but not one which should have undue influence over one's decisions. The popular post about "why meeting someone online isn't weird at all" quoted in the previous chapter notably plays off the dangers of "strangers" online both by dismissively noting that "not everyone is trying to catfish or abduct you" and by declaring that young people "know all about internet safety", and as an example, are "going to sure as hell confirm their identity" before meeting someone from the internet in person.

Tumblr users react with a similarly dismissive but even more trivializing attitude to the dangers of allowing corporations and government agencies to collect data and profile them. The most common narrative of this kind of systematic invasion of privacy by larger institutions is one in which the kind of data they might collect on tumblr users is laughably

useless. "*puts tape over webcam so the nsa doesn't see me eating chips and crying*" says one post with over 200,000 notes; a number of other popular posts joke about what the world's various covert agencies must think of fanfiction writers' Google histories, as they search for information on topics such as how to cleanly dispose of a body. Most commentary tumblr users offer on corporate profiling, meanwhile, revolves around pointing out how poorly targeted advertising on tumblr actually is. One user I interviewed, for example, who is still in high school, mocked the advertisements tumblr had chosen to show them with the words "get your shit together staff, loving these ads about dog food and life insurance". Interestingly, while tumblr users make their disdain for obtrusive advertisements quite clear, their concern manifests primarily in terms of user experience, and the tools (such as browser extensions and user scripts) they use to combat advertising focus on removing visible ads rather than hiding users from underlying tracking and profiling technologies. Again, the data that may be collected about them is treated as trivial, and any truly dangerous or offensive use of it that might affect them individually in any perceptible way is viewed as unlikely.

None of this is to suggest that there is no information tumblr users treat as privileged or express a wish to control. There are certain kinds of "personal" posts users make which are often understood, at least to some extent, to be "off-limits" for wider sharing. 19-year-old artist somefunnyusername described tumblr as unique among blogging platforms because it does not function primarily as a "diary" in which users "log in, type about [their] day, and log out"; when users *do* edge into this territory of explicitly personal reflection, however, these posts are treated differently from others, seen as outside the typical discourse of fandom communities and not as content to be shared. As another user, koalaamidala, put it, "for the most part, [notes] feel important, but when its something personal, I'd rather not people reblog it? because I basically use tumblr as a public diary." I

have rarely seen a post of this nature garner more than a handful of notes, and any notes they do get are usually likes from mutuals offering support or encouragement rather than reblogs. Personal posts include everything from complaints about conflicts with family or roommates to anecdotes about friends and romantic partners to reflections on life events like birthdays and graduations.

Maintaining Control: "#personal #don't reblog"

This understanding that "personal" posts are not to be shared demonstrates what is perhaps the most fundamental difference between tumblr and more mainstream social networks like Facebook when it comes to how privacy and privileged information are actually managed from day to day. Where Facebook relies on technological controls created by the platform's developers – detailed privacy settings for each element of profiles, the ability to un-tag oneself in photos, controls to set specific audiences for each individual post, and so on – privacy on tumblr runs more on social controls established by the community. Again, the crowded street metaphor is appropriate; the privacy of a conversation on a bench in a public place is not guaranteed by any inability on the part of others to eavesdrop intently on as much of the exchange as possible, but by the fact that to do so would be considered inappropriate.

Personal posts can often be identified solely by their content, but users frequently make use of the tag system to more clearly denote posts as personal. As mentioned in the previous chapter, this system is intended to help users categorize content. A user's tags for a post appear below the body of the post as it appears on their blog and on other users' dashes. Users often tag posts about their lives and thoughts "#personal", which serves as an explicit signal that the post in question is outside the regular fandom discourse and not

something to be shared within the community. As tags can be searched²⁷ either on an individual blog or tumblr as a whole, this creates an interesting paradox in which tagging posts in this manner can actually make them easier to find for anyone who might be looking, despite often being done specifically to signal a desire for privacy. Some users avoid this by creating their own unique tags to use for their personal posts, though I do not believe avoiding having personal posts searched or tracked is actually the primary reason users do this; it seems more to be a way of expressing creativity and humor. As an example, one user I follow makes personal posts frequently and tags them "#dbh rambles" – "dbh" being the first letters of the three words that make up their url²⁸. Other users employ a larger set of personal tags specific to particular topics they engage with frequently; for instance, hazelnutcorgi frequently posts under the tag "#hazel talks college"†, and I have frequently used "#grad school" on my own blog.

Tags are also used to even more explicitly state a user's wishes regarding to what extent a post should be treated as private. Personal posts are frequently tagged with phrases like "#please don't reblog" (or, calling back to a years-old joke started by a user who made a spelling mistake in a popular post, "#please don't rebagel"). I have occasionally seen the even stronger "#don't reblog or interact", a request that goes beyond asking users not to share a post and essentially requests that they not acknowledge its existence by liking or replying, even though those actions do nothing to increase the post's audience. It may seem odd that someone would post something in a clearly public forum and not wish to have it acknowledged, but as koalaamidala explained, "it's comforting to yell into the void" – to be able to express oneself "out loud", as it were, without the social consequences of being

²⁷ As noted in the previous chapter, this has become more difficult with changes to the platform over the past two years, but is still possible.

²⁸ These initials, like all references to urls, have been changed.

judged or having to explain. In fact, another common tag that serves as a synonym for "#personal" is "#screams into the void". These sorts of posts also serve to cultivate deeper friendships through meaningful self-disclosure, something which has long been recognized as important in adolescent friendship-building (Bauminger, Finzi-Dottan, Chason, & Har-Even, 2008). The effect is perhaps amplified by the very fact that these personal posts are not intended for wider consumption, and are thus implicitly directed specifically at users' friends and mutuals.

It is worth noting that not all personal posts are treated as "off-limits"; in fact, users sometimes explicitly tag such posts "#okay to reblog", particularly if they feel that a post might be relatable for others dealing with similar situations. For example, I have seen a number of posts about users' experience of mental illness tagged "#personal #okay to reblog". Often, such posts do not end up with more than a handful of reblogs, but even so they are clearly spreading further than posts simply marked as "#personal".

Tags are not the only way in which tumblr users mark posts as private or seek to exert control over how such information spreads. Making personal posts and then deleting them after a short period of time – sometimes tagging them "#delete later" or similar – is a relatively common practice, the effectiveness and continued use of which is somewhat surprising given that it still relies on other users' respect for their wishes. When a post is deleted from the op's blog, any reblogs of it remain visible, meaning that making and then deleting posts does nothing to ensure they will not be widely seen unless one can also rely on others not to share them. Another common practice is putting personal posts entirely or mostly under "read mores". A user can insert a "read more" at any location in a text post, which will make the content following that point appear only if the viewer clicks a "keep reading" button. Tumblr introduced this feature years ago to make long text posts less obtrusive on the dash, by allowing users to decide based on the first few sentences whether

or not they are interested in reading the full post, and if not, quickly scroll past. However, in practice, I have actually seen this feature used more to hide personal thoughts from casual readers; though anyone can click "keep reading" and access the full post, the feeling is that using this feature makes such posts less obtrusive for those who are not particularly interested in a user's personal posts, while keeping them easily accessible to friends and mutuals. At the same time, it serves as a subtle signal to followers that the post in question is of a personal nature and should not be shared.

Yet another way in which tumblr users have turned a feature of the platform not designed for privacy-related purposes to these ends is seen in some of the more involved ways tags are used. Unlike the main body of posts and comments, tags do not persist as part of a post when it is reblogged by others. Thus they become in some ways the most "private" space on tumblr for expression that is still taking place within the "public" realm of the blog itself – tags are readable to followers and anyone who visits a user's blog, but do not carry the same risk of indiscriminate sharing or unexpected popularity that the main text of posts or more conventional reblog comments can have. "i use my tags as like....a secret whisper space," explains a post that currently has around 211,000 notes. "like.....idk [I don't know] how many of u actually read them but i know not all of u do obviously so it's like the BONUS FACTS part of the book or something. the special fan club secrets. U Know Me A Little Better If U Read My Tags." Users will sometimes write the entirety of a personal post within tags, their only concession to tumblr's restriction against "empty" posts being the placement of a single punctuation mark in the main body of the post. Of course, although in doing this, users are exploiting a quirk of the platform to make personal posts impossible to reblog, tags are still readable to anyone and can be copied and pasted easily – in fact, copying other users' humorous tags on fandom posts into comments and reblogging them widely is a fairly common and accepted practice – so users who do this are still relying on the good

intentions and manners of others to keep the thoughts expressed in tags to a limited audience.

Theorizing Privacy

In the previous chapter, I argued that the steps users take to keep the fandom tumblr community separate from the offline social world enable this community to construct its own social norms and cultural practices, in contrast to social platforms like Facebook and Twitter, which are more integrated with offline life and where the expectations and structures of everyday life therefore apply more and more thoroughly. The norms, practices, and expectations surrounding privacy on tumblr are a particularly stark example of this, as they break very significantly from the ways in which internet privacy is managed on more mainstream platforms and conceptualized in everyday discourse. They also present an important challenge to academic and social discourses of young people and internet privacy.

Most research and commentary on the subject of young people's internet privacy practices follows a general pattern of assessing how well they operate within mainstream conceptualizations of what makes a space public or private, what constitutes privileged information, and how privacy should be managed. Young users are chastised for sharing too much and platforms that do not employ strict privacy controls by default are considered dangerous. Tumblr's popularity with teens and young adults in particular has been a subject of concern for parents, teachers, media commentators, and computer security experts because of the inherently public nature of tumblr blogs (Birdsong, 2014), "tricky" and "awkward" privacy settings that do not enable the same kind of control as exists on other platforms (Younger, 2014), and worries about the kinds of content young users might post

or the conversations they might have with others on a platform mostly unknown to their parents (Ochs, 2015; Thornton, n.d.).

Fandom tumblr users occasionally make use of this paradigm themselves to joke about the apparent contradictions or perceived inadequacies of the way they manage privacy on their chosen platform, explicitly acknowledging the same paradox I described earlier in this chapter. One popular post, for example, comments:

Me irl: No one can EVER know this secret

Me to 8k strangers online: You guys will never believe this

Even jokes such as this, however – ironic and self-deprecating though they may be – serve to illustrate that these users do, in fact, generally feel safe confiding in the internet at large, especially under pseudonyms which can be changed if necessary and in the context of a community kept isolated to a significant degree from the rest of their daily social experiences.

This approach to the sharing of information, and the unique ways in which privacy operates within fandom tumblr, begin to make sense upon considering the unique social pressures experienced by young people as a category in relation to the control and disclosure of information about themselves. To begin with, they must contend with a different geography of privacy; young people cannot see spaces that are isolated from outside surveillance – like family homes – as "private" because of the level of surveillance to which they are subjected from others *within* those spaces. The privacy through obscurity found in places like coffee shops, parks, and streets, which may be only marginally private for adults, in fact present teenagers' best opportunity to control the flow of information about themselves. Scholars such as Beazley (2000) and Jenkins (1999) have described the

street as both a space of individual freedom for young people and a space of the production and reproduction of children's culture for exactly this reason. This experience extends to the online world, where busy public spaces like tumblr provide the same kind of privacy. Young adults may have greater privacy than teenagers in their homes and dorm rooms, but are often subject to a continuing relationship of unequal power with their parents, and may therefore still find it difficult to associate "private" space with the ability to control information about themselves. Perhaps more meaningfully, those part of online youth communities like fandom tumblr may continue to utilize the cultural practices of these communities even when some of the conditions which made those practices necessary no longer apply to them in the same way.

Young people must contend with the same worrying, but distant, possibilities of surveillance in the digital age that face adults: government surveillance, corporate data mining, digitally-enabled financial or violent crime, and so on. In addition, however, they face more personal and immediate threats to their privacy due to living circumstances and to a cultural ideology which often does not recognize their right to privacy to begin with. Teens' divergent privacy practices and priorities can be seen as a direct response to the particular threat their privacy is under on a daily basis: namely, that adults with power over their lives might uncover intimate personal details of their relationships, activities, thoughts, feelings, and very identities. Unaccustomed to the privilege of the "personal castle" with its expectation of practical barriers to the intrusion of others, teens find that they must rely on implicit social norms, the obscurity of the crowd, and a sense of obligation to one another to maintain their privacy.

This pattern is only amplified by the fact that more integrated online spaces, where social networks tend to duplicate those in offline life, carry an expectation that posts and profiles will be shared with the same people who, again, pose the greatest threat to teens'

privacy; tumblr users I interviewed repeatedly defined Facebook as a place where they were not safe to express themselves because of the fact that it was expected they would be friends with family members. This expectation essentially negates any benefits offered by Facebook's extensive privacy controls; being able to build a virtual "castle wall" is of little benefit when society insists that one must freely give the most likely invader the key to the gate. Tumblr thus becomes to Facebook what the crowded street is to the home.

This leads to the fundamental difference in conceptualizations of privacy which Stern (2004) observes in her research: "adults think of their communication as 'private' when it is transmitted in a theme-specific forum to a predesignated audience, [while] teens think of their communication as 'private' when the people they know in real life (e.g. parents, friends, teachers, etc.) do not see, hear or read it" (p. 277). In other words, adults conceptualize private space as space in which they are unobserved by all but their intended audience, and prefer to manage privacy by exerting highly specific control over who is privy to details about their lives. Young people, on the other hand, care less about the potential for unintended – but in most cases largely harmless – dissemination of their personal information to unspecified third parties, and more about avoiding potential fallout from the unwanted transmission of information to very specific people with power to affect their lives. Stern regrettably proceeds to interpret this difference through a conventionally adultist lens, imagining the dominant conception of privacy among adults as default and correct and concluding that teens simply do not "fully grasp the concept of 'public'"; however, her observations nonetheless remain important.

A more respectful approach to understanding this difference, which does not seek to establish one paradigm of privacy as superior to the other, might conclude that the difference is produced not by an inferior understanding of privacy, but by the different social conditions under which young people and adults live. Privacy is ultimately concerned

with the ability to exert control over how information flows, and young people, unlike adults, must deal with the fact that the greatest threats to this control are not the unspecified third parties their parents fear, but their parents themselves (boyd & Marwick, 2011). Adults, in other words, have an important form of social privilege that young people do not: belonging to the category of "adult" does not subject them, as belonging to the category of "youth" would, to the everyday threat that specific figures with real power over their lives may attempt to invade their private thoughts and relationships in a way that could have significant personal consequences. This is not to say that the less "personal" concerns which tend to occupy adults' thoughts on digital privacy – the possibility of National Security Agency e-mail hacking, for instance – are frivolous or trumped-up, but it is worth acknowledging that for most people these are moral or social concerns rather than immediate, personal, practical fears. In contrast, teenagers must constantly navigate direct threats to their privacy from specific individuals who hold power over them as a result of differences in cultural, social, legal, and economic status, and in many cases occupy the same "private" spaces and use the same computers – and often must face the possibility that those people may exact punishment, including physical violence, for any deviation from their expectations they may discover.

Of course, age is not the only dimension of social location which can subject one to privacy threats not faced by those belonging to more privileged groups. While age has unique features as a dimension of social difference – the fact, for example, that members of the marginalized category almost universally share living space with members of the corresponding privileged category – it is worth considering that the privacy needs and practices of othered groups are often different by necessity from those of dominant groups. There is therefore no need to wholly "reinvent the wheel" in interpreting the privacy practices of young people. Indeed, it may be beneficial to further understanding to view

these practices from the perspective of age as one of several social categorization schemas which necessitate non-normative privacy practices. This framework might help better elucidate the role of the social inequality of young people in shaping their experience of privacy, compared to Stern's developmentalist paradigm or even boyd & Marwick's more matter-of-fact discussion of parent-child power relationships, which does not make any significant attempt to integrate these intimate family dynamics with broad social structures of difference and inequality.

Warren & Laslett (1977) offer a useful framework in a paper which lays out their definition of the conceptual differences between *privacy* and *secrecy*. The former, as they define it, constitutes voluntary and socially acceptable withdrawal from public society for socially approved activities; the latter, the necessary concealment of that which is viewed negatively by the public. The right to privacy being granted only to those with a certain perceived moral standing, others must make do with practices revolving more around secrecy.

The use of privacy is most likely for those whose behavior is not suspect and who have financial and other resources sufficient to draw boundaries around their activities. We would thus expect privacy to be available to adults more than to children or to the institutionalized elderly, to the healthy more than to the physically or mentally ill and to higher more than to lower class persons. Secrecy would be most likely where persons are morally stigmatized or where they have inadequate financial or other resources to provide themselves with privacy. We would thus expect that secrecy would be utilized more by lower than higher status persons, by children and the institutionalized elderly rather than adults, by the

mentally and physically ill more than the healthy, and by the morally stigmatized more than the 'normal'. (Warren & Laslett, 1977, pp. 48-49)

Those who are forced to rely on secrecy do so because they are not afforded the right of privacy; as a result, secrecy is much more likely to find itself under attack, and requires more concerted effort to maintain. The fact that secrecy, as Shils (1966) observes, often requires a shared commitment not to breach the confidence of groups existing "under the radar" underscores the importance of the relationship between tumblr's positioning as a "public" space of "private" interactions and the fandom tumblr community's shared preference for maintaining separation from the rest of the public sphere. Warren & Laslett (1977) also describe secret communities as operating outside the norms of everyday society, with their own expectations and practices, in a manner reminiscent of my discussion of tumblr's particular norms of networking and community building in the previous chapter.

Despite the important conceptual links between my analysis of fandom tumblr and this material on secrecy, I have chosen here to avoid this terminology in describing the practices and attitudes of tumblr users. This is partly because where "secrecy" implies only concealment, "privacy" implies a more complex set of practices and relationships; in DePaulo, Wetzel, Sternglanz, & Wilson's (2003) words, "privacy [is] bidirectional: we do not solely keep others away from our private spaces; sometimes we invite them in. Privacy is a dynamic, changing process of regulating access to ourselves" (p. 392). I also wish to avoid the moral connotations of "sneaking around" which are embedded in terms like "secrecy" – especially when young people are involved – and which I feel are too difficult to overcome.

Meanwhile, I feel I should clarify that none of the users I interviewed used the terms "private", "privacy", "secret", or "secrecy" to describe any element of their lives on tumblr;

instead, they used a variety of more narrowly defined terms to refer to specific patterns of experience. Words such as "personal" described specific kinds of conversations and blog content with a narrower intended audience and more deliberately self-representation purpose, for instance; terms like "escape" and "safe space", and references to tumblr "not being for family", spoke to questions of who was considered an appropriate audience; and phrases like "practical safety" referred to practices associated with avoiding the dangers of identity theft and predatory strangers which underlie the dominant narratives of internet privacy. I did see broader, concrete terms like "privacy" and "secrecy" appear occasionally in posts, such as the joke quoted above about telling "secrets" to 8000 people, but these were rare and often ironic. Like Livingstone (2008), I thus found that my young participants' perceptions, priorities, and practices around what I have described using the umbrella term "privacy" are more nuanced than that term may give credit to.

I still feel, however, that using the terminology of "privacy" is important, because doing so allows me, rather than separating the non-normative practices of marginalized groups from the concept of privacy, to advocate for a rethinking and broadening of how privacy is understood and interpreted. It also makes clear that if privacy is to be understood as a right (as, indeed, it is, not only in the UNCRC but in many other human rights documents at the national and international levels), that right must be contextualized and allow space for diverse conditions, experiences, priorities, and practices of privacy. It is only by establishing young people's right to privacy as inclusive of their right to protect personal information *as they define it* from those *they wish to protect it from*, by the use of strategies which are *effective and reasonable for them*, that we can improve approaches to young people's privacy in theory, practice, and policy, and bring them more into line with children's expressed needs, experiences, and priorities.

Privacy and Resistance

Understanding what online privacy means to young people is fundamental to understanding what tumblr means to its users. Tumblr is a social space defined in many ways by its separation from the offline world, where identities are somewhat flexible, massive amounts of content can easily lend obscurity to individual posts and users, and a young user base has constructed a particular way of understanding personal information and complex set of social norms dictating interaction with such information. As such, it excels at providing the kind of privacy young people value: not the ability to prevent information about the minutiae of their lives from being indiscriminately disseminated to persons unknown, but the ability to live life, construct identity, express viewpoints, explore interests, and forge relationships outside the scrutiny of those who would watch, judge, and control them. As Holvast (2009) and Westin (1970) note, privacy is ultimately important to human society because it is a fundamental condition of personal autonomy and development, emotional release, and honest, open communication with others – basic social and emotional needs which, thanks to the larger social construction of youth as a group who do not have the right to privacy, cannot be met for them in the same ways or contexts in which they are met for adults.

The implications of this analysis of privacy practices on tumblr for the study of tumblr itself are, perhaps, obvious. As argued in the previous chapter, tumblr is a space where deliberate separation from the offline social world creates unique conditions of possibility in which a predominantly young user base is able to construct its own set of social norms. Among these are particular practices and expectations relating to individual privacy, which answer to needs which young people often find difficult to fulfill elsewhere, in social contexts and environments more connected to their offline lives and governed more by conceptualizations of privacy which are not their own. The kind of privacy users can find

through tumblr is more in tune with their priorities and the social realities that shape their ability to manage the flow of information about themselves than the privacy of a space like Facebook, where greater technological control over barriers to strangers' and third parties' access to information are undermined by social expectations that demand information be shared with those whose surveillance teens are most anxious to escape. Like the freedom tumblr offers from the judgements, identities, rules, and "baggage" of the offline world, the privacy it affords by way of obscurity, flexible pseudonymity, and community-constructed norms of sharing and disclosure create, for many users, a safer space for expression than they are accustomed to finding offline or on other social platforms. Like tumblr's separation from offline life as a community, the particular experience of individual privacy its cultural norms afford helps to create unique opportunities for expression and identity work, topics I will offer analyses of in the coming chapters.

This is a clear example of how tumblr serves as a space in which young people have built something which suits their priorities and needs, and in fact enables resistance to repressive structures in their wider societies. Tumblr's "marginality", the cultural ambiguity it enjoys both as the natural result of being something new and different and as the hard-won prize of users' persistent resistance against integration with the offline world, has given rise to social practices and conditions which enable resistance to dominant social structures and controls. One form this opposition takes for the young people of fandom tumblr is that of asserting and practicing their right to conceal (and disclose) information about themselves on their own terms.

Beyond the scope of an analysis of tumblr in particular, these observations can help illuminate a need for research, social discourse, and policy regarding internet privacy, especially with regard to youth, to adopt a less judgmental viewpoint that takes account of multiple definitions and conceptualizations of private space and personal information, and

multiple frameworks and mechanisms for exerting control over that information. Rather than assume that differences between adults' and young people's internet privacy practices are due to a lack of understanding, capability, or concern on the part of youth, it may be more appropriate to view such differences as responses to the different social conditions under which these groups live. In such a view, young people's privacy practices cease to be a simple question of transmitting lessons of good internet safety habits from one generation to the next. Instead, they become a particular site of the conflict childhood studies scholars have noted many times between young people's struggle for agency and protectionist ideals that so often serve to enable marginalization, silencing, and even violence against them (Qvortrup, 1994).

Chapter 4: Constructing Authenticity

A Fandom Betrayed

In April of 2016, the animation fandom on tumblr was rocked by the sudden loss of one of its own – the suicide of a user named corporatedragon²⁹. This event followed an earlier suicide attempt and a period of worsening depression, exacerbated in corporatedragon's final days by a highly public argument with another member of the fandom, which had drawn in others on both sides. In the days after her death, members of the fandom posted drawings of corporatedragon, poems dedicated to her memory, messages of hope and support for one another and for her family, and calls for the fandom to come together as a community in her memory to stop "drama" and "hate" within their ranks. I had never interacted with corporatedragon or even encountered her blog, but it quickly became clear that she had been well-known in the fandom and that many would miss her. I thought, as I watched the fandom memorialize this departed comrade, that seeing how the community dealt with such a tragedy might provide a window into what tumblr fandoms mean to their members and how they help people through difficult times, even as I hesitated to include observations of such an intimate grieving process in my dissertation.

A few months later, the situation shifted dramatically as it emerged that corporatedragon was not really dead; in fact, not only had she faked her suicide, she had returned to tumblr under not one but two new urls, purporting through one of these to be corporatedragon's "sister". The fandom was understandably shocked by the scandal as multiple users produced chat logs and other evidence of her manipulations, the reasons for

²⁹ Generally, it has been my policy in this dissertation not to individually identify or discuss users whom I did not interview, even by pseudonyms. Given the circumstances of this highly charged event, I have made an exception here, but I have still given this user a pseudonymous url.

which defied understanding. Her new account remains active, and although some members of the fandom have welcomed her back and even offered support as she continues to struggle with mental illness, many others have advised the community to stay away from her, describing her as a "toxic" person and her interactions with other members of the fandom as emotionally abusive. Some have gone so far as to create long posts detailing "red flags" that may reveal apparent newcomers to tumblr as more "fake" tumblr identities created by corporatedragon.

I found myself quite struck by this visceral reaction from the tumblr community to a user who misled others and pretended to be someone she wasn't, on a site in many ways *defined* by the ability to do just that. In the last two chapters, I have discussed the ways in which users construct tumblr as a social space divorced from everyday life, how they control and limit the flow of information about themselves on the site, and the value they see in the ability to create self-presentations and social networks that are unique to tumblr. Users see tumblr as a place where self-presentations can be more divergent from offline identities than, for example, those found on Facebook, and they tend to view this as positive. This openness of identity construction exists thanks in part to the lack of detailed profiles, "real" names, and socially enforced connections with offline acquaintances which often define more popular social media platforms. Many users create multiple blogs with different urls, and, as discussed in the previous chapter, changing one's url is, if not commonplace, far from unheard of. Even if outright deception is not accepted or anticipated, then, it might seem unlikely that honesty about one's "real" identity would be upheld as an important ideal within the community – and yet, clearly in some ways it is.

At a number of points in the course of this research, I have grappled with the concept of authenticity. It is a subject that came up frequently in interviews, with users like hazelnutcorgi reacting explicitly against the notion that online life is the opposite of "real

life", and others like *simplisticswashbuckler* naming fandom tumblr as the only place they can truly "be themselves". My own experiences have demonstrated (as I discuss in detail later in this chapter) that making off-the-cuff posts which communicate a unique sense of humor elicits more attention from my fellow users than putting significant effort and thought into attempting to produce "quality" content. Even mass marketing efforts on tumblr seem to be successful only when they eschew calculated polish for a more "genuine", homespun aesthetic – something which has attracted commentary from users and marketing analysts alike.³⁰

Authenticity is thus both prized and meaningful on tumblr, despite the fact that this might, on first glance, seem to conflict with the community's preference for separating tumblr from "real life". In this chapter, I explore how fandom tumblr users construct authenticity in their self-expression and identity presentations on tumblr, with an eye toward how the particular authorial practices they use to do this constitute something specific to this particular online culture while sitting broadly into larger trends in young people's online self-construction – and how these practices stand against normative ideals of honest self-representation in online spaces.

Representing Digital Selves

Recent decades have seen significant shifts in how identity is theorized, and both the experiences of young people and the nature of the self in the digital world serve as meaningful microcosms of these changes. While traditional views represent identity as singular, the product of a process of learning and growth whose completion is part of the journey to adulthood (Zemmels, 2012), most contemporary perspectives see it as multiple,

³⁰ For instance, restaurant chain Denny's, which runs a tumblr mixing bizarre breakfast-themed posts with constant interaction with users, has long been recognized as tumblr's breakout marketing success story (Alfonso, 2013), while Taylor Swift's popularity on the site has been credited to her just "acting like a normal 20-something cat blogger" (Baker-Whitelaw, 2015).

fluid, and more process than product. In the postmodern world, identity is seen as continuously constructed and reconstructed "through individual actions and choices, the patterning of thoughts, dispositions, feelings and desires, and the structuring of subjective experience in relation to the social order" (Elliott, 2008).

This increasing recognition of the fragmentary and ephemeral nature of identity in general has led to a trend toward "taking seriously" both the identities of young people and the identities people of all ages adopt and present in online spaces. Traditional theories clearly frame children and youth as incomplete, possessed of only partial, fleeting, and ultimately unimportant identities in the present tense, worthy of interest only inasmuch as they lead (or fail to lead) to fully-formed and healthy identities in adulthood (Hogan, 2009). The decreasing prevalence of the view of adult lives and identities as stable forces us to confront the fallacies inherent in seeing children's perceived instability of self as reflective of a lack of significance or completeness (Lee, 2001). Instead, we can start to see children as subject to and participants in the same interactions between individual and social context through which we all continuously negotiate identity (Bluebond-Langner & Korbin, 2007). Meanwhile, those holding to notions of identity as a singular and stable construct have tended to view online identities as hollow, artificial "masks" (Turkle, 1995), and the early years of scholarship on online social spaces often saw such spaces defined as contexts of "identity play", in which it was assumed users could and did represent themselves in ways which did not map to their physical bodies – a phenomenon viewed alternately as disruptive, liberatory, and dangerous (Marwick, 2005). More popular today, however, are perspectives which see the virtual world as a site of the same multiplicity and fluidity which are increasingly taken to characterize identity in a more general sense (Kennedy, 2014).

These trends have made room for approaches to young people's online identities which go beyond ideas of "identity development" – with its attendant implication of

progress toward the goal of a "finished" identity – and "identity play" – with its suggestions of dishonesty or, at least, contrivance. Instead, scholarship increasingly foregrounds the ways in which young people experience the never-ending project of self-making and the traits of fluidity and multiplicity which are increasingly viewed as normative for identity in a general sense. Stern notes that contemporary young people themselves tend to reject any definition of their online practices in terms of "experimentation" or similar developmentalist terminology suggestive of "playing with" or "trying on" roles and selves. Instead, they prefer to speak in terms reflecting the agentic construction of self.

Young people often reject the characterization of [their online identity] practices as 'experimentation', because, they argue, this term suggests that what they put online is somehow not true or real. Indeed, it is worth noting that social scientists who have tried to empirically measure 'identity experimentation' among online adolescents have operationalized this concept as 'pretending to be someone else'. Rather, most young authors see themselves as trying to capture who they are [...] rather than trying out entirely new and different identities. In nearly all cases, young authors perceive the identities they present online to be authentic, even if 'shined up' and 'polished'. In fact, some youth authors see their online self-presentations as even more representative of their 'real' selves than their offline self-presentations (Stern, 2008, pp. 107-108).

Dobson (2015), meanwhile, notes that the once-popular narrative of "finding yourself" – discovering one's "true" identity as a part of coming of age – has in many cases been replaced with that of "creating yourself", reflective of a growing ethos of "self-

invention and reinvention to suit fluid and shifting needs and purposes" (p. 108). Both observations speak to a growing body of scholarly work which recognizes not only the genuineness of young people's identities in the present tense (as against presuming "finished" adult identity as a goal), but the active role young people take in constructing and negotiating their own identities and self-presentations in the digital world.

The Expectation of Integration

Despite this theoretical trend toward recognizing identity as multiple and fragmentary, in practice, "authenticity" or "honesty" in online self-presentation is often operationalized as connection between online and offline identities, a phenomenon which is only increasing in prevalence as social networking becomes more integrated with offline life generally. Kimmons (2014) argues that most of the dominant social platforms of this decade share two key assumptions about the nature of identity: "that people have authentic or essential identities that exist offline and [...] that these authentic identities can be expressed online" (p. 95). Facebook, by far the world's most popular social networking platform, has been a leader in establishing connection between online and offline identity as a normative standard of online authenticity. This is likely a direct result of Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg's clear belief in the moral and practical superiority of singular models of identity: "having two identities for yourself is an example of a lack of integrity" he says, while also appealing to what he sees as the inexorable forward march of identity "transparency" (Zuckerberg, cited in Kirkpatrick, 2010). In keeping with this philosophy, Facebook maintains punitive policies regarding "fake" names and profiles, requiring that names on profiles "appear on an ID or document" (Facebook, n.d.), and frequently suspends or deletes accounts which are suspected of not matching users' "real" names (Drake, 2015). Other platforms, including Google+ and LinkedIn, have similar expectations and policies (van Dijck, 2013), and the acquisition of Instagram by Facebook and of YouTube by Google

has increasingly tied these platforms to singular philosophies of authenticity as well, as they have been slowly integrated with their parent platforms.

All of this contributes to establishing a normative view of online authenticity as being based on "a single public identity that's an aggregated version of [a user's] offline past, the online present and their combined future" (Krotoski, 2012). Authenticity is cast as the opposite of anonymity and essentially synonymous with connection to offline identity – not only through legal name, but through details such as appearance, physical location, employment and other group affiliations, etc (Kimmons, 2014). Those online spaces and communities which buck this trend and establish norms more accepting of fragmentary and contextually-defined identities tend to be more "marginal" spaces, platforms and communities with smaller user bases dedicated to more specific kinds of interaction. Krotoski (2012) points to a pattern here of friendship-driven spaces, which are usually highly integrated with offline life, tending toward a view of authenticity which sees identity as a singular construct which must be "truthfully" maintained across diverse contexts; less integrated, interest-driven spaces, on the other hand, tend toward a view which sees identity as an open field of different presentations which might be chosen and assembled differently in each specific context. This link between multiplicity of identity and interest-driven spaces was also noted by Ito et al (2010), who found that young people deeply engaged in activities such as sport, gaming, and creative production described their identities as they related to these activities as specific and context-dependent, while identities developed through interaction with local friendship networks were construed as more singular and stable.

Krotoski presents image board 4chan – on which users do not even maintain persistent pseudonyms – as the clearest contrast to the connected identity model, as it operates under the belief that not only is anonymity compatible with authenticity, it actually

enables it. The creator of 4chan, Christopher Poole, believes that equating authenticity with an inescapable connection between online and offline social worlds is misguided, and that what some think of as transparency or keeping people honest, others see as needlessly restrictive and, potentially, harmfully repressive (Krotoski, 2012). This paradigm sees authenticity in the ability to speak one's mind without fear, and to reinvent oneself whenever necessary, in a way which suggests a stronger version of the escaping of "baggage" tumblr users described to me as a key part of their experience. More common than the 4chan approach of total³¹ anonymity is meaningful pseudonymity – in Ingram's (2011) terms, "not real names [but] persistent identity with reputation attached". Reddit, for instance, requires the use of persistent pseudonyms, while Wikipedia can be edited either by unregistered users or by users with established pseudonyms and profiles, but the latter are given more authority.

Fandom tumblr fits broadly into the trend seen in these other primarily interest-driven platforms, embracing pseudonymity with a view toward "authenticity" in a form similar to those defined by Dobson (2015) and Stern (2008) in their work on MySpace profiles and personal websites respectively. The particular ways in which the ideal of "authenticity" is constructed, as well as the authorial practices through which it is produced, differ significantly from one of these contexts to another, but each involves some kind of, in Dobson's words, "transparency of interiority" – that is, "authenticity" means speaking earnestly both to the process of constructing oneself before an audience of friends, peers, and communities, and to the truth of a deeper, "interior" self conceptualized as primary and unique. Like the non-normative practices fandom tumblr users invoke in the building of

³¹ The limits of technology, of course, apply; though 4chan has taken significant steps to "back-end" anonymity such as automatically stripping metadata from all posted images, its creator admits that full anonymity even from the platform's administrators requires connecting via some form of IP address-hiding technology (Krotoski, 2012).

community and the establishment of privacy, their practices of constructing authenticity can be seen as a form of cultural resistance, inasmuch as they reject the notions of integrated, singular self which are increasingly expected elsewhere in their digital worlds.

Urls, Icons, and Descriptions: "because that's what I am"

Urls, icons,³² and blog descriptions are the most overt and deliberate forms of identity presentation on tumblr. Urls, for all intents and purposes, are names, and fulfill the same function as names in the offline world, as the first identification of oneself one presents to strangers and a cue by which one is recognized by acquaintances and friends. The key difference, of course, is that tumblr urls are self-chosen,³³ and can technically be easily changed, although in practice this is not done frequently or lightly. Icons serve much the same purpose as profile pictures on Facebook and similar platforms, serving as a visual cue of a user's identity, recognizable to friends and acquaintances and offering strangers an image to associate with a person. Descriptions, meanwhile, serve essentially as the closest thing tumblr has to "profiles". These short (most are under 30 words), unstructured self-descriptions, which are placed persistently in prominent locations on users' blogs beside or above regular posts, are the only space on tumblr explicitly intended for deliberate self-description. Taken together, urls, icons, and descriptions contribute to users' self-presentation by placing them into established social categories, locating them within particular communities on tumblr, and/or expressing something about them on a more intimate personal level.

³² The image that appears next to posts or messages from a given user; tumblr officially uses the more standard term "avatar", but most users prefer "icon".

³³ Though it is technically possible to choose a url that is simply one's name, I have never seen this done by anyone other than public figures (as well as corporate, institutional, and organizational blogs not run by individuals at all). For that matter, even among the most well-known of tumblr users, more creative urls are not unheard of, as with author John Green who goes by the tumblr url [fishingboatproceeds](#).

There is a surprising dearth of scholarly work on the construction of usernames, but one fundamental concept that has been established is that usernames tend to serve as deliberate representations of the self, and are generally constructed and deployed with the goal of communicating contextually-relevant information about the user (Del-Teso-Craviotto, 2008; Hassa, 2012). For example, usernames on dating websites are usually constructed with an eye toward accurately (if flatteringly) portraying gender, age, and physical or personality traits, while names calling directly or indirectly to ethnic, cultural, or linguistic identities abound in diasporic spaces online (Aleksiejuk, 2016). Within fandom tumblr, contextually-relevant personal information can mean many things. Many users choose to identify with fandom communities by deriving their urls from obscure references to the texts at the center of those communities (for example, the previously quoted ice-cold-hooligan³⁴, whose url references the Viking tribe in *How to Train Your Dragon*). Others choose urls denoting an interest outside of fandom about which they are passionate (painterofcats, for instance), or a marker of personally salient social categories (such as LGBTQIA identities, as is the case with 14-year-old lesbian forestofgay). Some simply use personal references and inside jokes from the offline world (hazelnutcorgi's url refers to a conversation she had with a friend in elementary school), or ironic, self-deprecating descriptions (as is the case with carelesandwrong). Urls become a particularly fascinating site of identity construction when these trends are mixed, as they often are, resulting in urls like dastardlyartist and bisexuallukeskywalker.

The use of icons within fandom tumblr also tends to follow established norms. Of the users I follow, over 90% have icons featuring a character or other recognizable image from

³⁴ The examples given in this paragraph illustrate the importance of achieving the difficult balance of creating pseudonyms that protect users' privacy while also capturing the "flavor" of their real urls, as discussed in Chapter 1.

a fandom, while most of the rest use selfies (the three that fit into neither of these categories use pictures of animals). There is significant diversity within these fandom-derived images, however. To begin with, different characters, poses, and expressions can evoke different feelings; one self-described "humor blogger" uses an icon featuring an image of a screaming sheep from an animated film, for instance. Visual style can also be meaningful, with many users opting to manipulate images with software like Photoshop or draw their icons from scratch, rather than use raw screen captures from the source material, thus injecting some of their personal style into the images. In manipulating or creating fandom-aligned images this way, users display creative talents and interests, and may also find ways to integrate other aspects of their identities; one user I follow uses a hand-drawn icon featuring an anime character standing in front of a lesbian pride flag.

Blog descriptions, broadly speaking, serve to complement the markers of identity embedded in urls and icons with more explicit self-representation. Most start with a list of short, point-form identifications, often beginning with the user's first name (or a nickname) and age. Gender or preferred pronouns and sexual orientation are commonly included, as are indications of general location, nationality, or cultural background. Some users mention disabilities, depression, mental illness, or neurodivergence. Astrological signs and personality types are occasionally seen. A list of fandoms and other interests, or a general statement of identification with fandom community in a broad sense, is frequently present. Following this list, many users include a longer sentence or quotation meant to give some impression of their personality. The following are examples of blog descriptions written by users in the fandom tumblr community:³⁵

³⁵ Each of these has been edited in minor ways, including the use of pseudonyms, to protect users' privacy.

Sara | 17 | she/her | aspiring writer, cat lover. fandom life has consumed me and I love it.

Julia. 19. scotland. we are fickle beings with a gift for self-delusion.

Aisling | 14 | Ireland | she/her | gay af [as fuck] | multifandom trash

Hi, I'm 18 and the internet is basically my life. Have fun on my blog.

Jennifer, 19, bi, fandom blogger, ML, HTTYD, ROTG, ATLA/TLOK³⁶

21 | Polish | they/them | very tired

Ron, 17, scorpio. the hunger games, video games, idk [I don't know] this blog is a lot of things

When they talk about the significance of their urls, icons, and descriptions, tumblr users have a tendency to emphasize a kind of casual, almost effortless self-disclosure. Dastardlyartist, for instance, writes in her description that she chose this url "because that's what I am", a comment which downplays the deliberate thought that went into this choice. Saying that a url is simply "what one is" implies that the choice was easy or obvious, and not a deliberate attempt at presenting or constructing oneself a certain way. This ideal of uncontrived identity presentation can also be seen in the uncomplicated manner in which identifying characteristics are listed in descriptions, the self-effacing uncertainty ("idk this blog is a lot of things"), and the general lack of in-depth discussion or reflection.

³⁶ Abbreviations for the programs/films *The Miraculous Ladybug*, *How to Train Your Dragon*, *Rise of the Guardians*, *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, and *The Legend of Korra*. The last two take place in the same fictional universe, which is the reason they are separated by a slash instead of a comma.

Personalities and meaningful truths about people are often seen by users as coming out in these spaces in small pieces, by implication, rather than in clear statements. Identifications with fandoms, interests, and identity groups mean more than they appear to on first glance: they serve as markers of membership in communities within the broader tumblr context, but are also perceived as deep, personal self-revelation wrapped up in a brief identification with a shared experience and perspective. Simplisticswashbuckler told me that she sees others' expression of fandom identification in their icons as a reflection of shared interests, but as a statement of values and attitudes. She mentioned icons as a specific signal she can rely on to identify people who were part of communities that made her feel safe. "I don't feel that I would ever have to hide from anyone with a [How to Train Your Dragon] avatar," she said, "even if they were a total stranger[.]" This use of fandom affinity to serve as a marker of how users think, feel, and relate to their communities is far from unique to tumblr; Chaney (2013) notes that fan culture often serves as "more than just a social community, it's also identity, a tribe of sorts" which binds people together into a group understood to share much more than interest in a text.

This ideal of casual, indeliberate self-revelation stands in interesting counterpoint to the careful, reflective construction of online selves that defined personal website authorship for participants in Stern's (2008) study. Where those young people indicated that they were engaging in "self-documentation" intended to paint as accurate and detailed a picture of themselves as was possible in this context and medium, tumblr users eschew such obvious effort in producing a clear or cohesive representation of themselves. They prefer to see themselves as *letting out* their deeper thoughts, feelings, and values almost unintentionally. In descriptions and posts, users often characterize their blogs as hodgepodes of fragments in colorful and self-effacing terms like "multifandom dumpster", thereby abandoning

attempts at concrete, detailed self-definition. Such phrases also allude to the importance of the content users post and share as markers of identity.

Content: "puns and bad photoshop memes"

While urls, icons, and descriptions offer small spaces of explicit self-description, most identity work on tumblr takes place in spaces of day-to-day expression. Tumblr users describe their blogs as windows into their thoughts and feelings, and draw close connections between the notion of authentic self-presentation and the idea that they reveal themselves through their engagement with personally meaningful interests and communities. The voluminous content each user posts and shares is thus taken in sum as a representation of who they are – not only despite, but often because of the fact that most individual pieces of this content are not considered "personal" posts and do not directly address the identity or experience of the op. Because it is presumed that little conscious thought goes into the way each individual piece of that content portrays the user's identity, the whole is seen as somehow more genuine than any singular, concerted attempt at self-representation. 15-year-old gradual demise, who identifies herself as an author and artist, told me that browsing tumblr is "like looking into the minds of people, rather than anything else. [...] The mind is a beautiful place, and scrolling through tumblr, I see everything that I need to know, because nothing else matters." A post by another user I follow makes a similar statement in somewhat different language: "tumblr is great because there's no organization to anything, it's just like 'here my brain vomited on the internet'"†.

Users I spoke to drew contrasts between the authenticity that comes from tumblr's encouragement of continuous, unrestricted sharing of large volumes of content and their experiences of other social media platforms and offline social contexts, which they saw as more constraining on self-representation due to different social pressures and expectations.

In much the same way that tumblr's isolation from the rest of users' social worlds enables them to create communities that follow their own norms in terms of connection and interaction, it also makes them feel freer in how they express themselves. In turn, this leads to a feeling among users that their self-expression on tumblr is in some way more genuine. Users described Snapchat and Facebook, for example, as "competitive" spaces which make users feel a need to prove that their lives are exciting. Tumblr, on the other hand, is perceived as a space where people can "let loose" with whatever they think or feel, which leads to being able to present a fuller sense of who one is or wants to be, rather than who others think one is or should be. Such comments echo an important idea raised by Buckingham (2008) about the fact that self-representation can be as much a matter of resistance to outside forces as one of individual self-making: "identity is not merely a matter of playful experimentation or 'personal growth': it is also about [...] life-or-death struggles for self-determination", often against significant social forces (p. 1).

These comments also allude to a perceived inauthenticity in any identity presentation which smacks of deliberateness, and the perceived authenticity of expression that does not "try too hard" to represent the self. I noted earlier the contrast between the casual, piecemeal self-revelation favored by tumblr users in their descriptions, urls, and icons and the meticulous self-authorship Stern described among young people with personal websites in the mid-2000s. There is a similar contrast worth considering between tumblr users' ideal of uncontrived self-revelation by way of mundane social interaction and expression of interests and the more explicitly performative "transparency" in which the young women in Dobson's study of MySpace engaged on a day-to-day basis.

Dobson described a kind of performative disclosure of interiority achieved through the construction of an online self-presentation which was represented as "unfiltered", and thus signalled honesty and truthfulness. A kind of cultivated randomness often featured in

this effort, with users equating the presentation of authentic inner self with a performance of "obliviousness to the demands of social context" (Dobson, 2015, p. 115). Tumblr users' posts and interactions frequently exhibit a "random" character which might appear similar, but is thought of very differently. In fact, tumblr users often specifically mock the kind of cultivated randomness that was popular on the now-defunct MySpace, referring to it as self-indulgent, contrived, and embarrassing; a popular post written by a now-23-year-old college student reflects on the youth culture of the late 2000s with little sympathy:

Among my friends in 2006-9, anything 'mainstream' (Hollister, Aeropostale, Abercrombie), was acknowledged with disgust. [...] I don't know why I was so angry about American Eagle pants and Polo shirts at thirteen. But boy was my blood on fire. [...] Things like 'rawr XD' and 'I'm so lol random waffles-tacos!!!!!!!! GLOMP' Were Not Ironical. This was teen culture, I'm telling you. It wasn't a joke or satirical.

She goes on to argue that this time period, and a particular piece of now-infamous fanfiction written during it, "invented some of the tropes we have today surrounding embarrassing internet culture". While fandom tumblr often features posts equally filled with irrationality and non sequiturs, users tend to see this as more "authentic" because it is not so overtly performative of interiority. The kind of deliberate randomness Dobson describes in her work was imagined by MySpace users at the time as a deliberate ignorance of social boundaries and a frank, almost impulsive revelation of stream-of-consciousness thoughts and feelings, suggesting an inability to filter one's expression of momentary ideas and personal truths which social norms would usually dictate remain unexpressed. Tumblr's randomness, on the other hand – the kind of content users refer to as "shitposting" – revels in its disconnection and inscrutability, obliquely revealing thoughts and feelings by

way of obscure metaphor, reference, and humor rather than claiming to be explicit personal truth. As an example, one popular post imagines what the Boggart³⁷ scene from *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* would have looked like if the op had been a student in Remus Lupin's class, revealing something of their state of mind and sense of humor as a byproduct:

poor remus would have to deal with shit like Abandonment and Crushing
 Poverty hoppin out of the wardrobe and gettin turned into none pizza
 with left beef

When I asked elkcentral about how tumblr is used for purposes of self-expression, he noted that the posts tumblr users categorize as particularly revelatory of some kind of truth about themselves, for instance by use of tags that suggest a post speaks to their personality or state of mind, often have no explicit elements of personal expression. Unlike the previously discussed "#personal" tag, which is primarily used in a literal sense to express the preference that a post not be treated as "public" speech, categorizations like "#me", "#same", and "#relatable" are often applied to posts where their meaning is inferential at best; I have seen tags like these added to, for instance, a news report about someone stealing a large quantity of bananas, a drawing of a stick figure with no face, and a picture of a broken street sign.

Several times, I have seen this aspect of tumblr culture compared to "neo-Dadaism" – indicating that users do "weird things" and "new things" simply in order to avoid the effort it takes to make sense. The abandonment of logic and coherence inherent in this approach is described by one popular post as an almost inescapable response to the socioeconomic

³⁷ In the Harry Potter universe, a Boggart is a creature which takes the form of someone's worst fear, and can only be vanquished if the victim is able to mentally transform it into something they find amusing.

conditions young people are subject to in the 2010s. Mentioning a catalogue of issues from growing income inequality and perpetual overseas war to "being called lazy and self-absorbed by the generations that gave us these problems in the first place", the op of this post concludes, "of COURSE we make nonsense". This post itself quickly became an example of tumblr's appreciation for spontaneous nonsense, as another user commented that they had accidentally left a word replace filter³⁸ active on their browser while reading it, which replaced all references to "millennials" with references to "snake people" and resulted in phrases like "the hopelessness and dissatisfaction that tumblr's userbase (largely, disenfranchised snake people) feels in the modern day".

This cultural appreciation of nonsense suggests a kind of randomness that is collective and even political. This kind of content is far from accidental or undeliberate, but it is viewed by users as naturally proceeding from internal self-concepts negotiating with shared social conditions. This is a clear contrast to the randomness of the MySpace era, which was seen at the time as an attempt to *overcome* the moderating influence of shared social conditions on personal expression (Dobson, 2015), and is viewed by tumblr users now as overly individualistic and audience-oriented.

One of my early experiences while working on this project neatly illustrated the fandom tumblr ideal of transparently allowing one's interests and personality to emerge implicitly through the content of one's posts, as well as the social and cultural value placed on humor and creativity devoid of clear meaning. During my initial push to establish connections with other users in the first weeks of my research, I hoped that I would make inroads into the fandom tumblr community by making "quality" posts in certain fandoms.

³⁸ A word replace filter is a browser extension which replaces instances of a given word or phrase in any visited webpage with another word or phrase, as dictated by the user.

For example, I spent several hours making a How to Train Your Dragon gifset³⁹ using quotes from the original books superimposed over shots from the film adaptations. (One of the gifs I created for as part of this effort is seen in Figure 6.) This was a significant creative and technical task, involving finding appropriate shots from both movies, converting them into gifs, scouring the internet for a readable runic-style font for captions, and going through multiple iterations of the exact composition of each gif. This post did gain over a thousand notes, with replies and tags often complimenting the style and quality, but few users actually followed my blog after seeing and sharing it. Looking back on it, I now understand that there was not enough of *me* in this post to engender any kind of personal connection; the post stood on its own, doing little to express my individual identity.

The reaction to this post that I had been hoping for never came, but a post I made a few short weeks later did achieve remarkable popularity and help me to connect with a significant number of people in the How to Train Your Dragon fandom – I suspect, not despite, but because I actually put very little thought or effort into it. This post began with a news item I stumbled upon about a NASA probe that was about to reach Mars. The headline read, "ExoMars Mission Will Arrive on Time, Despite Hiccup". "Hiccup" happens to be the name of the protagonist of the How to Train Your Dragon franchise, who is famously accident-prone, so I posted a screenshot of this headline with the caption "what did Hiccup do". I soon found myself exchanging jokes with another user about Hiccup breaking expensive space exploration equipment. At one point, I responded with a (rather poorly) photoshopped version of an iconic image from the film of Hiccup reaching out to touch the dragon Toothless' face for the first time – the dragon replaced, in my version of this moment, with the Hubble Space Telescope. To my surprise, other users began piling on,

³⁹ A single post consisting of between two and ten animated gifs.

photoshopping other random objects in Toothless' place, and the image quickly turned into a meme within the How to Train Your Dragon fandom. Figure 7 shows the original image from the film, my initial photoshopped version, and another edit featuring Hiccup and a pizza posted by one of the many users who eventually got in on the joke. The original post reached 8000 notes, with other members of the fandom producing and adding images of Hiccup reaching out for everything from Jesus to a birthday cake.

I gained dozens of followers during this incident, and followed a number of them in return. This short burst of unexpected popularity within a very specific social circle shaped the rest of my research by helping me to forge particularly dense connections with the How to Train Your Dragon fandom. Perhaps more meaningful, however, was the number of people who responded with their own additions to the post, finding ways to engage with me and others more significantly through this minor piece of shared creativity. A similar incident occurred a few weeks later, when a joke I made about Captain America attempting to use a frying pan, an eagle, or one of the other Avengers as a substitute for his shield was widely reblogged and commented on, and ended up garnering me some recognition within the Marvel Cinematic Universe fandom, members of which thus also ended up highly represented in my research. Both experiences demonstrated that while technical, artistic, or creative skill might bring praise for a single post in and of itself, it is allowing one's personality to shine through in as easy-going and effortless a way as possible – and appealing to fandom tumblr's particular sense of humor – which builds lasting connections and fosters community on tumblr.

As I would remark later in a public post on my blog, after a Pokemon Go pun I posted achieved a similar sort of runaway popularity, "my only popular posts are puns and bad photoshop memes, so I think I'll just give up any dreams I had of creating quality content and give in to this identity".† The unpredictable mechanics of connection and popularity on

tumblr had led me to become known for something I had not set out to be known for – and yet, as someone who appreciates puns and bad photoshop memes, I could hardly say that this identity was less than genuine. In fact, it was far more authentic than my earlier attempt to produce a "quality" gifset, which, despite being based on a genuine fandom interest and creative impulse, was also a contrived attempt to gain followers and find a place in the wider fandom network on tumblr. In other words, these experiences did not simply shape how I would fit into the fandom community on tumblr; they also made me consider, in a way I had not previously, *how* I wanted to fit in. At some point, it occurred to me that if I found "puns and bad photoshop memes" more fun than spending hours on a more "artistic" gifset, perhaps the "me" the community reacted more positively to was, indeed, the "me" I wanted to be.

Hazelnutcorgi had a similar experience: "i didnt set out to become an analysis blog or a sad headcanon⁴⁰ blog, as I became known for," she told me, "but i ended up building that". She indicated that she had never particularly hoped to become well-known in her fandoms for dark humor and depressing character analyses, but that she came to truly enjoy this particular notoriety and now works consciously to maintain it by posting content that fits with this image. When I asked what her motivation for attempting to maximize this form of notoriety was, she explained that it was not so much about status or recognition, but about interaction, establishing a place for herself, and feeling that she had given something unique to the community that people appreciated, a statement which relates both to establishing identity and to my earlier observations about users' desire to "contribute".

⁴⁰ The term "canon" refers to the set of material accepted as "official" by fans of a particular text; a "headcanon", by extension, is something a particular fan chooses to *imagine* to be part of this material.

Through conversations like this, it became clear to me that there is a shared understanding that, over time, users became known for specific things, ranging from critical analysis to fanfiction writing to shipping⁴¹-related content to dark humor. The interplay between individual talents and interests and the perceptions and reactions of the community at large in forming and maintaining these "niches" is reflective of postmodern ideas of identity in a general sense, identity being seen as the result of negotiation between an inner self and fluid contexts of cultural discourse (Linger, 2003). It also reflects the more specific expression of this identity constructionism on tumblr, in the manner in which "stumbling into" an identity, and thereafter willingly adopting it, is respected as a "natural" or uncontrived revelation of self.

This is an important phenomenon to note, as one of the qualities often ascribed to online identity construction among young people, even by scholars who are generally positive about this subject, is its assumed deliberateness. The idea that identity in online spaces is built primarily on discourse and self-authored "texts" like blogs, homepages, and profiles seems to lead precipitously to the notion that it is always the result of conscious thought about who one is and wants to be (Stern, 2008). What tumblr showcases, however, is that this process can be as unconscious and inscrutable a process as in the offline world – and equally based on interaction and labels or expectations affixed by others, and the way these are adopted or rejected.

⁴¹ "Shipping", derived from the word "relationship", describes the desire among fans for two or more characters to be in a romantic relationship, and associated activity such as producing fanfiction or fanart featuring the relationship.

Evolution and Revision: "through my blog you would hopefully see a bit of growth and learning"

My first question to each of the users I spoke to was the same: how long had they been on tumblr, and how, in their view, had their blog changed in that time? This question led to some fascinating exchanges, such as this one with somefunnyusername:

somefunnyusername: I've had my tumblr for 5 years. It's changed drastically from only reblogging from other blogs, to actually posting my own material every now and then. It's changed from strictly the bands I liked, to mostly things that made me laugh or made me happy. Then went from that, to things I thought were most beautiful. (Ex. The ocean, landscapes, couples truly enjoying each other, etc.,) now it's slowly transitioning to more tattoos, as I'm a tattoo apprentice now and see the most art in the photos I reblog.

researcher: so it's kind of widened over time?

somefunnyusername: Yeah, I would say that. I'd say it's my mind through photos or text.

Like the things I don't talk about to other people [...] A deeper me I guess.

Somefunnyusername actually describes two distinct but interrelated trends in this exchange, both of which were noted by many of the other longtime tumblr users I spoke to. The first is a pattern of blogs becoming increasingly "personal" over time. Though not a universal experience, it seems it is common for users to start out with a blog that fits into one particular niche and then grows to encompass a wider variety of the things they like and enjoy, as well as more personal thoughts and feelings. While users who note this trend in their own blogs still see them as a collection of impulsive thoughts and shared content, rather than a deliberate or singular presentation of self, they do suggest that they change over time from outlets for a handful of specific interests to more complete narratives of who they are. As part of this trend, several users noted a particular increase over time in the frequency with which they made original posts: dastardlyartist explained that she made more of her own posts, rather than almost exclusively reblogging from others, as she began to "get used to the community and dynamic of tumblr" and become more comfortable expressing herself. Though in her case this pertained mostly to sharing her own creative work, others remarked on similarly feeling more comfortable making posts expressing their thoughts and feelings on their own lives as they got to know their tumblr communities and felt more accepted. Another specific manifestation of this trend is users engaging in more commentary on potentially controversial or charged social issues over time. Wyvernbodyguard, for instance, told me, "I started with posting just a few fandoms I was in, but now I post anything that's appealing to me and what I think is important, whether or not it's fandom related"; when I asked what "important" meant in this context, she answered, "Mostly social justice posts or anything with a more serious message that I think should be addressed."

The other trend implied in somefunnyusername's statements is that of blog content shifting gradually and fluidly over time as users' interests, values, and indeed identities

change. It is in part because of the potential for gradual, unintentional, and almost unnoticed change that tumblr users maintain that the content through which they present themselves on tumblr is an authentic representation of who they "really" are. I have, in fact, seen multiple posts remarking on the fact that it can be jarring to go back and look at the different fandoms and different kinds of posts which once dominated one's blog. Sirfansalot, who joined tumblr in 2013, explained, "I have used it [tumblr] when I am happy, and when I am sad. When I am furious at the world [...] If you would go through my entire blog you would be able to map out all of these emotions and hopefully see a little bit of growth and learning." This kind of reflection echoes the statements of some of the young authors Stern (2008) interviewed, who maintained blogs and personal homepages as ways of actively reflecting on what was important to them and changes in their lives – but there, this reflection was more deliberate and cohesive, where on tumblr it tends to take the form of short posts describing momentary feelings or specific events.

In contrast to this gradual evolution of the identity shown through posts, changing more explicit elements of self-presentation such as urls and icons is a clearer and more immediate revision of one's tumblr identity. As described in the previous chapter, users sometimes change their urls out of a desire to escape unwanted attention or notoriety. More often, however, such a change is the result of a user feeling that something about the way their current url presents them to the community is lacking in authenticity. A user I knew initially as galacticsteve⁴², whose url referenced the TV show *Steven Universe*, described his url as an integral part of presenting himself as a member of the *Steven Universe* fandom – something which had value to him, but also came at a cost. He explained how choosing this url had restricted his self-presentation over the long term, making him feel boxed into a

⁴² I still use a pseudonym for this user, despite this url now being abandoned, as it could easily be traced to his new one.

particular identity he did not feel was reflective of his whole self, and reluctant to share content within other fandoms for fear of violating the identity inscribed in his url. Despite this feeling of being limited, he indicated that tumblr is "a great way to express oneself" and made it clear that his interest in *Steven Universe* is a genuine and important part of his tumblr experience, suggesting that the identity defined by the url in question was not inauthentic in the sense of being wrong, but in the sense of being insufficient. Ultimately, he described the restrictions he felt due to his fandom-specific url as the result of his own choice, and one which he was aware he could change if he wished. A few months after I interviewed him, he moved on to another url he felt was less limiting, saying he "wasn't happy" with his blog as it stood. His new url references his interest in video games, which now appear to be the focus of the blog, and it is clear from the wider range of content he now posts that this choice of a less specific, but still interest-derived, label has had the desired effect of making him feel comfortable adding some variety to how he expresses himself.

Changing one's url is a significant reconstruction of one's identity, but for the former galacticsteve and his followers, it has not erased or reduced the meaning of his past. His old blog remains, with a notice at the top directing visitors to the new one. This kind of "soft" link between identities is commonplace when tumblr users choose to change urls, and helps to demonstrate that they are not trying to escape their tumblr pasts, but simply to move forward with a slightly different self-presentation.

Hazelnutcorgi recently went through something similar regarding her icon. She has had the same *Rise of the Guardians*-themed icon since she first joined tumblr, and in late 2016, made a post indicating that she was considering changing this. Followers and friends messaged her saying that it would be "strange" to see her with a new icon, as they had come to associate her so strongly with the specific image she has used for years; in response, she

explained that the *Rise of the Guardians* theme would remain, and she would probably even keep the same character as a subject, but she wanted to "redo" the icon and make minor improvements. "I've used this icon so long it's become part of my image just like my url," she said; "I'm just going to give it a new background and improve the quality since I lost the original file long ago and had to use a screenshot of it"†. This suggests that, like galacticsteve's decision to change his url, hazelnutcorgi's plan to change her icon is part of an ongoing process of identity presentation which acknowledges and remains tied to the past. She is not dissatisfied with her icon and still feels that it represents her, but thinks it could represent her somewhat better with a few changes that don't significantly impact the overall visual impression.

As it was for the young people in Stern's (2008) study, online identity for these tumblr users has been an ongoing process, but unlike in the case of Stern's participants, here an earlier version of a user's identity is left visible to all, making the process not so much iterative as continuous, the past acknowledged but moved on from rather than wiped clean and replaced. This kind of transition, which is treated as significant but not out of the ordinary on tumblr, is part of the deliberate construction of authenticity by tumblr users, as much as the initial choice of a url, and focused on the same ideal of producing an earnest representation of the interests which figure powerfully in their self-concepts. As users make such adjustments to their urls, it is understood that they are going through a natural process of continually seeking out the tumblr identity that feels most accurately representative of their self-concept at a given time in their lives.

This is perhaps why outright deception is so frowned upon. A tumblr blog, with its associated url, icon, and content, is expected to be an ongoing space of honest, authentic self-representation before the community. To do what corporatedragon did and pretend to be different people through multiple blogs is seen as a betrayal of the community's trust

because the various systems involved are then being used for quite the opposite of their understood purposes – to obscure rather than to reveal. It also demonstrates significant *effort* on corporatedragon's part to shape identity in a social context where perceptions of authenticity often rest on the ideal of not trying too hard to present oneself in any particular light. In fact, it does take serious effort to run afoul of this taboo against manipulative identity-switching, as users are quite accustomed to others running multiple blogs or changing urls, and no matter how many times one mentions doing so in posts, tags, or blog descriptions there will always be many who remain unaware. Finding out that two urls belong to one person who has never actively hid this fact is generally met with mild surprise at the most⁴³. If anything, a lack of effort put into clarifying such a situation might even carry a suggestion of authenticity in itself, as a piece of naturally arising and purely unintended identity confusion.

Finding out that someone has engaged in intentional deception is a different story. Reflectionfaces spoke angrily in our interview of "people on tumblr [who] change their handles⁴⁴ every time they los[e] an argument", making it "harder to keep track of people with a pattern of bad behavior". The fact that this sort of escaping of consequences or manipulation of others through malicious use of anonymity does happen demonstrates that the fears of deception associated with multiple identities by people like Mark Zuckerberg are not completely unfounded. However, to tumblr users, this does not imply that the construction of authenticity through pseudonymous self-representations is fundamentally misguided – it merely means that, as in any context, unscrupulous individuals who may try

⁴³ I encountered this myself on several occasions, as I made a point to inform anyone I happened to interact with through both my personal blog and my research blog that they belonged to the same person.

⁴⁴ Though rare on tumblr, the term "handle" is a common generic term for usernames or pseudonyms. This particular user was a relative newcomer to tumblr and had more experience with Livejournal and Twitter, which explains the unusual vocabulary choice.

to take advantage of the system exist. No matter how many posts I see condemning corporatedragon's actions or expressing concern about what she may do next, none have ever suggested that in light of this incident tumblr should require users to sign up using their "real" names or tie their blogs to their offline identities. The fact that the community's norms are occasionally violated does not subtract from the value or overall effectiveness of those norms, and it seems that, despite the occasional betrayal, the value in pseudonymity persists for most users.

The Meaning of Being Yourself

Like the protection of a particular kind of personal information through the use of privacy settings and digital "castle walls", the Facebook model of authenticity would appear to have achieved a certain normative status. In Krotoski's (2012) words, this ideal of authenticity defined by singular, connected identities, "real" faces and names, is "creeping into the heart of most social media models and in the current internet landscape is playing an important role in how we engage with one another and with web content". This is due in large part to the influence of giants like Facebook and Google, whose revenue models thrive on connecting online content production and consumption with offline activity.

Despite this, users clearly see value in the ability to maintain online identities separated from offline ones, particularly within spaces of interest-driven engagement that historically have been the more divorced from offline sociality. In such contexts, authenticity is not based on having a single public self which seamlessly connects the virtual world to the physical – on being "the same" everywhere one goes. It is based, instead, on the ideal of being "true to oneself", honest about one's interior thoughts and feelings and about the process of social negotiation and self-construction that creates identities unique to particular contexts. To suggest this is hardly a new argument. Despite digital social spaces

being decried in their early years by scholars and pundits alike as threatening the very sense of identity itself, and despite the continued moral panic about the internet as a space of deception and false faces, digital culture researchers have repeatedly observed that online communities tend more often to foster willing openness of self than intentional deceit.

The ways in which this openness operates, however, and the particular norms of how "authenticity" is operationalized as a concept, vary from one online context to another, often speaking to the specific value users see in different online communities, and in a broader sense, the wide range of ways in which human beings define authenticity in their interactions. For the young personal homepage authors in Stern's (2008) study, notions of authenticity rested on the idea of online self-presentations as ongoing projects of self-construction and self-reflection, iterations building upon iterations in never-ending search of a representation of self which could be called whole and accurate. The MySpace users in Dobson's (2015) research valued overt and deliberate rejection of social norms in favor of unfiltered and "random" self-representations which highlighted both uniqueness and a kind of vulnerability arising from seeming to be an "open book". Boellstorff's (2015) research on Second Life highlighted the way in which "disjuncture" from physical-world selves in avatar appearance and role-taking was seen not as deceitful, but as enabling new kinds of relationships, often freer and more emotionally resonant. Ito et al (2010) found that people involved in online creative collaboration defined authenticity in terms of originality and expressiveness in art-making.

In fandom tumblr, authenticity is suggested by a communication of interiority which consists more of passive revelation than active disclosure. The content users post and share is perceived as representative of their values, thoughts, and feelings, even or perhaps especially when it is not overtly "personal" but grounded in fandoms and other interests.

Authenticity comes from a lack of conscious thought about how this content reflects the self, and a kitchen-sink approach which errs on the side of wide-ranging genres and themes. Randomness is encouraged, but only when it does not appear contrived to present the individual as unique in their eccentricity, or more earnest than others around them. Niches and reputations are better stumbled into through the offhanded creation of posts that let personality and humor shine through than through deliberate attempts at appealing to an audience.

More static markers of identity necessitate some level of more careful thought, but even here, an attitude of casual, careless earnestness prevails, as does the notion of self-revelation as a byproduct of fandom-driven sharing and creation. Images of favorite characters stand in for identification with the messages and themes of the texts from which they are plucked, and thus subtly communicate something of personal values. Urls denote fandom memberships and key elements of self-concept while users downplay the creativity involved in their creation by defining them as simply honest statements about "who they are". Blog descriptions, the closest thing tumblr provides for to the extensive profiles of Facebook or MySpace or the large-scale authorship of personal websites, are short, matter-of-fact affairs, identity often read between the lines.

Tumblr selves are not static, just as identities in general are not; when tumblr users start their blogs, create urls, icons, themes, and descriptions for them, and begin to fill them with content, they embark on a process of self-representation that is never quite finished. Gradual changes in the content users post and reblog occur unnoticed by users and their followers alike, and minor tweaks in descriptions or color schemes seem inconsequential taken one at a time; still, they reflect growth and change in the interests and self-concepts users see as defining the interior self they wish their blogs to reveal. Larger changes like the starting of a completely new blog to replace an existing one may mark a break between past

and future in such a fluid identity, but histories are often left in place, making change seem less about reinvention and more about evolution.

The users I spoke to described feeling free to express themselves on tumblr in ways they could never do offline and in many other online spaces, and ascribed this directly to the community's emphasis on being true to oneself in a relaxed and uncontrived way, and on the lack of pressure toward connectedness with identities defined outside of tumblr. "On tumblr, I don't have to pretend I have my life together," said first-year college student dancebreakheartbreak. "An ambiguous URL provides a safe space to admit to some of the darker points of being alive, and all the shortcomings of young adulthood I've unveiled. [...] And I think that kind of honesty is true for a lot of tumblr users."

This particular way of valuing a particular kind of authenticity explains why accidentally starting a meme garnered me an order of magnitude more response than a careful attempt at producing something artistic, and it also explains the How to Train Your Dragon fandom's reaction to corporatedragon's duplicity. Despite the common narrative that pseudonymous online interaction allows people to "pretend to be someone else", tumblr users' experience is often the opposite: both the pseudonymity itself and the particular way in which urls and other aspects of tumblr identities are constructed enable people to be themselves. Furthermore, the norms of how authenticity is constructed in fandom tumblr prioritize a lack of contrivance, and a kind of honesty which comes from showing one's inner self through uncalculated presentations of interests and fandom affiliations. To contravene these norms by using tumblr's pseudonymous nature and various tools of self-definition to obscure one's true self rather than reveal it was a betrayal not just of the community but of the foundations on which it is presumed to stand.

Fandom tumblr functions under a model of authenticity which, congruent with postmodern ideas of the relational and multifaceted self, follows a general pattern established by other interest-driven online spaces of valuing authenticity through personal transparency, but does so in a unique way. Fandom tumblr's vision of authenticity as uncontrived, piecemeal self-revelation, coupled with its separation from "real" names and faces, create a space where many users find it easier to express their core self-concepts without pressuring them to treat their blogs as identity projects with goals of development, exploration, or self-discovery. In their practices of identity presentation and ideals of authenticity, the meaningful centrality of "marginal" spaces once more becomes clear. The selves of the online world are increasingly connected to and defined by those of the offline world, with messy, inexact, multiple, and un-"verifiable" selves increasingly pushed to the margins of the digital world. Yet it is in this space on the edges of the normative digital experience that these young people feel they can most honestly and completely represent themselves to others.

In the previous chapter, I argued that young people's online privacy expectations and behaviors are often judged unfairly against standards inappropriate to the social position of youth, and that rather than seeing differences between young people's practices and those of adults as deficiencies on the part of the former, they should be taken on equal footing and analyzed for what they reveal about each group's experiences and needs. I wish to suggest something similar with regard to fundamental ideas of authenticity in online self-presentations. The idea that authenticity must be defined in terms of the continuity of online and offline selves is, though widely questioned in studies of online culture, still powerful in many narratives of the virtual world, and it is worthwhile, to begin with, simply to add my voice to those pushing back against this. This is especially true as spaces defined by connective authenticity continue to become more situated as the defining, normative

online social experience, as personal webpage services close their doors, the popularity of blogs declines, and increasing focus shifts to real-name-based services like Facebook, LinkedIn, Google's suite of social platforms, and (though the use of real names is here at least optional) Twitter (Taylor C. , 2015; Krotoski, 2012). It is worth bearing in mind that the view of authenticity which has typically been more prevalent in interest-driven online communities might continue to fit the needs and circumstances of these communities better than those of friendship-driven communities more deeply connected to offline life, and that the former cannot and should not be judged based on the standards of the latter.

Beyond this, and in a more specific effort to speak to necessary directions in ongoing online culture research, I feel it a vitally important observation that even among spaces where authentic identity is defined not by connected, singular personae but by the disclosure of inner selves and the public performance of self-making, there can be vast differences in how the pursuit of such authenticity plays out. Fandom tumblr's vehement repudiation of the cultivated randomness which defined the MySpace era, and more muted but no less significant rejection of the careful, iterative self-authorship of personal websites, raise important questions about the variety of ways in which young people can operationalize concepts of authenticity and personal transparency. To some degree, certainly, these differences are shaped by the constraints of each platform; tumblr's emphasis on content creation and (especially) sharing encourage the revelation of fragments of self by way of the indiscriminate curation of digital artifacts of interest, where social media profiles and webpage authorship encouraged entirely different approaches. But they also reflect the particular values of each community, and, perhaps, the circumstances of youth culture in a wider sense. Fandom tumblr is capable of seeing personal revelation in the sharing of fandom content only because the latter holds so much meaning for members of this community, and thus can fulfill a communicative function.

Meanwhile, as the cultivated randomness of the MySpace era was part of a wider cultural trend of the late 2000s (which tumblr users equally disparage, often in reference to Hot Topic clothing), perhaps the more intuitive and casual approach to transparency of interiority which tumblr exemplifies might shine a light on the youth culture of the mid-2010s. Alternately, it might be wondered what other models of authenticity are open to young people in other online spaces today, and how these relate to one another, to the geography of the social internet, and to how authenticity is imagined and performed offline.

All of this, of course, is beyond the scope of this project. All I can attempt to answer with any kind of clarity is the question of what fandom tumblr's vision of authenticity offers the young people who make up this community. My conversations with tumblr users suggest that ultimately, the answer is that it provides a feeling of safety from expectations, judgment, and pressure. Here, they feel able to "be themselves" in a truer sense than they can elsewhere, revealing more of their values and personalities than is safe in many social spaces – but still without feeling pushed to attempt to fully define themselves or explicitly reveal the deep personal truths they would rather gesture to obliquely in daily interaction. Sir-fansalot surprised me, at one point in our interview, by revealing that they do not use any other social media platforms; tumblr, they explained, is a place where they feel no need to limit themselves in what they talk about or the face they show to the world, and no other platform feels like either a necessity in their life or an equal of tumblr as a result.

Chapter 5: Reconstituting Politics

What Does "Engagement" Look Like?

On September 25, 2016, a user on tumblr uploaded an image (seen in Figure 8) of a group of young women taking selfies with Hillary Clinton standing and waving in the background and captioned it simply, "we're fucked." Responses from the tumblr community almost universally condemned this comment as reactionary and technophobic, and discussed, at varying levels of complexity, the power of the relationship between citizen and candidate expressed in the image. Some users contented themselves with adding sarcastic responses like "how dare I want to show others that I was there and I was excited?"[†] or simply saying in tags that they support "selfie culture". Others offered historical perspectives, reminding their followers that self-portraits predate modern technology by thousands of years and have always been about documenting one's existence in context. One commented with screenshots of a series of posts made on Twitter by her coworker, in which he argued,

If anything, in that photo they're closer to someone they admire than they ever can be otherwise and that's cool. [...] They're connecting. They're inserting themselves into a narrative and, more importantly, they are physically inserting a politician into their own narratives. That's powerful. That's participatory.

This version of the post picked up steam, accumulating many thousands of notes and inviting still more commentary. One young woman said of this act of self-insertion into the visual narrative of a major election, "this is direct evidence that our generation really

understands on a deep level that we are the foundation of democracy, we are the leaders. we're witnessing empowerment here."†

The conflict in this discussion is not simply over whether or not young people are "politically engaged", but rather over what *counts* as engagement, and who gets to decide what a moment of "political engagement" means. Taking selfies with Hillary Clinton, the "pro-selfie" crowd on this post is arguing, is not just a way of becoming part of the political narrative, but a way of making a political figure and a political moment part of one's own narrative, an act which can be read as evidence of fundamental democratic empowerment. If this is the case, then this is a form of engagement that is not just about situating oneself within existing political structures, but about taking an active role in shaping political discourse.

Of course, this is only a single moment, which ironically became a point of conversation only because someone took a photo, but it raises some relevant questions regarding tumblr users' views and experiences of engagement with issues of political and social significance. In my interactions with the young people of fandom tumblr, I have found that many are deeply and consistently engaged with such issues, but their patterns and practices of engagement often operate outside of not only traditional institutions of governance, but the dominant discourses which frame issues in national and global public conversation. In finding and constructing their own ways of framing issues which have meaning to them, they navigate around some of the perennial problems associated with the ever-elusive "youth voice".

Youth Participation and Youth Engagement

Questions about what "counts" as political participation have a long history, founded at least in part on the equally long history of disagreement about what "politics" itself

means. Hanley (2010) describes this history as one of a gradual progression from a clearly delimited concern with governance to a more encompassing and hazily-defined interest in social relationships:

Once upon a time the discipline was about law and government. Then it came to include the study of social movements. And then it came to include the study of the effectiveness of policy. And [it became] about voting. And about decision-making and rational choice. And now it has come to include the evolved psychology of social interaction. [...] 'Politics' as a term should not be limited to any one set of activities, but should be applied to a class of human behaviors that have a common purpose [...] those that involve the pursuit of goals and value in conjunction with others.

If "politics" is about law and government, it stands to reason that political participation consists of actions related to formal institutions of governance – joining political parties, campaigning, voting, running for office. If "politics" is about social interaction, and particularly about the way values and power are embedded in daily life, then political participation cannot be so neatly defined or circumscribed; it happens as much in the office, the classroom, and the living room as in the voting booth. If there can be said to be a primary focus of criticism levelled by scholars at discourses of youth political engagement, it is that formal, governance-focused modes of political participation have been privileged over forms of engagement which fall into this wider conceptualization of politics as everyday relational action.

Since the first members of the millennial generation were teenagers, the perceived political disengagement of youth has been a topic of increasing attention within both academic and social commentary (Howe & Strauss, 2000). This discourse has focused primarily on low voting rates among young adults, or on the need to improve the process of "political socialization" by which children and teenagers are trained to become "active citizens" who vote, communicate with their representatives, and otherwise participate in the institutions of democratic governance (Russell, Fieldhouse, Purdam, & Kalra, 2002). While some scholars have fallen partly or wholly on board with the narrative of increasingly apathetic youngsters, often foisting much of the blame on the siren call of social media, others have countered by arguing that dystopian narratives of withdrawal from the institutions of public society fail to take into account new forms of engagement (Kahne, Middaugh, Lee, & Feezell, 2012). Bennett (2008) describes the two basic paradigms of thought on this issue as that of "dutiful citizenship", in which the decline in electoral participation and use of traditional news sources by young people is lamented as a rejection of civic obligations to participate in the institutions of government, and that of "actualizing citizenship", in which conventional forms of participation such as voting are seen as overvalued and engagement via volunteering, social activism, and networked advocacy are considered more important.

To those who subscribe to the latter perspective, the defining feature of contemporary young people's political participation is their preference for informal, networked, and collective action over formal, hierarchical institutions. Jenkins (2016) observes:

Youth are making calculated choices that they may be more effective at bringing about change through educational or cultural mechanisms

rather than through electoral or institutional means and through a consensus rather than partisan approach – addressing social problems on levels where voluntary actions can make a difference (p. 9).

He goes on to argue that this approach is validated, at least to some degree, by the fact that even as youth and other marginalized groups have increased their participation in formal politics in recent election cycles, the issues which matter most to these groups have not seen increased attention in the halls of formal power.

The question of whether participation in formal politics actually leads to representation and, by extension, genuine change is hardly a new one, especially in the particular realm of children's rights to inclusion and participation. When young people are invited into spaces of traditional, formal politics by adults – which, it must be said, is relatively rare to begin with – it is on adult terms. Formal schemes to involve young people in established political institutions tend to be framed in a language of ensuring the development of good future citizens, rather than one of acknowledging a moral obligation of representation and voice owed to children by society (Clutton, 2008); this quite readily leads to tokenism, or to children having the appearance of "input" on matters of concern to them but no genuine influence (Woodhouse, 2004). Ennew (2008), along these lines, gives several examples of United Nations conferences and initiatives which have "included" children as a way of generating an air of legitimacy, without giving any significant weight to their views. At worst, spaces intended for children's participation become nothing more than spaces in which adults can co-opt children into exercising their agency for specific adult purposes, giving them a share of responsibility for achieving goals without a commensurate share of authority in determining what those goals are (Gallagher, 2006).

Even youth participation initiatives which are genuinely intended to empower young people as collaborators in decision-making processes may still reflect the adultist social power structures within which they are produced. This is especially the case when young people find they are unable to set the agenda, leaving them with no opportunity to ensure the issues most important to them are open for discussion (Liebel, 2008). It is for this reason that Fitzgerald, Graham, Smith, & Taylor (2009) argue that inclusion for children lies not in taking part in specific participatory initiatives, or even in staking claim to a voice in existing systems of power, but in actively struggling for recognition as a social group with legitimate views and interests, and a right to an equal part in ongoing social dialogue.

The Question of Voice

ppl [people]: teens need to focus on important things

teens: *discuss politics, feminism, race, etc*

ppl: lol...ur just a teenager, chill

This post seems to have originated on Twitter, but has circulated widely on multiple platforms of late, including tumblr. It calls attention, in cuttingly sarcastic fashion, to one of the key issues outlined above: for all the complaints young people face about their political disengagement, they often find that the kind of participation desired of them does not include forwarding their own opinions and perspectives. Those under the voting age are expected to "participate" as relatively passive citizens-in-training, or by joining parties and movements helmed by their elders. Even reaching the voting age does not constitute the clear threshold on this point which it might be imagined, as the political establishment's drive to "empower" young voters rings hollow with many who feel their views on key issues are not welcome. Gamber-Thompson (2016) notes a trend among many young people of

rejecting voting as a useful method of affecting policy at all, based on the notion that political parties spend most of their time working toward their own benefit rather than that of the populace. I have seen such views expressed only rarely in fandom tumblr, and when they are forwarded, they are usually rebutted with the argument that those who can vote have a moral responsibility to do so in order to help prevent the worst possible outcomes from coming to pass. Still, few users seem much enamored of parties or conventional democratic institutions. Illustrating this poignantly are posts decrying the hypocrisy of the Democratic Party's continuing to position itself as the party of young Americans while failing to give space to their vision of progressivism, which have been commonplace in the wake of both Hillary Clinton's nomination for president over Bernie Sanders and Tom Perez' appointment as party chair over Keith Ellison. To a cynical eye, then, it seems that the young people whose "engagement" is so keenly desired are merely being courted for their votes rather than welcomed as true participants in democratic governance. Such a conclusion is supported by Russel, Fieldhouse, Purdam, & Kalra's (2002) observation that campaigns rarely make mention of youth issues, and young people casting their first ballots are rarely contacted by representatives or candidates, outside of key battleground constituencies.

These issues echo more abstract questions of the meaning of "voice" for marginalized groups – for example, those raised by Orner (1992), who asks, "For whose benefit do [the oppressed] speak? How is the speaking received, interpreted, controlled, limited, disciplined and stylized[?]" (p. 76). When those dedicated to the "dutiful citizen" paradigm of engagement, fearful of the demise of democratic society, decry young people's disengagement from institutional politics and call on them to increase their participation, they are demanding a certain exercise of youth voice for a certain purpose – that of both

maintaining and legitimizing existing "democratic" social structures, which in practice are significantly less democratic for children than they are for adults.

Ennew (1994) raises a question fundamental to childhood studies by asking "how individual children surmount the obstacle of childhood" (p. 125). This question is posed not in the sense of "developing" out of childhood or even escaping the social category of "child", but of overcoming the socially constructed barriers which childhood represents. One might understand this question in a variety of ways, congruent with the multiple and intersecting structures which marginalize young people. I invoke it here specifically to draw attention to young people as a group traditionally marginalized from political participation and, in a wider sense, from inclusion in public life, who must overcome barriers practical, legal, and cultural in order not only to simply speak, but to successfully exercise, in McGillis' (1997) words, a "decolonized" voice, "speaking its own authority and identity in confidence".

Mejias (2006) argues that "even the alleged 'non-participation' of teens is political", and the vital question is not to what extent young people are "participating" in conventionally recognized forms of political life, but rather "what kind of public sphere is being created by new forms of participation" in which they choose to take part (p. 11). Schultz (2012) makes an argument that is similar, but less situated in traditionally political discourse, arguing that children's silence is not representative of passivity, but alternately represents a chosen assent when adults desire silence or chosen resistance when adults desire response – in either case, it is fundamentally agentic. These arguments recognize the importance of both silence and expression outside conventional understandings of "public voice" as ways of working against established power structures and norms of discourse, particularly for young people. Of particular note is the power of refusal to speak in *contexts and framings of others' devising* as a tool of social resistance; Orner (1992) argues that

silence in the face of demands for expression to fit a purpose that is not one's own is as powerful as outspokenness in the face of deliberate silencing.

Hooks (1990) argues that too often, "when the radical voice speaks [it is] speaking to those who dominate" (p. 154). This kind of speaking to power about one's struggles is central to the notion of youth "voice", something imagined as missing or erased which must be "given" or "listened to" in order to allow young people into conversations which are historically alien to them. An instinct toward a sort of beneficent uplifting is seen in these efforts, in which adults graciously help youth to speak in adult frames of meaning; it may be, however, that a great deal of truth about young people's lives and experiences is lost or obscured when their voices are "read" solely for words spoken to adults in contexts of adult meaning and purpose (Spyrou, 2011).

In considering this, I am reminded of several tumblr posts I have seen which feature similar hypothetical exchanges between teens and adults (usually parents). In these posts, the adult asks the teen how their day at school was, and the teen answers, in stereotypically monosyllabic fashion, "fine"; but when, taking the risk of opening up further, they reveal that they have actually had a terrible day filled with stress and turmoil, the adult responds with something to the effect of "well, enjoy it, these are the best days of your life!" What the fictional young person's all-too-familiar experience suggests is that they are not being listened to on their own terms so much as invited to lend their "voice" to a dialogue that will, regardless of what they say, be used to justify the pre-existing views of the adult. These posts suggest that their young authors feel silence is the preferable option if its alternative is being asked to speak, but only heard on someone else's terms.

Gonick (2007) suggests that what is needed is "a way for [marginalized people] to both speak and remain silent at the same time" (p. 448) – that is, to claim the power of

making themselves heard when they wish to be without having their expression coopted to fit others' discourses. This notion is reminiscent of the concept of "talk" – the hidden, horizontal expression which stands in contrast to the "voice" elicited by those in power and always spoken with a backdrop of hierarchy and difference (Shor, 1980; Orner, 1992). "Talk" is dialogue and discussion, often idle or without clear purpose, lacking in the clear and present link to large-scale action which "voice" enjoys. It is a key practice of freedom because it builds empowering social ties, engenders creativity and critical thinking, and helps people form views and opinions (Kim & Kim, 2008). It is stifled for these very reasons; "a power struggle surrounds the use of words in every institution of life, [so] there are tense rules and high prices to pay for talking" (Shor, 1980, p. 72).

In fact, even in contexts where "progressive" philosophies are at work to elicit the "voices" of young people and mobilize them for ideals of justice and equality, communication about day-to-day issues and concerns *between* children and youth is often treated as undesirable and brings punishment from adults (Fine, 2008). This is especially true if the issues being discussed among young people relate to their own discontent with the restrictions and conditions under which they live and speak. This kind of emergent, everyday talk can thus be seen as inherently subversive and resistive even if it is not engaged in for purposes which are expressly "political" – that is, related to governance or conventional framing of controversial social issues.

Fandom tumblr users have adopted particular ways of framing their engagement with social issues that exemplify this kind of refusal to let their expression be constructed within the dominant framework of political participation, with all its trappings of adultist (and ableist, and hetero/cis/sexist, and racist) power. This chapter considers the systems of meaning which they create for themselves, how these interact with more conventional ideas

of "politics", and ultimately, what these patterns of engagement and expression mean for conceptualizing young people's social and political participation and inclusion.

Tumblr Politics: "social justice" and "real life issues"

Tumblr has a significant and complicated reputation for political activity. In the greater internet community, tumblr's particular brand of politics, generally perceived as identity-focused, radically progressive, and verging on dogmatic, is a fairly consistent target of ridicule. There are entire subreddits, for instance, with hundreds of thousands of subscribers, wholly dedicated to mocking political tumblr posts and the users who create and share them. These users are often labelled "social justice warriors" or "SJWs" – a term which, though once used in a positive light just as commonly as in a negative one (Ohlheiser, 2015), is now firmly established as a "derogatory" term for "a person who expresses or promotes socially progressive views" (Oxford English Dictionary, 2015).

Mass media outlets, for their part, have alternately called tumblr blogs dedicated to political and social activism a "thought-provoking [...] goldmine of knowledge" (Barksdale, 2015) and a "malignant self-parody" filled with "self-righteousness and intolerance toward dissent" (Young C. , 2016). Despite recognizing the tumblr community for playing a key role in galvanizing the biggest social movements of the decade – including popularizing the slogan "we are the 99%" and the hashtag "#BlackLivesMatter" (Lowery, 2017; Gee, 2012) – even generally progressive outlets have accused the political side of tumblr of being a "mob" that subjects anyone accused of a microaggression to vitriolic harassment and death threats (Ryan, 2012). What little scholarly research on tumblr's activist side exists is similarly divided and complex. Drager (2012) describes tumblr as a space of community and self-empowerment through identity-based resistance, where queer users in particular are able to reject mainstream narratives of experience and identity and "creat[e] radical ways of

being and living that challenge the monolithic, one issue based, mainstream queer movement" (p. 63). Bell (2013), on the other hand, portrays tumblr as a space in which the perception of a "social justice utopia" masks a culture where victimhood functions as currency, marginalization is performed as virtue-signalling, and there is rampant fear of speaking up in opposition to the dominant opinions and perceptions of the community, lest one be targeted for intimidation and bullying.

As I would discover in the course of my research, tumblr users' own perceptions of politics on tumblr, and even within their own experiences and their own posts, are equally complex and contradictory. When I started this project, one of my primary goals was to analyze how fandom tumblr functions as a space for the claiming of political voice. What I found, however, was that although users certainly do use tumblr to assert their right to speak on issues of social significance, they avoid defining their activity as "political", and in expressing themselves to each other and their peers more than making attempts to speak to power, engage more in "talk" than the exercise of "voice".

When I asked users about their experience of political discussions on tumblr, I tried to keep the question broad in its concept of "politics", giving examples such as electoral politics, social justice discourse, discussion of minority representation in fiction, and posts intended to raise awareness of current events. Even within the context of this relatively open definition of "political", users tended to shy away from any admission that they did, in fact, engage in political action or expression on tumblr. Carelessandwrong told me that she "tr[ies] to stay out of that", describing tumblr's political side as angry and depressing, and saying that she not only avoids this kind of content for her own sake, but also avoids putting it on her blog for the sake of her followers, who might "get upset by all the bad that goes on". In the same week, however, she reblogged multiple posts imploring Bernie Sanders supporters to vote for Hillary Clinton to help ensure Donald Trump's defeat; one post which

simply said "THIS BLOG BELIEVES 100% THAT BLACK LIVES MATTERS [sic]"; and a post condemning jokes made at the expense of immigrants who face language barriers. Forestofgay, who told me she rarely posts content relating to "social commentary", mentions on her blog's about page that she supports Black Lives Matter, is an environmentalist and an intersectional feminist, and, as a Scottish citizen, is "very salty" (disappointed) about the results of Scotland's failed independence referendum of 2014; she also posts regularly on LGBTQIA issues. Simplisticswashbuckler told me very clearly that she "stay[s] far away from" political and social activism on tumblr, which she described as "too intense", but has made and reblogged posts tackling issues such as Brexit, the social stigma of mental illness, and the marginalization of youth. It seems that, despite my attempts to "open up" the term, users were reluctant to define their expression as political or even as social commentary, or to separate speech that might fit into either of these categories from the rest of their everyday expression and interaction.

When Orsini (2015) set out specifically to interview tumblr users engaged in social justice advocacy, she ran into a similar problem: none of the users whom others had identified to her as fitting the category of "social justice bloggers" wanted to label themselves as such – despite regular use of the term "social justice" in their posts and tags. "Social justice [on tumblr]," she concluded, "is a movement without any self-identifying movers." For some, rejection of this label is based on its use as a derogatory appellation, or on a belief that the term trivialized serious activism. One user, however, responded to the question of why tumblr users hesitate to be identified as "social justice bloggers" by saying, "We don't define ourselves [that way] because we're simply talking about real life issues that affect us[.]"

The suggestion that there is a clear difference between "social justice blogging", political activism, or social commentary on one side, and "talking about real life issues" on

the other, is reminiscent of Jenkins & Shresthova's (2016) observation that the young people in their studies who might easily be described as engaging in "political" action often wanted nothing to do with the term. Instead, they preferred to define this action as an ordinary and everyday way of living produced by social consciousness or an ethos of caring – or, in the words of one young "activist", "it's not called 'activism'. It's called 'giving a shit'" (Jenkins & Shresthova, 2016, p. 254). This, in fact, led Jenkins & Shresthova to ask some fundamental questions about the very question of whether researchers can or should decide what is to be framed as "political" engagement:

What counts as "politics"? Who gets to decide? Throughout this book, we have referred to these youth as activists, because they are seeking to bring about social and political change through their work. Yet some of them adopt other frames for their activity. Who are we to identify as "political" activities the participants themselves sometimes understood in different terms – as participation in fan communities, forms of sociability, extensions of their cultural and ethnic identities, tools for education and cultural change, forms of charity and public service, ways to "decrease world suck"? And how do we think about the problematic relationship between these attempts to "change the world" and institutionalized politics? (p. 254)

Their ultimate conclusion is that, while Bennett's (2008) notion of the "dutiful citizen" is in steady decline, it is being replaced with a mode of social engagement based on shared identities, interests, and experiences, a kind of community-mindedness which "demand[s] that we care about the plight of others" (p. 269). What would conventionally be understood as activism and advocacy thus ceases to be about engagement with political institutions

which campaign for young adults' votes but rarely welcome young people's self-directed activism, and becomes a form of producing "meaningfulness" in individual expression and social activity.

I contend that beyond simply being a departure from narrow, governance-focused definitions of political engagement, this reorientation of social consciousness and expression on issues of personal and public significance also marks a shift away from what might conventionally be thought of as the exercise of public voice. By their reluctance to frame their expression on the subject of "real life issues" as "political" speech or even "social justice blogging", fandom tumblr users take on what Gonick (2007) calls the "impossible" task of speaking and being heard outside of othering systems of meaning. Their engagement is qualitatively set apart both from the "participation" in conventional democratic institutions begged of them in cautionary narratives of disengagement and from notions of "voice" which would see them speak within systems of meaning belonging to a public sphere that is not their own. Their "talk", instead, consists mostly of engagement within their communities, in their own vernacular and their own frameworks of meaningfulness.

Educating and Spreading the Word: "#important"

The first such framework which became apparent to me through observations and interviews is one which establishes discussion of social issues as educational. When I asked gradualdemise if she takes part in political discussions on tumblr, she replied,

I try not to. I'm a human rights activist, but I mostly use tumblr for leisure.
 [...] The only things I comment on really are stuff that needs to be represented more, like asexuality [...] or agender [...] or just the stuff you don't really think about, like one thing I got into was on how women are

viewed as overreacting by the medical field. But even that stuff I don't go too deep in.

Though she responded, at first, with a fairly simple declaration of disengagement from these topics, what is more illuminating is her immediate qualification of this statement. Particular topics, selected on the basis of her perception that they are in need of greater attention, are excepted from her preference to keep her activism separate from her life on tumblr. Her reasoning for this rests on the need for people to be more aware of underrepresented experiences and underdiscussed topics.

This kind of response was far from unique. "I myself try to stay out of that unless it's something that really gets me upset or I find it really important to be said," said carelessandwrong. As I continued conducting interviews and observing the posts that circulate within fandom tumblr, I began to see the extent of the vocabulary of terms used to refer to posts which tackle personally relevant and socially significant issues in this educational, consciousness-raising manner. "Important", frequently used both by users I interviewed in describing the kind of content they posted and reblogged and as a tag on posts involving some form of social commentary, topped the list. Other terms which appeared in tags or posts included "psa" ("public service announcement") and "signal boost", both carrying implications of vital information that needs to be widely disseminated for some form of public benefit. As noted above, posts of this nature are also sometimes tagged as "social justice", even by users who reject the idea that they are "social justice bloggers". This is less common than more apolitical-sounding terms like "important", and was not a categorizing term I particularly noted any of my interview participants using, but its regular use is still noteworthy. Terms like "social justice blogger", which focus on labelling the speaker, imply a particular kind of approach to social issues which seeks

debate for the sake of personal validation rather than ways of generating real change (Heron, Belford, & Goker, 2014). It seems that "social justice", on the other hand, as a term for categorizing and contextualizing statements, can for some users refer to a positive ideal of sharing views and information that might contribute to making the world a better place.

Wyvernbodyguard defined "important" content as "anything with a more serious message that I think should be addressed", a construction which leaves room for a wide range of topics and styles of expression. The same user may tag as "#important" one post which offers a scathing indictment of a United States cabinet nominee and another which quotes an inspirational passage from a favorite novel. Likewise, I have seen the term "psa" used to label statements supporting the work of activist and nonprofit organizations like the ACLU, information about household items potentially toxic to pets, and warnings about new identities adopted by corporatedragon (the deceitful user discussed in the previous chapter) for the purpose of manipulating others. Some of these posts engage at least obliquely with political institutions or topics of ongoing public debate, while others are less controversial; what brings the two (and everything between them) together is a focus on improving lives through the sharing of information.

This framing makes room for forms of talk which engage with issues of social significance without speaking directly to established "political" discourses. For example, the following post at first glance appears to be a relatively standard offering of helpful information, devoid of any content that might speak to a conventional political alignment or any ideological position beyond a basic ethos of reaching out to others in need of support:

1-800-273-8255 is the USA National Suicide Prevention Hotline so like, if
you need tonight, do that

This post, however, was made in the late hours of November 8, 2016; "tonight" was election night in the United States, and the op's clear implication was that, as they watched the tide turn in Donald Trump's favor, young people across the nation might need help to get through the night. The post was reblogged tens of thousands of times in its first two days, spreading quickly across tumblr along with other shows of support and subtle condemnations of the incoming administration.

Categorizing posts as "important" and avoiding labels like "political" pushes the contentious nature of what is being said (or implied) to one side and instead focuses on communicating necessary or useful information to those who share a similar experience or perspective. This framing accomplishes three things, broadly speaking. First, it orients the exchange toward informing others rather than debating issues. In so doing, it makes implicit statements about the range of acceptable viewpoints on a given topic. In disavowing their statements as social commentary and figuring them instead as educational, users normalize their positions by pulling them out of the realm of controversial ideology and into that of information, thus figuring contrary views as somehow radical or simply uninformed.

This is, in some ways, familiar as a style of rhetoric; Potter (2008) discusses at length how presenting ideas and circumstances as factual causes them to be treated as "lying outside of the domain of moral or political dispute" (p. 89). The effect and purpose of such a rhetorical orientation is different, however, in the context of a group who often find themselves denied "public voice", and when able to claim it, find it restricted to particular contexts, channels, and issues by systems of meaning and power that are not their own. Rather than claiming a right to such a "voice" with which to take part in existing social and political discourse, these young people bypass such discourse specifically by framing their expression as outside of public debate. Instead, they are merely speaking among themselves on questions of "real life issues" and "human rights".

This "educational" framing also makes engagement with social issues a connective effort at sharing knowledge within a community. The idea that networked learning about social issues is part and parcel of belonging to the fandom tumblr community is one that was raised by several of the users I interviewed. *Forgottenprincesses*, for example, called this kind of talk "unavoidable" on tumblr, and presented this as a positive feature of the community and an important learning experience for her personally, saying that she had become more aware of the struggles others face through her interactions with others on tumblr. 18-year-old *outerspacepyjamas* referred to tumblr as the place where she had "first learned about social justice" as a concept. Self-described "multi-fandom science dork" *cake*⁴⁵ took a more critical, but still generally positive, view. He told me that in his experience, most posts on social issues – and particularly those which gain any significant popularity – tend to fall within an attitude of "not everyone knows these things everyone has to be introduced at some point". He also observed, however, that users can sometimes forget this and focus too much on "going after specific people who are seen as doing something wrong" rather than "changing ignorance", the latter of which he saw as a more effective and appropriate approach. *Dancebreakheartbreak*, who calls herself a "spectator" in the world of social justice content "with the occasional feminist post", had a similar perspective:

There are definitely extremists that drown out voices of reason. [...]

Radical becomes the norm on here much more quickly. However, I do feel significantly more informed about how senselessly terrible people can be to each other. The mainstream media tends to leave that out.

⁴⁵ I am, quite frankly, shocked that the url "cake" was not associated with an existing blog and thus free for me to use as a pseudonym.

The suspicious approach to traditional news media to which dancebreakheartbreak refers is a documented trend among young people, who tend to reject mass media based on a cynical view of the priorities, styles, biases, and accuracy of mainstream journalists (Marchi, 2012). Young people's growing preference for obtaining information about issues and current events through networks, providing an interactive context in which knowledge is collectively constructed and claims, opinions, and perspectives can be compared and checked against one another, is also well-established (American Press Institute, 2016).

This networked approach to discerning the truth of current events – particularly those which may have relevance to conventional politics – is something I have been fascinated to see young people on tumblr mark as an important generational difference: "I'm convinced most of the adults who told me Wikipedia is unreliable now use viral facebook posts for most of their news," reads one post which several users I follow have reblogged in the months since "fake news" rose to prominence as a national issue. In interviews, many users spoke to the importance of considering multiple viewpoints, confirming information using multiple sources, and ultimately coming to one's own conclusions. Not one person who described tumblr as a resource for learning about social issues failed to also discuss the importance of independent thinking in this way, and I often found myself reminded of Shor's (1980) argument that to engage in "talk" is to be part of evolving dialogue and the consideration of viewpoints rather than the mere voicing of positions and conclusions. "[Tumblr]'s helped me understand so much about current events, and develop my own political opinions different to those of my parents; and it's also helped me to think about not just believing what I'm told (by adults, the media, or even other Tumblr users)" said forestofgay, constructing an interesting equivalency between various groups who might try to sway a young person's opinions, and against whom one subtly resists by forming more independent views.

Humor and Remix Activism: "turn on the news and experience the same dystopian horror for free"

Another framing within which many tumblr users make sense and meaning of material relating to meaningful social issues is that of humor. As with the "educational" framing, this can implicitly or explicitly serve as way of forestalling debate by presuming a shared perspective. "Merely joking" about a subject one expects others to agree is humorous is far less inviting of argument than stating a "political viewpoint". Dailygrimace, for instance, referred to Donald Trump as "just another celeb to make fun of", which would seem to rob any discussion of his candidacy⁴⁶ of the gravity it would normally have as a form of political discussion, and give it an air of casual, everyday talk which denies any ascribed importance as "voice" within the realm of conventional politics.

Humor within fandom tumblr which engages in social commentary frequently makes use of the community's general penchant for engaging in remix culture – the manipulation and combination of existing cultural artifacts into new creative forms (Knobel & Lankshear, 2008). In many cases, this consists of fairly simple references to the central texts of fandoms. "Can't afford \$11.50 to go see Mockingjay?" asks one still-circulating post originally written in 2014; "don't worry! turn on the news and experience the same dystopian horror for free".

More complex examples which rely on detailed knowledge of relevant texts are also commonplace. In one recent example, which was posted shortly before Donald Trump's inauguration and accumulated over 150,000 notes in its first six days, the op jokes that "America is about to be that part in the lion king where where [sic] pride rock became all

⁴⁶ This interview took place before the 2016 presidential election. Whether or not dailygrimace's view of Trump as "just another celebrity" has changed since his election and inauguration, I cannot be certain, but from the context of the conversation and the posts she has reblogged about him in the months since, it seems her statement remains applicable at least to some degree.

shitty bc [because] Scar became king". Another user added a comment suggesting that, following the Lion King's narrative, Trump might soon be assassinated by Barack Obama's daughters, here standing in for Simba; a third "corrected" this reference with a suggestion staying closer to the film's plot:

Didn't Scar get killed by the hyenas, who turned against him when he tried to throw blame at them while begging for his life?

The equivalent would be Trump cornered by both Obama sisters on the White House roof (yes, while it's on fire, I can totally believe that Trump will somehow lead to the White House catching fire at some point) insisting that 'we're all friends against the Republican establishment, it's their fault' and Sasha and Malia quote one of Trump's tweets back at him to tell him to get the fuck out; Trump scurries away and runs right into Pence and Cruz.

A later comment suggested that Joe Biden should fill the role of Timon, distracting Trump and his supporters by "dress[ing] in drag and do[ing] the hula". This post intriguingly shifts the overtness of its political statement from one contribution to the next; while the op is clearly and openly critical of the prospect of a Trump presidency, as the discussion continues, it centers more on remixing the emerging narrative into one which stays true to the story of The Lion King, and the turn into jokes about Joe Biden dancing in drag toward the end would seem to take the discussion away from any semblance of serious political commentary – yet, of course, the entire discussion is disseminated further anytime the post is reblogged, making sharing it an act of political significance regardless of the changes in tenor.

The potential fan communities present for social activism is well documented, but most past research has focused on the value of social capital embedded within fandom: the strong social networks, the enthusiastic adoption of new tools for disseminating information, the collectively organized events and publications (Bacon-Smith, 1992; Kligler-Vilenchik, McVeigh-Schultz, Weitbrecht, & Tokuhama, 2012). Less attention has been given to the cultural capital involved – the media texts and symbols fans tap into to express their views on subjects outside of fandom. Jenkins describes the relationship between popular culture texts and social justice work as one not only of symbolic borrowing but of discursive framing:

[O]ne can see an ongoing process through which young people have refreshed and renewed the public's symbolic power as they fight for social justice; they often push back against inherited forms and search for new mechanisms for asserting their voice. [They have] tapped pop culture to express participants' collective identities and frame their critiques. Thus a more playful style of activism is emerging through this appropriative and transformative dimension of participatory culture (p. 2).

What makes this form of fandom remix activism effective is not merely that it makes texts and references part of political discourse, but that it takes traditionally political subjects and makes them part of fandom discourse. In the process, again, this kind of expression is framed as everyday talk within a community not dedicated to engagement with conventional institutional politics, or to giving voice to opinions and conclusions on issues of widespread debate.

The basis for this kind of cultural remixing is not always central texts of fandoms. At times, it is found in shared knowledge and understandings which are tangential or only somewhat related to these texts – the kind of "insider" cultural capital that fans collect as "behind-the-scenes" knowledge or produce as artifacts of their own interaction and creativity. The death of Carrie Fisher in December of 2016 saw a surge of examples of this of this kind of engagement. Ironically, while more casual fans and the world at large were mourning "Princess Leia", members of the Star Wars fandom on tumblr remembered Fisher with a kind of talk impenetrable to those who were not so deeply engaged, because it relied on more esoteric knowledge of the lives, work, and personalities of the franchise's stars beyond their on-screen roles. Fandom tumblr memorialized Fisher primarily for her tireless activism for women's rights and sufferers of mental illness, and for the dark and witty humor with which that activism was often tinged, rather than as Princess Leia. Many tumblr users who count themselves members of the Star Wars fandom have taken to popularizing the story that Fisher "drowned in moonlight, strangled by her own bra", a reference to a story told in her 2008 autobiography about an argument she had with George Lucas over the practicality of sexualized costumes for women in science fiction films. The full story behind this joke is not shared in most of the posts which reference it, leading many of these to appear nonsensical to those who are not "in" on the joke. To those who are, however, the discourse playing on this quote references not only a shared piece of knowledge about Fisher's life, but a presumably shared understanding of Hollywood sexism. Such posts are thus understandable as signals of feminist ideology and shared objection to the same things Fisher campaigned against in her life. This is an interesting counterpoint to the kind of "fan activism" Kligler-Vilenchik (2016) describes, in which textual and cultural elements of fandom which are widely known are mobilized with intent to bring attention to key social issues. Where this kind of activism relies on fan culture to provide a tool through which to

claim public voice – much as, I must admit, I was looking for on tumblr when I began this study – posts like those referencing this fictionalized account of Fisher's death rely on deep knowledge of fan culture to escape such voice and engage in more covert social commentary within a community of shared background. Indeed, there has among many fans been an active disinterest in explaining the background of this ongoing joke. One person who received a message from an anonymous user asking "why are u spreading misinformation abt [about] carrie fisher's death? she died of heart complications" responded publicly, saying only "No she drowned in moonlight, strangled by her own bra". This post has now accumulated over 32,000 notes, most of them without any comments which further clarify the story.

One of the most significant expressions of remix culture in the digital world is, of course, memes – images, phrases, and other pieces of creative work remixed again and again by many individuals as they circulate in online communities. These are easily turned to political humor as well. Some examples hail from fan communities and are based on references – often indirect or obscure ones – to mass media texts. The photoshop meme described in an earlier chapter, which I inadvertently started by photoshopping the Hubble Space telescope into an image from the film *How to Train Your Dragon*, was eventually co-opted (as seen in Figure 9) to engage in commentary on conventional institutional politics when a user created a series of images in which Hiccup was seen reaching up for various famous individuals, both real and fictional. When it came to Donald Trump, however, Hiccup's image was replaced with the words "fuck that". Fandom-based cultural capital is a key element of this exchange as it is in the case of the Carrie Fisher "drowned in moonlight" narrative. While in a basic sense the political message is more overt, the full meaning of the image is hidden even to many with detailed knowledge of the *How to Train Your Dragon* franchise, and really only fully apparent to those in the tumblr fandom who had seen this

meme – in other words, the joke was only accessible to a total worldwide audience of a few thousand people.

Many memes have little to do with fan culture in any traditional sense, but those coined in other corners of tumblr simply as attempts at humor, with no fandom references involved, circulate widely through fandom tumblr and are often coopted to make points about social issues. In 2015, an unusual form of what might be termed "meta-meme" rose to brief prominence, in which users discussed the creation and dissemination of memes themselves in faux economic terminology. "PRIVATIZED EDUCATION AND COMPULSORY COLLEGE HAS SPIRALED US INTO MEME RECESSION" declared one post, which blamed school stress and the forces of the market economy for keeping young people's creative output down. The fact that thousands of users are able to share in this kind of humor, with a vaguely-defined "capitalism" the butt of so many jokes, assumes, if not a political agreement on the moral superiority of socialism, then at least a shared experience of financial and personal struggle and socioeconomic marginalization.

Positivity Posting: "just people trying to make others happy"

Dryoldbones' comment quoted earlier that she would reblog posts she found "relatable", and gradualdemise's similar statement that she tried to make sure others "know they're not alone", point to another framing within which tumblr users often engage in commentary on social issues of personal significance: that of "positivity posting". "Positivity" is a common term used on tumblr to refer to posts which are intended to be encouraging or affirming to fellow users. Positivity posts generally take the form of text posts or images drawn in a simple "webcomic" style, often invoke irony or non sequiturs, and range in emotional tenor from cute and light to strangely aggressive, as popular examples like these demonstrate:

talks about u behind ur back but in a supportive way about how cool u are and how much i love u

U KNOW WHAT? I HOPE UR CRUSH NOTICES YOU AND REALISES HOW NICE AND LOVELY AND FUNNY AND SWEET AND KIND AND BEAUTIFUL YOU ARE AND YOU BECOME THEIR CRUSH BECAUSE U DESERVE SOMEONE WHO KNOWS THIS AND WILL TREAT YOU LIKE A PRINCE OR PRINCESS AND LOVES YOU WITH EVERY PART OF THEM⁴⁷

Posts of this nature are shared widely among tumblr users, with many accruing hundreds of thousands of notes. In fact, perhaps the most interesting feature of positivity posts is the fact that most are clearly intended to be personally applicable to large numbers of people, and thus to offer support not just to a few friends in need of a kind word, but to thousands of people, most of them strangers, who are going through some kind of struggle in their lives. Ice-cold-hooligan called these posts "just people trying to make others happy", and indeed, the most obvious and straightforward goal of such posts is to offer emotional support to others. They can also, however, function to make implicit statements about larger social concerns.

Though many positivity posts take the form of relatively generic personal affirmations, intended to encourage others through unspecified hard times or remind them of their worth and build up their self-esteem, others tackle more specific areas in which people may need encouragement or face hardship. These posts often relate to the particular

⁴⁷ Yes, the original post was written in all caps.

experiences of users who are members of marginalized social categories; those who are struggling with problems which are socially stigmatized (such as mental illness); or those who are dealing with stresses deemed the result of living in an unjust society (such as inability to live up to unrealistic body expectations). Unsurprisingly, these posts are more likely to engage with potentially controversial social issues, whether implicitly or explicitly. Generic positivity posts can remain essentially devoid of any social commentary, but posts which relate to particular kinds of sadness, uncertainty, or anxiety must often imply some level of condemnation for the people, situations, structures, or social norms that cause those feelings, and an idea of what must be changed in order for the world to be made a kinder and more just place. However, this condemnation is forwarded within a frame of users talking to each other – to others whose experiences they can empathize with to some degree – rather than "speaking out" *directly* against those who might be their ideological opponents, in the context of public or political debate.

In the post pictured in **Error! Reference source not found.**, for instance, the offering of encouraging thoughts is based on an understanding of shared struggles against specific experiences of social structures and pressures – namely, the way LGBTQIA people, especially young ones, are frequently expected to defend their orientations to others. Elkcentral, a trans boy who credits tumblr's trans community with helping him understand his own identity, told me that posts like this were valuable because "it helps to be reminded by other people that you are worthy of a good life" and because seeing these posts "helps normalize self love". This echoes the sentiments of several popular posts I have seen argue that self-acceptance is a "radical" act in the context of social structures which make marginalized people feel inadequate.

Elkcentral also more explicitly recognized the undercurrent of social commentary in these posts, intriguingly, by pointing to what he sees as a common flaw: due to their attempt

to quickly and gently reassure people who are facing serious challenges with complex causes, positivity posts, in his opinion, "can end up reducing an issue too much and missing the point entirely." He offered no specific examples, but I recalled, when he mentioned this, a post I had seen not long earlier which criticized positivity posts aimed at encouraging mental illness sufferers to take care of themselves as "ignoring" the fact that self-care can sometimes mean doing things that are not immediately pleasant or comfortable. Though elkcentral marked this trend toward oversimplification as "problematic", however, he indicated that overall he felt positivity posting was a valuable trend, specifically because it focuses on supporting real people who suffer as a result of social ills (rather than engaging in high-minded ideological debate).

In some cases, the social commentary is much more explicit. This post, for example, pushes back very specifically against the cultural norm of anti-youth discourse:

this generation gets dragged so much and insulted so much and called conceited and careless and lazy and stupid and yet we're just taking selfies when we think we look nice and complimenting each other and educating ourselves and un-learning internalized prejudices and we care so much about the world and the future and we're so tolerant and passionate and perseverant and i love it. i love it so much. everyone hated us and we just didn't care. everyone hated us so we learned to love ourselves.

This is, perhaps, teetering on the edge of what might be called a "positivity" post, but although it makes clear the op's dim view of those who perpetuate dismissive and disrespectful attitudes toward young people, its message is still hopeful and complimentary

to its intended audience. That audience is clearly not the people who "drag" the millennial and post-millennial cohorts, as it would be if this post were an attempt at claiming a place in public debate; rather, it is the op's fellow young people, who share in the ignominy of being "called conceited and careless and lazy and stupid". This post lays bare the social criticism more often covertly embedded in positivity posts, calling out the specific ways in which a group of people – in this case, youth – are mistreated by society at large, but still focuses on offering that group encouragement and affirmation in the face of that mistreatment.

While positivity posts offer kindness and support to individuals, then, they also serve to help tumblr users make statements to one another about the ways they think the world could and should be a better place. Hazelnutcorgi, who prefers to keep what she considers "political" material off her blog (and, unlike many who say this, does not actually engage in much of the "educational" or "humorous" discourse described earlier) in order to make it "a safe and good place", reblogs positivity posts frequently, and recognizes the value of the commentary they make beyond encouragement on an individual level. "It's important to make sure other people know [...] that the world isn't such a bad place, or that things can improve", she told me.

The Discourse: "opinions and personal beliefs really come out"

When I asked jane71⁴⁸ about her experience of witnessing or taking part in discussions of social issues on tumblr, she asked, "Like politically? Or like tumblr discourse?" The fact that she draws a line between "tumblr discourse" and "politics" points to yet another framing within which tumblr users make sense of conversations centered on social commentary. Unlike the "education", "humor", and "positivity" framings, however,

⁴⁸ If this pseudonymous url seems out of place with the others I have invented, it is because this user's url is itself rather unusual. It consists of what appears to be a version of her "real" name and a string of numbers, a common construction for something like an email address but quite rare on tumblr.

this one is not used to bring discussion of "real-life issues" outside of the realm of controversial or "political" expression, but rather to frame overtly political expression as being *disconnected* from real-life issues – usually, though not always, in a critical manner.

The term "Discourse", or sometimes "The Discourse" – often capitalized, to give the suggestion of an air of self-importance – rose to prominence on tumblr in early 2015. It is most often used to refer mockingly to political, ideological, or philosophical arguments engaged in, essentially, for their own sake – long exchanges and diatribes which spend more time debating the minutiae of intellectual approaches to social justice than actually trying to effect change. One might be accused of taking part in Discourse, for example, for putting time and energy into engaging in debate with fellow members of the LGBTQIA community over the meaning of the word "queer", and whether or not it has been fully reclaimed and is an appropriate way to identify others, instead of focusing on raising awareness of widespread violence against the people the term describes. The implication is not necessarily that the conversation is pointless or without merit, but that it should at least be recognized as distracting from more immediate issues affecting people's safety and well-being. Figure 11 shows an image known among tumblr users as "the Discourse Chef", which is often used as an ironic label appended to posts seen as engaging in this kind of debate.

Although the term "Discourse" is often used mockingly, it should be noted that users do regularly identify their own posts as Discourse as well. Generally, this is done to indicate that they are approaching an important social issue in a manner which is not particularly straightforward or black and white, or acknowledge that they are engaging in a debate rather than simply attempting to educate or raise awareness of something they see as a settled issue. When I asked nicewerewolf about her view of Discourse, she gave a very detailed response which highlighted what she saw as its importance and value, and its relationship to fandom tumblr:

topics I see are sexuality, objectification, healthy and unhealthy relationships, whether or not you can justify x about character A. Sometimes even sensationalist themes in modern novels if I'm lucky. Most times, opinions and personal beliefs really come out. There's fighting, but it's usually polite and backed by a paragraph - long defense. It's interesting to see because I think young adults get stereotyped as having silly interests or being uneducated or following a cause 'because it's trendy'. I kid you not, my Trans brother was sent an article that literally said Trans people 'are a meme'. A MEME. I think this kind of ageist reaction is interesting when you consider how much people are willing to fight for their beliefs on tumblr with words rather than violence or belittling someone. Again, this is a general statement but my experience seeing Fandoms and outside concepts and issues collide is great. It kind of proves that we are human and well-rounded and we are capable of applying our knowledge to highlight issues in even our favorite things.

This response suggests that despite the tendency for Discourse exchanges to sometimes devolve into tangents and arguments, there is value in deep, conceptual engagement which goes beyond simple advocacy and involves young people in theoretical conversations about what social justice means. It is in Discourse that fandom tumblr users' political talk most overtly works toward the deliberation and critical analysis which Shor (1980) and Kim & Kim (2008) name a vital emergent property of everyday talk within communities. Nicewerewolf also gives some illuminating commentary here on the relationship between Discourse and fandom, by detailing the way in which the latter acts as

an entry point to and reflection of the former. Furthermore, she describes young people's participation in Discourse on tumblr as a useful counterexample to the idea that young people cannot or should not participate in the same kind of deep intellectual engagement with complex social issues as adults.

An example of Discourse I see regularly on my dash, thanks to several users I follow who are vocal proponents of positive recognition and representation for asexuality, is "Asexual Discourse", or "acecourse". This term essentially refers to ongoing arguments among members of the LGBTQIA community on tumblr as to whether or not people who identify as asexual "belong" in the community (which those on the "no" side tend to pointedly refer to merely as "LGBT"). Other topics I have seen tagged as "Discourse" include arguments over whether or not "TERFs" ("Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminists"), who refuse to accept trans women as women, are "real" feminists; whether or not specific fictional characters with disabilities should be seen as positive representation; and the morality of shipping fictional couples with abusive or otherwise unsavory relationships. While these arguments may seem disconnected from the "real-life issues" many on tumblr prefer to focus on, they have clear practical implications which users recognize; "acecourse" arguments, for instance, frequently center on whether asexual individuals should have access to resources and spaces intended for the LGBT(QIA) community.

Some topics of Discourse, like that surrounding the validity of asexual people as members of the LGBT(QIA) community, are consistent subjects of argument that continue to draw the attention and ire of users for long periods of time; others flare up for relatively short periods, but have lasting consequences. For instance, the MCU movie *Doctor Strange* faced widespread accusations of whitewashing based on the casting of Tilda Swinton and Benedict Cumberbatch. Some users argued that Swinton's casting as the Ancient One, traditionally depicted in comics as Tibetan, inverted racist tropes of the "magical Asian

mentor stereotype", while others insisted that casting a white woman to play traditionally Asian character could never be anything other than racist. Meanwhile, while many seemed confounded by the notion that casting a white actor to play a traditionally white character would be attacked as racially insensitive, a number of fans pointed out that casting an Asian American actor in the role of Strange could have been an opportunity to correctively subvert narratives of white men finding "enlightenment" in Asia and easily surpassing the skills of Asian masters in their own mystic arts. This debate provided a jumping-off point for a larger flood of Discourse about the representation of minorities and women in MCU films. Along with DC Comics' launch of its own film universe, promising solo films for Wonder Woman and black Justice League superhero Cyborg, this in turn became a catalyst for the decline of tumblr's MCU fandom, the impact of which on my research I discussed in my chapter on methodology.

Ironically, I have even seen Tumblr Discourse on some of the very questions discussed in this chapter, such as one recent post which debated the practical and philosophical value of referencing popular culture in the context of protest movements. Some users criticized the display of a sign (seen in Figure 12) reading "Dumbledore wouldn't let this happen" at a protest march, calling it "erasing the importance of life-and-death issues with kids' books"†, while others argued that people "cling to messages of hope in fiction for inspiration in troubled times"†. In an intriguingly meta turn of events, I ended up pulled into this discussion myself, using arguments from this chapter and even a quote from the Jenkins piece cited earlier to describe the benefits of fan activism for raising awareness, communicating experiences, and framing issues using shared cultural vocabulary.

The Politics of Everyday Talk

As I continued writing this chapter, I began to consider that perhaps I and others involved in this exchange about "fan activism" had conflated two different phenomena. The original post referred to the kind of activism Kligler-Vilenchik (2016) describes, which "connects fan enthusiasm not only to real-world issues but also to action" (p. 119). This kind of fan activism builds on casual awareness of texts outside of core fan communities to bring attention to issues, and transmutes fans' deep engagement and creative output into civic action. The goal is "engagement" of a kind that, while often disconnected from institutional politics and narrow issues of law and governance, is recognizable as the exercise of "public voice" and "social agency". When fans carry signs referencing Albus Dumbledore to protests, they are not (or, at least, not *only*) speaking to a community of like-minded fans who will appreciate the reference while nodding along in commiseration at the social situation providing the backdrop; they are invoking a piece of popular culture to make their point to a wider public on an issue of widespread debate. This is what the op criticized as trivializing social issues – and what the work of Kligler-Vilenchik, Jenkins, and others would tend to paint as valuable, pointing as it does to the effectiveness of fan activism in giving fans tools through which to claim this kind of public voice. However, in responding to the op's criticism with references to the kind of engagement I have witnessed in fandom tumblr and described in this chapter, I was equating forms of expression I have now come to see as meaningfully different.

When another user observed that fans look to fiction for hope and inspiration, they came much closer to invoking the kind of engagement I have discussed in this chapter. Subtly but vitally different from "fan activism" as Kligler-Vilenchik defines it, this kind of fan talk is primarily a connective effort within communities, and not meant to engage with political or ideological debate in the public sphere as a protest sign does. This is not to say,

however, that this kind of talk does not do vital work with regard to social and political issues.

Exclusion from conventional politics is an almost universal fact of life for young people, an intrinsic part of what Ennew calls "the obstacle of childhood". Children are left out of the political sphere by the formal denial of representation, voting rights, and the ability to hold office; by the intrinsically hierarchical nature of political institutions, which prioritize adult voices and agendas even in the context of initiatives meant to involve youth; and by the social construction of childhood itself as an exclusionary status which bars one from public life (Mayall, 2006; Lansdown, 2006). Even those who have recently reached the voting age have little opportunity to participate in setting the agendas of institutions of politics and governance, and young people who are otherwise marginalized along axes of race, ability, gender, and other social categories find themselves multiply excluded from this kind of power to shape political discourse beyond being entreated to lend their support to one already-established side or another.

It is for this reason that children's rights scholars have suggested the future of children's social inclusion lies in their engagement in informal spaces of discourse and debate (Fitzgerald, Graham, Smith, & Taylor, 2009; Cockburn, 2005). Even here, however, the problem remains that "voices" are not straightforward expressions of individual will and thought, but rather are produced and interpreted in sociocultural context. The "voices" of marginalized people are interpreted and given meaning within the very systems which marginalize them in the first place, and children's voices in particular remain, at best, ambiguous in the context of a society which views children as passive and dependent (Komulainen, 2007).

Gonick (2007) suggests that voices "speaking out of difference [cannot] be both intelligible and yet not re-inscribed into the very normative frameworks that constitute the difference" (p. 448); marginalized people, in other words, cannot express themselves while simultaneously refusing the significance applied to their expression by dominant systems of meaning. She argues, however, that the solution may be found in "collective creative processes" by which, rather than exercising "voice" as individuals before an audience of "the public" at large, marginalized people might collaboratively build new systems of meaning, frameworks of knowledge, and practices of identification for themselves. This view at least partly echoes Brake (1985) and Jenkins' (Jenkins, 1999) conceptualization of youth subcultures as collective efforts to provide both space and symbolic resources for young people to construct meaning outside of mainstream cultural interpretations. Though dominant cultural frameworks of meaning-making for expression are always present and never without impact, spaces in which young people are able to exercise greater agency in constructing social norms may at least produce interpretations and framings for their expression focused more on achieving their own goals than on supporting those of dominant (adultist) structures.

Different youth communities no doubt achieve this in very different ways. Indeed, it should be noted that even within fandom tumblr, and even within the specific fandom communities I have studied, the framework of meaning-making I have presented here is messy and far from universal. One person's "important" educational post or "public service announcement" is another's Discourse, and not all users reject labelling content as expressly "political" to begin with.⁴⁹ Some tumblr users run expressly political blogs, and

⁴⁹ Of course, by the same token, the word "political" hardly means the same thing to everyone who subscribes at any level to the dominant systems of categorizing expression to which the framings described here function as an alternative.

some, though none within my core sample, are happy to identify themselves as both fandom and political bloggers. However, I do believe it is reasonable to say that there is a general preference within fandom tumblr specifically to keep "politics" as conventionally understood – the conflict of power between clashing ideologies and factions – out of the community and engage in a different way.

I came into this study interested in how young people use fandom tumblr to "claim public voice". What I have found is that this is not as common or clear a phenomenon within this community as I had believed, at least in the context of how "voice" is understood in literature on children's participation and on marginalized people's public expression more generally. Many fandom tumblr users, even if they would not label themselves as "activists", proudly take part in the kinds of action Jenkins & Shresthova (2016) describe as aspects of activism and civic participation – volunteering, creating, donating, organizing, and generally finding ways to "decrease world suck". Posts encouraging people to vote, and to vote in particular ways, are far from unheard of, and other engagements with electoral and institutional politics, such as the circulating of petitions, appear with enough regularity to be not entirely surprising; tumblr users may not prefer these forms of engagement, but they do not draw hard lines against them. In these actions, users claim public voice and a right to engage with issues recognized as current subjects of social controversy, and in so doing, they enter into existing discourses and conflicts, and are subject the frameworks of meaning which others ascribe to these kinds of engagement. In interactions *within* the fandom tumblr community, however, these forms of engagement are rare, and users are far more likely to engage in political "talk". Wright, Graham, & Jackson (2016) offer a useful definition of this kind of interaction in the context of online public spaces:

Political talk [is] something that a) emerges in the process of everyday talk, often interweaved with conversations that do not have a political character; b) includes mundane reflections upon power, its uses and ramifications; and c) possesses qualities that enable it to contribute to meaningful public action. (p. 74)

The emergent and mundane qualities of this kind of interaction, and its orientation toward connection and deliberation within communities rather than engagement with larger-scale conflicts and public discourse, are what mark it as different from the exercise of "voice" – and give it the potential to constitute the kind of collective meaning-making Gonick (2007) advocates. In rejecting a conventional framing of "political" expression and not particularly seeking to make their "voices" heard in the halls of power or forums of recognized public debate, fandom tumblr users gain significant power to determine how their expression is framed.

"Important" posts are presented as statements meant to educate, raise awareness, or advocate for moral positions on human rights, implicitly declaring the clear correctness of views which might be open to debate if presented as "political". Posts which create humor from commentary on current events, world leaders, and significant social issues, often with reference to the texts on which fandom communities are founded, at once rob their targets of "serious" standing and wrap shared cultural references up with a presumption of shared experiences and perspectives. Positivity posts turn argumentative "political" debate on its head, focusing on encouragement and affirmation for those harmed by social injustice and leaving negative statements against the structures and individuals responsible for that injustice relegated to subtext, but still present and often easily discerned. "Discourse" reframes nuanced intellectual arguments about social issues as to some extent worthwhile,

but ultimately tangential to real-world questions of justice, rights, and safety. In constructing these shared framings for public expression on topics they deem important, and rejecting conventional paradigms of political engagement and the exercise of voice, fandom tumblr users have to some degree reclaimed the right not only to speak for themselves, but to determine for what purpose they do so, and how their expression is interpreted.

Like its patterns of network- and community-building, its approach to privacy, and its paradigm of constructing authentic identity, this is another way in which fandom tumblr as a social space is valuable to its users primarily for its cultural norms, rather than for the particular technological tools it affords. The conventionally understood benefits of digital spaces for social inclusion – the lack of gatekeepers, easy dissemination of information, lower barriers to access, and so on (Bennett, Freelon, & Wells, 2010) – certainly help to make tumblr a space in which young people are able to speak. However, it is through users' collaborative construction of community-specific frames of meaning that fandom tumblr has become a space of expression at least to some degree outside the bounds and expectations imposed by conventional understandings of institutional politics.

The meaningfulness of tumblr for these various kinds of political talk also speaks once more, and perhaps most clearly of all the major points I have raised, to the meaningfulness of tumblr as a "marginal" space where young people gather and, in various ways, resist the power of "mainstream" society to define their lives by way of exclusion. However, this exploration of political talk on tumblr also points again to the fact that definitions of "margin" and "center" are complex and often in the eye of the beholder. As Awan (2005) notes, conceptualizing spaces and experiences as defined by marginality can have the effect of rendering their inhabitants undefinable except in relation to what they do not possess, or in contrast to the privileged. It is important to recognize that young people are not simply

retreating to spaces like fandom tumblr to engage in forms of discourse they are excluded from elsewhere,⁵⁰ but rather are creating meaningful ways of engaging with socially significant topics of conversation in a space they occupy for deep and complex personal reasons. By understanding tumblr not (or, at least, not only) as a marginal space but as a space of difference which occupies a central position in the lives of its users, we can appreciate it as a space affording cultural practices and social norms which enable young people to express and exchange ideas about their societies outside of the frame of conventional "political" discourse.

It is something of a contradiction attempting to portray, with any authenticity or even sincerity, in a dissertation written by an adult researcher for the consumption of other adult researchers, young people speaking not only in their own voices but in their own systems of meaning. I cannot even claim to have no system of meaning of my own which is by matter of course layered on top of theirs, however well I might aim to present it, since in the act of presenting an analysis and making conclusions, I am clearly to some extent co-opting their expression within a framework of my own devising. This is one of the perennial troubles of the childhood studies field, of course, and of any work which seeks to access "the child's voice"; it is partly for this reason that I wish, in this chapter, to trouble that very concept. To analyze tumblr users' expression on issues of social significance as an exercise of "public voice" would be to imagine it as meaningful for its relationship to wider social discourse and established frameworks of meaning. By approaching such expression as emergent,

⁵⁰ It is perhaps quite telling that explicit political expression and clear partisan argument – in other words, more conventional political discourse – seem more common among older tumblr users, a very relative term I use here to refer to those in their mid-twenties and above. While users in this age group often still espouse a generalized millennial socioeconomic disenfranchisement, they are far more welcome in conventionally political circles than teens and even post-secondary students, and this, it would seem, shapes their expression on these topics.

mundane "talk", I hope to present it in a more honest light, as the product of everyday interaction rather than a conscious effort at claiming space in public conversations.

Spyrou (2011) suggests that the necessary response to the conundrum of attempting to include children's "voices" in research is a reflexive approach which considers how children's voices are heard, and for what purpose we present them. In this, at least, I hope that I have done justice to the young people of the fandom tumblr community, by presenting them as active meaning-makers in their own cultural context, finding ways to collectively reject the framing of their words within a sociopolitical structure which they do not quite see themselves as part of.

When young people are entreated to become "politically engaged", the systems and institutions with which they are being asked to engage belong to adults, and, by and large, serve adult interests. In this context, overcoming the obstacle of childhood means being able to express oneself not only on one's own behalf, but without having that expression interpreted in the context of an agenda which is not one's own. The fandom tumblr community provides space and symbolic resources for young people to accomplish this – not completely (since there will always be adults like me attempting to make sense of what they are saying for other adults), but to a significant and impressive degree. Fandom tumblr has established a number of interpretive framings for expression which might conventionally be called "political" which instead cast it as various forms of social activity, and which draw attention to the priority users give to "real-world issues" over what they consider idle discussion. In so doing, it has given users a means by which to avoid "participating" in a system over which they have little agency, while still working, at least on a discursive level within their immediate online communities, to further the causes of human rights and social justice in which they believe.

Conclusion: Tumblr and Cultural Resistance

The Obstacle of Childhood

The desire to address childhood as a marginalizing status has underlain the field of childhood studies for decades. Bardy (1994) calls social marginalization "one of the dominant organizing characteristics" defining the relationship between adults and children (p. 301), and Qvortrup (1987) goes so far as to say that children are "not merely a typical minority group, but *the* minority group *par excellence*; it is they who provide the minority paradigm" (p. 11). Scholars in diverse fields have described young people's exclusion from governance (Liebel, 2008), from research (Miljeteig & Ennew, 2017), from social space (Jenks, 2005), and even from the very concept of human rights (Woodhouse, 2004). Young people themselves, when consulted on the differences in social power between themselves and adults, tend to describe themselves in terms which characterize a minority group, though without actually using the term, something I have witnessed in the course of this project but which has also been documented by other scholars such as Mayall (2002) and Mason (2004). In the last chapter, I referred to Ennew's (1994) question of "how individual children surmount the obstacle of childhood" – that is, how they resist and overcome this marginalizing status. It is this question with which this project has ultimately been concerned: the question of how the young people of fandom tumblr have together established a community which provides them space and resources for overcoming the obstacle that is the social category of youth.

To begin with, they have taken advantage of the cultural ambiguity which, though it no longer permeates the social space of the internet as a whole as it did ten or twenty years ago, still applies in varying degrees to lesser-known platforms like tumblr. As online social interaction in general has become increasingly normative and integrated with offline life,

the social controls and expectations which govern offline sociality have expanded into the digital world; platforms like Facebook are increasingly subject to norms and practices surprisingly similar to those we encounter offline. Tumblr has to a great degree resisted this process, thanks to community practices among fandom tumblr users (such as the tendency not to connect with offline friends via tumblr), and to certain design and engineering choices at the platform level (such as the lack of profile pages and "real" names). In turn, tumblr's continuing separateness from offline society helps it to remain more open to the establishment and continuance of novel practices of community-building – for instance, the way that users follow and unfollow one another relatively unconcerned with any kind of social fallout, or the particular emotional connection users express with long-time mutuals.

Tumblr's separateness from other social contexts, and the lack of influence many patterns of offline social interaction and behavior have in this space, have afforded the young people in this community the opportunity to construct cultural practices which meet their particular needs and priorities with regard to expression and interaction in various forms. The concept of "privacy" on tumblr has little in common with its ostensible analogue on Facebook, and answers a different need – one for social privacy over informational privacy – by way of shared practices rather than explicit controls on information.

"Authenticity" on tumblr has come to signify a particular way of honestly allowing one's thoughts, feelings, values, and interests to come to the surface in everyday interaction, an ideal more meaningful in a community built on shared passions and perspectives than "verifiable" singular identities tied to offline names and faces. While conventionally political, explicitly governance-focused discourse and argument is not unusual on tumblr, young users tend more toward a kind of community-focused political "talk" which allows them to express their points of view without relying on others' frames of meaning-making,

and addresses their priorities of connection, learning, and an everyday experience-focused approach to justice.

Other aspects of life on tumblr could equally serve as frames within which to explore the meaning and value of the unique social conditions of possibility fandom tumblr users have established for themselves. As, I think, in any ethnography, I am left with the feeling that there is more to say, that the window into the experience of being part of this community I have worked to create cannot capture the whole in a completely satisfying way. Still, I hope that the aspects of fandom tumblr I have described here make clear that its ultimate value for its young users comes from its offering a space where the expectations and pressures of the offline world can be overwritten with something which better fits users' needs, priorities, and perspectives.

For individual users, this space of possibility tends to be rendered in tones of comfort, honesty, and friendship. "Tumblr helped me come into the person i am," said hazelnutcorgi, "because [...] i've been able to explore sides of me that i couldn't express as easily [elsewhere]." Galacticsteve called tumblr "a diverse place with great people and a little bit of everything for everyone". Perhaps the most poetic note on this point came from gradualdemise, who told me, "I have wings here that couldn't grow in real life".

Meaning at the Margins

It is tumblr's status as a "marginal" space which in many ways enables all of this, and history indeed shows that young people have often found spaces of social possibility at the margins of adult society, in spaces which were new, in flux, or unobserved (Burton, 1983). Boyd (2014) and Herring (2008) present online social spaces as providing a freedom generally denied to young people in the offline public spaces of the early twenty-first century minority world, arguing that social media is, in effect, a substitute for being able to

go out and see friends "in public" in a more conventional sense. Both cite young people they have interviewed in their research who expressed that they would much rather go to the mall with their friends than talk to them online, but find themselves increasingly forbidden from doing the former.

It is important, however, not to read young people's occupation of marginal spaces as implying merely passive consignment to these spaces, or a notion of young people being simply pushed out of an imagined "center" of public life and corralled into spaces defined by what they are not. The marginalization of children and youth is a very real phenomenon which must be addressed, and to which I have attempted to bring light in various ways throughout this dissertation. It does not necessarily follow from this state of marginalization, however, that young people are simply relegated to carrying out their social and public lives in whatever spaces are left to them, or that they perceive these spaces as fallbacks over which more "central" spaces would be preferred were they available. Users are clear that fandom tumblr offers them escape and respite from the social restrictions and requirements of offline life, but they are even clearer that they are not here simply because they have nowhere else to go. I thus find myself working to strike a difficult conceptual balance. On one hand, it is important to acknowledge the reality of young people's exclusion from – and perhaps more significantly, their lack of power in – more mainstream social spaces. I do not wish my argument to be taken as opposing those of scholars like boyd and Herring, whose perception that young people are "pushed" out of traditional public life and into particular online spaces is undoubtedly relevant to the experiences of many on tumblr. On the other hand, unlike boyd and Herring, I have not heard a single young person involved in this research indicate that they would rather be somewhere else, or that online socialization is a fallback or substitute for its offline equivalent. These young people have exercised meaningful agency in choosing tumblr and

worked collectively to make the fandom tumblr community what it is, and they find positive meaning here that makes this an important place in their lives irrespective of the exclusion they might face anywhere else.

It is thus worth considering, in a larger sense, the centrality which "marginal" spaces often have in the individual lives and collective experiences of marginalized people, and the power and meaning such spaces can hold. Hooks (1990) calls marginality "a central location for the production of a counter-hegemonic discourse that is not just found in words but in habits of being and the way one lives [...] it offers one the possibility of a radical perspective from which to see and create, to imagine alternatives" (p. 156). It is a site and state that is excluded from a certain kind of power, but also one that nourishes the capacity to resist, and provides, as Brake (1985) reminds us in the specific context of youth culture, both space and resources for defining and expressing oneself outside dominant frames of meaning.

The fandom tumblr community does not simply answer to the individual needs of young people with its prioritization of social privacy over informational privacy; through its collective adoption of complex cultural practices for maintaining social privacy, it actively and cooperatively resists the enforcement of dominant adultist privacy norms. The existence of shared practices and expectations regarding "authenticity" in self-presentation allows users to collectively resist the increasingly default model of connected, singular online identity. The exercise of emergent political talk within frames of meaning more relevant to connection, learning, and shared humanitarian ideals than party politics or formal governance helps young people to express views without their voices being coopted for purposes within dominant discourses and spaces of power. In each case, the fandom tumblr community has created (and continues to re-create) alternative practices and patterns of interaction which push back against those expected at the "center". The result is

that fandom tumblr takes on a deep centrality in the lives of its young users, who find this a space not of deprivation or exclusion, but of inclusion, belonging, and comfort in ways of being.

Moving Forward

I set out on this project two years ago with the intention of demonstrating the value of an ethnographic, contextual approach to online youth culture – one which did not aim to judge the "effects" of participatory media, but focused instead on exploring the meaning a specific piece of the digital landscape holds for the young people who inhabit it. The particular questions I brought with me to the particular community of fandom tumblr were broad and open wonderings about "community", "identity", and "voice"; but even so, I have found myself needing to reformulate my questions and reconsider my approach repeatedly as categories and concepts have shifted through my observations and conversations with the young people of this unique digital gathering place. In fact, the entire third chapter on "privacy" was not something I intended to write even at the time I was working on the chapter which immediately preceded it – it arose as I began to write on the concept of identity, and I discovered that I could not do so without exploring the deeply connected question of how tumblr users control information about themselves.

The resulting study, I believe, still serves to illustrate my original point: much can be learned from a deep, interpretive engagement with a specific online culture that cannot be gleaned from large-scale studies of "media and social change" or even from in-depth qualitative analyses of "online youth culture" that cross boundaries of platform and community. My initial questions have, in all their fluctuating and reconfiguring, eventually merged into an analysis centering on a single, if broad, idea: that of "marginal" online spaces, defined by cultural ambiguity in connection to the "center", as exhibiting a kind of

social and cultural openness for young people which can lead them to become deeply meaningful spaces of possibility. This is a concept I would not even have considered had it not been for the kind of engagement with tumblr I have had over the course of this study, and I believe that it both has potential as a theoretical contribution to the study of digital culture and demonstrates the methodological and paradigmatic point from which I began.

At the same time, I am left with more questions. As I have mentioned, aspects of fandom tumblr's culture which I have not had time or space to address here are ripe for investigation through the same kind of lens I have applied to issues of community, privacy, identity, and politics. Creativity is a unifying concept on tumblr, something woven throughout my discussion here but never addressed directly, and is perhaps the frame of analysis most conspicuously absent from this dissertation. User resistance against the wishes of tumblr's developers is so strong and organized that multiple options exist for client-side tools to add features or "turn back the clock" on changes to the platform's design and functionality; this is a fascinating phenomenon about which I wrote many notes, but in the end I did not find a place for it here. Connected to this is the complex and often unpredictable relationship users have with advertising and corporate presences on tumblr – from their love of the bizarre and nonsensical blog run by restaurant chain Denny's to their active revolt against advertising by Nike. In fact, I wrote several pages of material relating to this point in an early draft of this manuscript, which I removed from subsequent drafts because it seemed only tangentially connected to the rest of my material, and better filed away as the germ of a future paper. These and other aspects of fandom tumblr culture still hold possibilities for worthwhile ethnographic analysis.

It is also important to note that tumblr, while it may be "ruled by fandoms", is much more than just fandom tumblr, and there is a great deal of room for future work exploring other communities on the platform. One of my interview participants, recent high school

graduate ser-klein, actually recommended that I "try to vary [my] base as much as possible", and although he understood when I explained that the kind of interpretive analysis I wanted to conduct was best kept within the context of a particular community, his remark reminded me that less visible tumblr communities might be equally relevant sites for investigation. These communities are numerous and the interests which unite them diverse and sometimes unexpected. Dancebreakheartbreak mentioned running a sideblog in "crewblr", a tumblr community of competitive and hobbyist rowing team members. Through the personal blog I have maintained alongside my research presence on tumblr, I am a member of "fishblr", a surprisingly large community of aquarium and fishkeeping enthusiasts. There are networks of Christian bloggers, communities of musicians, kink communities, and anarchist groups. Though such groups are generally far smaller and less influential in terms of tumblr's overall culture than fandom tumblr, any one of the dozens of these small, niche communities that exist on the platform might prove a fascinating space to examine some of the same questions of marginality, practice, and belonging that have been the foundation of my analysis here.

Moving beyond tumblr, I find that several key points have emerged from this study which point me toward further research on the resistive ways youth and other marginalized groups make use of digital social spaces. I am particularly keen to engage more broadly with the notion of diverse online privacy paradigms, and how these are shaped by social status and context. The fundamental argument that privacy rights are inequitably distributed, both on moral grounds and due to socioeconomic circumstance, and that privacy practices vary as a result is worthy of a more systematic investigation. I am also interested in conducting a more specifically targeted study of young people's perceptions of the role of emerging technology in the actualization of their participatory rights in everyday contexts of

interaction, something which connects to my work in this project across domains of identity, public voice, and privacy.

Final Words

The youngest of the tumblr users I interviewed for this project was just four years old when tumblr launched in 2007; she had only just been born when Facebook launched in 2004, and is younger than MySpace, Livejournal, and the first smartphones. It would be silly to imply that social media is a novelty in the context of her experience, and questionable even to argue that her use of it is the result of a wholly conscious choice. Social media, as a general category, has become for young people what Herring (2008) calls a "transparent" technology – like the automobile or the washing machine, it has blended into the fabric of everyday life, a significant topic of thought or conversation mostly when it is absent or malfunctioning.

Social media is no longer a new technology, and measuring its impact in terms of what it "does to" young people is an increasingly problematic proposition. A growing research tradition which first emerged in the mid-2000s instead asks what young people are "doing with" social media technologies, as tools for communication and learning and everyday spaces in which their social lives play out. Often, the answer seems to be, in some way, that they are doing what they did before, but in a new way, in a new place. They are seeking alternative pathways to education, success, and social satisfaction, as youth with niche interests and impatience for traditional schooling have always done (Ito, et al., 2010); they are seeking to establish themselves as part of public society, to find a voice and assert control over their lives, as has long been a primary struggle of adolescence (boyd, 2014); they are constructing and reconstructing identities, deciding and discovering how they wish to be seen by others, questions with which all young people must inevitably grapple (Stern,

2008); they are advocating and agitating for a vision of a better world than the one left to them by their elders, part of a proud tradition of youth activism far older than the internet (Jenkins, 2016).

Like the scholars behind these and other studies of online youth culture in the past decade, I find myself searching for a balance point between acknowledging the power of so-called "new" media and stressing its cultural mundanity among young people, its role as a conduit and context rather than a transformative force. The fandom tumblr community obviously could not be what it is – could not even exist in anything like its current form – without the various technologies of social media; but what is important about tumblr, what gives it meaning and value to its young users, is not its technology. For all the complaints they raise about the platform's technical failings, one might almost conclude they have carved out a place for their community in this particular digital space not because of its specific technological affordances, but in spite of them. What is important about tumblr is its culture, its community, and its role as a space of cultural resistance in which young people work together to find ways of being and being together which answer to their perspectives, values, and experiences.

A decade ago, the internet as a whole may have offered the kind of cultural ambiguity and detachment from dominant social norms which enabled this kind of community built on alternative practices and expectations. Now, with digital social space dominated by integrated platforms and connected identities, this kind of ambiguity and openness for social reconfiguration is primarily to be found in niche spaces like tumblr. To borrow from boyd (2014), this may well make tumblr "terrifying for those who are intimidated by youth or nervous for them" (p. 212), and I am aware I am practically inviting this reaction by discussing young people's use of tumblr in terms like "resistance". To those concerned with the marginalization of young people and the question of how they deal with the "obstacle of

childhood", however, this must be seen as a community which, for all the faults they freely admit, creates a vital space of possibility for its members.

Tumblr's current slogan is "Come for what you love, stay for what you discover." This, like other aspects of Yahoo's presentation of the site to potential and new users, would seem to present tumblr as a place for consuming content, but it can be read in a very different way. Most young people on fandom tumblr come to the site for the close friend or other loved one who "dragged them here". Once here, they do indeed stay for what they discover: the community, the sense of belonging, and the freedom they feel to "be themselves", to express themselves and interact with others in ways which suit them. Tumblr fandoms are collections of people, whose greatest value to one another is in working together to create a space where they can find something that is missing from their social lives outside of this space. As one long-circulating post declares, "There are no good fandoms, only good friends."

Appendix 1: Glossary

This dissertation includes many obscure terms and references which are either unique to tumblr or part of internet culture more broadly, but still unfamiliar to many not deeply engaged in that realm. While I have attempted to define these when they are initially referenced, either in the body of the text or in footnotes, I felt it might be useful to compile a list here.

about page: a sub-page on a user's blog containing more detailed information about the blogger than can be fit into a description. Many blogs do not have these.

ask: a message sent to a user which can then be replied to privately or publicly; originally intended to ask users questions, but used for all kinds of messages.

blog description: a brief (usually under two sentences, and often point form) self-description written by a user which appears somewhere on each page of their blog.

follow: to add a user to the list of those whose posts will appear on one's dash.

gif: an animated image with a small file size, generally of low visual quality and with a looped animation 2-4 seconds in length. Often posted in **gifsets** of 2-10 related images.

icon: also known as an "avatar"; a small, square picture which accompanies all of a user's posts and reblogs. While some users choose to use photographs of themselves here, the use of pictures of favorite characters or other meaningful images is more common.

irl: "in real life"; not online.

like: to click a button on a post which expresses appreciation but does not share the post.

mutual: someone who follows you and whom you follow simultaneously.

note: "notification"; a like, reblog, or reply.

op: "original poster"; the individual who created a post. Used as both a pronoun and a noun.

reblog: to share a post on one's own blog, including any comments displayed on the post as found.

shipping: expressing appreciation for the relationship or potential relationship between a pair (or more) of characters, typically though not always in a romantic context.

sideblog: a secondary blog opened under the same account as one's primary blog. This blog will have a different url and icon, but asks and chat messages will go to and be responded from the primary account. Sideblogs can be password-locked.

tags: keywords and phrases which can be appended to a post and are not shared along with the post proper when it is reblogged. Users have adapted this space for various forms of expression beyond the original technical purpose.

url: adapted from "URL"/"Universal Resource Locator"; the "screenname" of a tumblr user. Individual blogs are located at <http://url.tumblr.com>.

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Curriculum Vitae

Education

| | |
|---|------|
| PhD in Childhood Studies , Rutgers University, Camden, NJ, USA | 2017 |
| MA in Educational Psychology , University of Connecticut, Storrs, CT, USA | 2011 |
| BA in Anthropology , University of Wyoming, Laramie, WY, USA | 2008 |
| BA in Secondary Social Studies Education , University of Wyoming, Laramie, WY, USA | 2008 |

Relevant Work Experience

| | |
|---|----------------|
| Travelling Science Teacher , Wondergy Science, Philadelphia, PA | 2017 – present |
| Graduate Assistant , Department of childhood Studies, Rutgers University, Camden, NJ, USA | 2012 – 2017 |
| Research Assistant , CityLife Project, Camden, NJ, USA | 2015 – 2016 |
| Home Tutor , Calgary, AB, Canada & Ora Banda, WA, Australia | 2011 – 2012 |
| Curriculum Consultant , Habiba Childcare/Domashniy Rebenok, Dahab, Egypt | 2011 |
| Lead Teacher , The Bridge Learning Community, Springbank, AB, Canada | 2010 |
| Kindergarten/Music Teacher , International School Bochum, Bochum, Germany | 2010 |
| Lead Music Teacher , Family Box Children's Center, Beijing, China | 2009 |
| English as a Foreign Language Teacher/Activity Leader , Embassy CES Summer, Reigate, UK | 2009 |
| Substitute Teacher , Synarbor Education, London, UK | 2008 |
| English/History Teacher , King Cove School, King Cove, AK, USA | 2008 |
| Camp Counsellor , Children's Camp Dzerzhinets, Berdsk, Russia | 2007 – 2008 |
| Research Intern , University of Wyoming Archaeological Repository, Laramie, WY, USA | |

Publications & Presentations

| | |
|---|----------------|
| "Screaming into the Void: Reconceptualizing Privacy, the Personal, and the Public through the Perspectives of Young Tumblr Users." In A. McCracken, L. Stein, & A. Cho (Eds.), <i>A Tumblr Book</i> . | In preparation |
| "'Look at Us, We Have Anxiety': Internet Culture and Youth Resistance." <i>Conceptualizing Childhood and Youth Conference</i> , St Catharines, ON, Canada. | Upcoming |

- "Privacy on Their Terms: Complicating the Ethics of Confidentiality in Online Research with Children and Youth." Institute for Child and Youth Studies, University of Lethbridge, Lethbridge, AB, Canada. 2017
- "Echo Chambers, Safe Spaces, and the Meaning of Democratic Engagement: How Young 'Activists' Frame Online Discourse." *Bangor Interdisciplinary Conference on Childhood and Youth*, Bangor, Wales, UK. 2017
- Reimagining the Child: Proceedings of the Third Rutgers-Camden Graduate Student Conference in Childhood Studies*. Co-edited with K. Fredricks. 2017
- Paper included in this volume:
 "You Can Do the Thing: Positivity Posting and Shifting Perspectives on Online Youth Sociality."
- "Why We Need to Stop Talking About 'Child Abuse': How Pathologizing Discourse Enables Violence Against Children." In *Storytelling: Global Reflections on Narrative: Proceedings from the 8th Global Meeting*. Oxford, UK: Inter-Disciplinary Press. 2017
- "'Tell Them Ellie is the Little Girl Who Broke Your F***ing Finger': Children's Agency Between the Monstrous and the Mundane in *The Last of Us*." *Mid-Atlantic Popular & American Culture Association Conference*, Philadelphia, PA, USA. 2015
- "The Alien and the Other: John Christopher's *Tripods* Trilogy and the Colonizing of the Imperial." *Rutgers-Camden Student-Led Academic Conference*, Camden, NJ, USA. 2015
- "Symbols Making Symbols: Conceptual Challenges and Emerging Paradigms in the Study of Children and the Arts." In *Symbols in the History of Art and Culture: Proceedings of Cultural History 2013*. Istanbul, Turkey: DAKAM. 2014
- "More Harm than Good? The Construction of Childhood in Research Ethics." *Childhood Studies Issues Panel*, Rutgers University, Camden, NJ, USA. 2014
- Three presentations on "Talent Development in Non-Traditional Learning Environments." *12th Asia-Pacific Conference on Giftedness*, Dubai, UAE. 2012
- "Mentoring is Not Just for At-Risk Kids." (with Thomas L. Burton.) *Youth Development through Recreation Services Symposium*, Edmonton, AB, Canada. 2012