The Millennial Politics of Tumblr Feminism

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Abstract

In recent years, feminism has become extremely popular on Tumblr, a social media and blogging website. Teenagers and young adults have taken to the site to converse with others about feminism, to learn about the topic and to redefine it for their generation. In this thesis, I examine the phenomenon of Tumblr feminism. I use it to argue against the idea that feminism is over, as well to provide positive examples of online activism to respond to critiques of the practice as lazy and brainless. I situate Tumblr Feminism within the larger backdrop of postfeminism and neoliberalism, contrasting its anxious and pessimistic outlook with that the more joyful and vivacious one of the Riot Grrrls of the 1990s. I then examine Tumblr feminism as content, working towards a flexible definition of what Tumblr feminism is. Finally, I speak to actual teenage and young adult users of the site to explore how Tumblr's position at the intersection of politics and apolitical social media use provides an accessible space for young people to do feminism.

Résumé

Au cours des dernières années, le féminisme est devenu extrêmement populaire sur Tumblr, un réseau social. Des adolescents et des jeunes adultes ont utilisés le site pour discuter du féminisme avec les autres, s'informer le sujet et le redéfinir pour leur génération. Dans cette thèse, j'examine le phénomène du «Tumblr feminism». Je l'utilise pour s'opposer à l'idée que le féminisme est terminé, ainsi que de montre des exemples positifs d'activisme en ligne pour répondre aux critiques de la pratique qui dit qu'elle est paresseuse et inutile. Je situer le «Tumblr feminism» dans le contexte du postféminisme et du néolibéralisme, contrastant ses perspectives anxieuses et pessimistes avec celle de la plus joyeuse et vivace des «Riot Grrrls» des années 1990. J'examine ensuite le «Tumblr feminism» comme contenu, en travaillant à une définition souple du phénomène. Enfin, je parle aux utilisateurs jeunes du site pour explorer comment la position de Tumblr à l'intersection de la politique et l'usage apolitique de réseaux sociaux offre un espace accessible aux jeunes pour faire du féminisme.

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Introduction

A decade ago, in 2007, I was in high school, finishing up grade ten, and I knew next to nothing about feminism. Nor did I care; I wish I could remember what my thoughts on the subject were then, but it crossed my mind so infrequently that I'm not sure I ever formed an opinion on it. My friends, whatever gender, were no different. To us, men and women were equal – more or less. This was true even though I spent my weekends at local concerts where the boys played music while the girls felt lucky they were allowed to watch, and even though teachers told us openly that girls were naturally bad at math. It was true even though I thought of other girls as the enemy, because that was what the popular shows of the time like *Gossip Girl* told me to think. It never occurred to me to question the order of things that told me men were from Mars, women were from Venus, and Mars was a whole a lot better.

2007 also happens to be the year that Tumblr was created (though I didn't begin using it until a few years later). Back then, Tumblr was full of primitive memes like Rage Comics and screencaps from the British TV series *Skins.* It was a curated carnival of lowest common denominator Internet humour. Flash forward to today, and all of that is still available and abundant on the site. But that material now fights for attention with excerpts of feminist theory, poetry written by teenage girls, conversations about rape culture on college campuses, and news on the spectacle of politics.

The outside world looks very different than the world I lived in in high school. I've seen, firsthand, teenage girls at my old part-time job calling out our adult male boss for humming Robin Thicke's *Blurred Lines* at work. I've seen lists posted online of all the things that girls love about themselves and their female friends. The entire world has seen teenagers and young

adults heading out en masse to the Women's March on Washington in January 2017. And I headed there with them – largely thanks to Tumblr.

I'm still unsure exactly what changed, what the tipping point was that made me and so many other millennials into feminists. It might have been a slow economy recovering from the 2008 financial crisis, or the postfeminist turn in media coming to a head, or a series of unfortunate political decisions worldwide that culminated, more locally, in the 2016 election of Donald Trump as US president. Or maybe we just got fed up. Either way, feminist networking between young people online has grown from a trend to a culture, and maybe even to a movement.

"Tumblr feminism" is a term thrown around, mostly derogatorily, to describe the feminist work young people are doing online. It is my undertaking here to examine what Tumblr feminism is, how it works, and why it is important. I argue for an understanding of young people's blogging as work they do to create and strengthen feminist subjectivities, despite some qualities of their microblogging that reinforce individualism and social isolation. I examine and outline the liberal-leaning, youth and pop culture-oriented subculture of Tumblr feminism, and explore how information circulates on the site, arguing against the idea that Tumblr users are extremist or naïve. Finally, I suggest that Tumblr feminism is a useful tool for politicizing young people because it appeals to them in ways that traditional politics do not. Overall, I aim to show that Tumblr feminists, while often misunderstood, have created a new feminist politics that works for their generation.

The Story So Far: Zombie Feminism, Brainless Clicktivism, and Scary Kids

There are three conversations, all of which have been going on for at least a decade, that I'm jumping into in this work. The first is the discussion of whether or not feminism is dead.

Those too young to remember the Second Wave tend to see feminism as a thing of the past; it is seen to have done its job, and now it is no longer needed. Scholars like Angela McRobbie and Rosalind Gill write in their work on postfeminism that feminism has been "taken into account," absorbed into our institutions in a superficial way so as to convince us that men and women are now equal and that feminists have no battles left to fight (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2009, p. 12). Corporations continue to co-opt feminism and brand it, selling it back to us as "girl power" (Zaslow, 2009). In the popular media, a lite version of "cool" feminism that insists that any choice a woman makes is feminist because she chose it is made to seem hip, though it does not require us to change anything about our lives to participate (Zeisler, 2016). This feminism, though not quite the enemy, is merely a shell of the liberatory movement that is feminism at its best.

But despite this overbearing culture that tells us that feminism is either the ghost or zombie of its past, it is not quite dead yet. It looks different from the Second Wave because it's been changed by forty years of cultural transformation in the West, including the rise of both a postfeminist sensibility, the idea that feminism has done its work, and neoliberalism, the marriage of individualistic liberal values with free-market capitalism. But glorifying the past and forsaking the present only further serves to kill the movement. In this thesis, I follow the work on new feminisms by the scholars cited above, as well as others (Harris, 2008; Keller, 2015b; Kennedy, 2007; Piepmeier, 2009; Rentschler, 2014; Scharff, 2011b; Taft, 2011), in looking for pockets of resistance that young people identify with, and as, feminism.

The second conversation in which I wish to intervene is the denouncement of online activism, commonly called "clicktivism" or "slacktivism." Slacktivism, the story goes, is signing a Change.org petition while ignoring organizing happening in your neighbourhood. It's expending the bare minimum effort to do something productive by clicking a button and using that one click to absolve yourself of any guilt you feel about not caring about the world outside your window. The phenomenon was popularized by Malcolm Gladwell's 2010 *New Yorker* piece "Small Change: why the revolution will not be tweeted." In the piece, he argues that "Facebook activism succeeds not by motivating people to make a real sacrifice but by motivating them to do the things that people do when they are not motivated enough to make a real sacrifice" (Gladwell, 2010).

Gladwell's critique of a particular type of online activism has been inflated to encompass a number of very different online activities, and has cast a negative light on all of them. But scholars have argued back against conceptions of clicktivism by shedding light on the labour that goes into participating in online activist circles, giving reasons why it may be a more welcoming form of activism than traditional protests and breaking down the myth that signing an online petition will disqualify one from ever going a community event (Bruns, 2008; Cantey & Robinson, 2015; Clark, 2015; Keller, 2015b; Losh, 2014; Mottahedeh, 2015; Shifman, 2014). I draw on this body of literature on online activism when I examine the work that goes into Tumblr feminism and the effects it has on its creators.

Finally, I wish to engage with an issue that has likely been going on as long as there have been people – older generations assuming that those that come after them are lazy, naïve, and terrifying. Millennials, those born roughly between 1980 and the early 2000s, were the first modern generation to collectively earn less at their jobs than their parents (Elliott, 2016). They

were also the first to grow up using computers, becoming, depending who you are asking, either digital natives or digital naïves. The result of these two factors has been that millennials have been very vocal online about the problems their generation faces. Speech that may once have been reserved for private conversations between friends in the hallways of high schools is now available for anyone to read through public accounts on social media. Instead of a productive dialogue between generations, this has largely resulted in thinkpieces about everything millennials are doing wrong – from not buying enough cereal to not playing enough golf to somehow killing Home Depot (Ferdman, 2016; Fromm, 2014; Schlossberg, 2016). They are written by people who are millennials' parents' age and posted to Facebook and other sites, where millennials complain back at them in the comments. This deluge of complaint has climaxed in articles with titles like "Against Anti-Anti-Millennial Thinkpieces" (Higgins, 2016). Girls, it seems, bear this burden of doing everything wrong even more so than boys do, as do young people of colour and queer youth. Being young is bad enough, but being young and deviating from the established straight, white, and male norms of adult Western society earns you even more vitriol.

There are some, however, who have taken young people seriously and have studied kids' online activities in order to see what can be learned from them, and about them (Banet-Weiser, 2011; boyd, 2014; Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013; Kearney, 2006, 2011; Marwick & boyd, 2014; Mazzarella, 2010). I take up the same task, situating my work at the intersection of girlhood studies and social media and participatory cultural studies, in trying to understand the online practices of my fellow millennials.

What is Tumblr?

Tumblr was founded in February 2007 by David Karp, who sold it to Yahoo in 2013. It defines itself as a social media site that "lets you effortlessly share anything" (Tumblr, 2017a). "Anything" manifests in seven different types of posts that users can create: text, photo, video, quotation, discussion, audio, and link. Buzzwords like "mixed-media" and "microblogging" are often used by writers to describe the site, positioning it as less intensive than other blogging platforms like WordPress, and more visual and varied than other feed-based sites like Twitter.

On Tumblr, users create a "tumblelog," usually just referred to as a blog, on which they can post original content, or share posts made by others (called "reblogging"). They can also "like" posts, saving them for later. Users are able to "follow" blogs they are interested in. Following is not necessarily reciprocal, as friending is on Facebook; users can follow blogs without requiring that blogger to follow them back. Users who do mutually follow each other's blogs sometimes refer to each other as "mutuals," which is generally taken to indicate a form of friendship on the platform.

Blogs are customizable with HTML, allowing for creative control over appearance. Tumblr advertises this option on its About page, contrasting it with sites like Facebook that require every user's profile to look the same, something that many decried when Facebook first became popular (Tumblr, 2017a). Many Tumblr users have more than one blog, a feature supported by the site. Users call these "side blogs," and they may be dedicated to different interests and intended for different audiences.

Users, whether mutual or not, can message each other using the mail function, comment on others' posts through a function called "replies," or use the site's chat function to talk to each other. However, because the chat function was a late invention on the site (it was added in late

2015), many users had already grown accustomed to conversing either via publicly posting their mail or simply reblogging one another's posts to converse. Thus it is not unusual for conversations to be had publicly on the site, unlike, for example, on Facebook, where having extended conversations across profiles is somewhat outdated, the chat function having been introduced and normalized much earlier. This technical feature means that friendly conversations, debates, and arguments, are all usually available for anyone to read.

There is no technical affordance for sub-grouping on Tumblr. By this, I mean that nothing similar to Facebook fan pages for celebrities or Facebook groups exists on Tumblr. Similar to Twitter or Instagram, all members interact within the same environment, with *tags* forming the basis for sorting information. Thus, Tumblr feminism is not a group that one may join, or be excluded from. All one needs to do to be a Tumblr feminist is create or reblog posts about feminism, or even simply read those that others have made.

Users do not need to provide their real name to join Tumblr, nor do they need to identify themselves at all beyond their user handle, which allows for more anonymity, or psuedonymity, than other social networks. This, along with the frequent reblogging of posts, means that posts are somewhat disengaged from their creators, and judged more for their own merit than for who created them. Unlike on Facebook, where we care about, for example, wedding photos because we know the people in them personally, Tumblr users tend to like posts based on humour or relatability rather than because they know the person who posted them. This makes the "dashboard," or "dash," the homepage of Tumblr where users find a chronological feed of posts from all of the blogs they follow, look very different from a person's Facebook feed. Tumblr users mostly follow others' blogs based on mutual *interests* rather than personal relationships.

Due partly to both the psuedonymity of Tumblr and the creative control allowed, Tumblr tends to attract an artsier, more niche crowd than behemoth sites like Facebook and Twitter. As I will discuss in Chapter Three, Tumblr has somewhat of a "nerdy" connotation that makes users reluctant to show off being users of the site.

How I Approach Tumblr: Themes and Definitions

Tumblr's technologies and users together create an emergent experience, one that invites many different angles of analysis. There are themes that arise in this thesis in how I talk about Tumblr, situated within the larger debates I detailed above.

The first is Tumblr as part of a history of *girls' writing practices*. Girls' writing and craft-making as productive self-expression have been traced from the Victorian age to the present (Kearney, 2006). In whatever form this media production takes, it serves as a way for girls to explore their identities, and, when circulated, it can be the basis of community formation. In Chapter One, I explore a short history of girls' writing and connect that to modern feminist online activity.

As noted, girls' writing connects to the theme of *identity formation*. Though I do not directly address this as I feel that others have already done this work successfully (see Banet-Weiser, 2011; Crowther, 1999; Mazzarella, 2005b; Mazzarella, 2010; Stern, 2007), theories of identity formation and exploration inform my discussion of the ways in which Tumblr forms and strengthens feminist subjectivities.

In discussing the technological aspect of Tumblr, I conceive of it as a *social media site and content producer*. Henry Jenkins has written about the ways that big media producers interact with amateur producers in participatory spaces, noting how the lines between the two

entities have become blurred as media conglomerates depend more and more on audience participation to produce content and attract new people to the fanbase (2006). Content produced on Tumblr comes from many different levels: some content is user-generated; some is made by media professionals specifically for Tumblr; and some is imported from other media spaces. I look at the relay between big and small media makers, the technological affordances specific to Tumblr that allow for that mingling of creators and cross-platform content, and the culture that develops under those circumstances.

Culture is a term that I use often in this thesis to talk about Tumblr. In doing so, I'm drawing on the basic definition of a culture as a set of shared beliefs, values, norms, and artifacts (Merriam-Webster, 2017). But I am also including two other qualities that are important in understanding how cultures work: tastes (Bourdieu, 1984), including the common aesthetics and language conventions used by a group of people, and communication, the norms that shape the way people talk to, conceive of, and treat one another.

We can conceive of the groups of people formed on Tumblr as *communities* or *publics/counterpublics*. I see communities as encompassing characteristics of publics, including a common set of texts, and a shared imaginary of a group identity. However, community implies two other characteristics. First, members of communities do not only imagine one another, they interact with each other directly. Second, they see belonging to a community as some form of investment in working towards a goal. That goal, in some cases, may be the simple reproduction of the community form, or it may be something larger, such as a feminist agenda.

I draw on various versions of these terms, from Michael Warner's *publics and counterpublics*, to danah boyd's *networked publics*, to Jessalynn Keller's *networked counterpublics*, and Benedict Anderson's *imagined communities* to examine Tumblr as a social

space and as a place where information connects people (Anderson, 2016; boyd, 2014; Keller, 2015b; Warner, 2002).

Finally, I raise questions of *activism* in all three chapters of this thesis. I do not attempt to define the term, nor to say conclusively whether or not Tumblr feminism fits its definition. Instead, I try to understand how activist ideas work through the personal and political blogging on Tumblr.

Methodology

Jessalynn Keller, in her book *Girls' Feminist Blogging in a Postfeminist Age* (2015), outlines a practice of doing feminist ethnographies in online spaces. She draws on Mary Gray's concept of approaching the study of online communities "in situ" (Gray, 2009), which means looking beyond the traditional production-reception pathway to take into account the context in which the media are consumed, and the relations that are formed between media texts. This method helps break down the divide between online and offline life and reminds us that there is no way to effectively separate the two.

In this thesis, I draw on methods of content analysis and ethnographic interviews to examine Tumblr as a community in which media are produced, shared, and commented upon. I speak to the users who create some of the site's textual and visual material in order to examine the role these practices play in constituting the culture that makes up Tumblr feminism. To find blog posts to analyze, I relied on searches that enabled me to identify blogs dedicated to feminism and where people reblogged personal posts. I also used my own dashboard to locate information to analyze, a process I detail further in Chapter Two. I conducted interviews with six feminists who were regular users of the site whom I recruited through my own connections on

the site and through a call I put out on Tumblr for interviewees, which I detail further in Chapter Three.

For every post from which I quote in this thesis, I have notified the writer that I wanted to cite their work. In most cases, I received explicit permission to do so; some did not respond. In the few cases that a user did not wish for me to quote them, I withdrew their post from my work. While getting this type of permission is not strictly necessary for quoting from online sources that are publicly available, I felt that it was important that I do so in this study for a few reasons.

First, many of the Tumblr users I quote are underage teenagers, and they may not be prepared for their thoughts to be shared in an academic work. Danah boyd has written about "context collapse" – what happens to Internet users when messages are read by an audience other than that which the writer intended – and the discomfort and consequences that can arise from it (2014, p. 31). Just as teens may not want their parents reading messages intended for their friends, they may not want adult academics reading them either. Furthermore, many of these posts are highly personal as well, where young people talk about their experiences dealing with sexism, or discrimination, and share other personal information. It is not my place to expose these inner ruminations to the world without permission.

Second, I felt that by reaching out to these writers and not only asking them for permission to cite them but by also telling them about the work I am doing, I could build relationships within the Tumblr feminist community around my research. I used my own profile (complete with my personal musings and fandom posts) to message users so that I could be transparent about who I am and why I am researching Tumblr. I did not want to just take the labour done by these users without also engaging in a form of reciprocity where they could learn about me.

On that note, in the interest of knowledge sharing and building relationships, I have also been reflecting on this research alongside my typical blog entries. I have shared feminist posts that I have found interesting so that others may read them, and I have talked about what findings I was drawing. I also wrote about the work of completing the thesis, so that my followers could have a glimpse into the research process. I did all of this to expand my audience beyond academia so that Tumblr feminists, too, could perhaps learn from and draw on the work that I was doing *about* them, drawn from their collective labour.

Chapter Overview

In Chapter One, I situate Tumblr feminism within a history of girls' writing practices, as well as within a context of postfeminist media saturation. I then examine the Riot Grrrl movement of the early 1990s and contrast the writing its members produced to Tumblr feminist text posts. In doing so, I argue that the contexts in which each developed deeply influenced the tone those movements took in their media production. Riot Grrrl, created by girls involved in punk and protest culture, adopted the enigmatic rhetoric of those spaces. Tumblr feminism, on the other hand, created by a different segment and generation of youth less situated in, and with less knowledge of, collective activism, offers a bleaker, more individualized aesthetic.

In Chapter Two, I study Tumblr feminism's content and the mechanisms of its distribution. In order to determine if Tumblr feminism exists as a culture, I detail some characteristics, such as newsworthiness, a relation to youth culture, and a tendency towards liberal views, that span across different genres of posts on the site, and that work to unite them as a genre of feminist Tumblr writing and posting. I look at intersectional feminism's place within that content order, arguing that it is present, but that it is often paid lip service to without being

deeply engaged by Tumblr feminists. Finally, I consider stereotypes of Tumblr as extremist by examining how content circulates on and outside of Tumblr.

In Chapter Three, I speak directly to Tumblr feminists to ask how they use the site and what it offers them. After briefly outlining how they came to the community, I discuss the disconnect they see between the writing and posting that they do and the notions of activism or community they have. I suggest that their use of the site more closely resembles their apolitical use of other social media than other forms of online activism. However, *because of*, rather than in spite of, this distance from traditional politics, Tumblr feminism is a useful tool for politicization. I explore how it works and what effects it has on its users.

Chapter One: Youth Feminist Subcultures under Neoliberalism: Riot Grrrl and Tumblr Feminism

"Riot Grrrl is …BECAUSE I believe with my holeheartmindbody that girls constitute a revolutionary soul force that can, and will, change the world for real." (quoted in Downes, 2007, p. 24)

"Being a girl in this world is honestly so strange like do u know how much we miss out on because we are scared? How much of the night we don't get to see because walking around alone is too dangerous? Do u notice the way girls walk at night, and does your heart hurt when U see them quicken their pace and lower their gaze when men walk past? Mine does"

(gabriellabowden, 2015)

The above two quotes represent the writing of two important spaces in recent feminist history: the Riot Grrrl culture of the 1990s and contemporary Tumblr feminism. Despite both subcultures belonging to the same broad movement of feminism in the US and Canada, they show very different sensibilities in their self-identities and the writing they produce. These differences become evident in the short quotations above: the first, from a Riot Grrrl manifesto, is optimistic about social change, while the second, from a Tumblr feminist post, expresses an uneasy outlook on the state of girlhood today, a recognition of a problem but ambivalence on how to solve it. To fully understand why Tumblr feminism as a form of subcultural feminism looks so different today than Riot Grrrl did twenty-five years ago, we must look at the historical and cultural contexts of the two movements.

In this chapter, I situate Tumblr feminism within existing literature on girls' writing practices, drawing on scholars of girls' media production such as Mary Celeste Kearney and Jessalynn Keller. I also situate Tumblr feminism historically, drawing on literature on postfeminist culture and its links to neoliberalism to explicate the world in which Tumblr feminists and Riot Grrrls operate. I then contrast Tumblr feminism to the Riot Grrrl movement, showing how the different circumstances of the two groups affected the writing they produce. I argue that, because of the Riot Grrrls' situation within protest culture and punk culture, their writing is, on average, more joyful and confident. Despite the fact that their main focus was not engaging in significant collective action, they believed themselves capable of the type of change that derives from more traditional activism. However, because Tumblr feminism is more divorced from the cultures of collectivity that Riot Grrrl formed in, its millennial members are less able to imagine feminism as a collective movement, and less equipped to combat an anxious, self-regulating, neoliberal subjectivity in their feminism. Thus, in appropriating feminism for their generation, they have made it more individualized, and have developed a pessimistic take on social issues that they feel uneasy about beginning to address.

In contrasting these two movements, I do not mean to generalize about the state of feminism today, or in the recent past. In both times, many different feminisms have existed, and even within the two movements I describe, there are variances. However, the Tumblr posts in this chapter have all been widely distributed (notes are included with the quotations to display their reach), showing that the skeptical and depoliticized ideas written into these posts have currency with many young people today. I believe that this outlook on feminism is representative and symptomatic of our current moment, in which feminism is presented as an individual identity that one can assume in order to define oneself rather than a type of collective movement.

A Short History of Girls' Writing and Media-Making

Girls' media production is not new; it has a history that can be traced back for centuries. Mary Celeste Kearney (2006) follows this history from the domestic labour of poor preindustrial girls, which included crafting and sewing, to the writing of Victorian girls, to amateur filmmakers of the 20th century. She highlights writing as an important part of media production that emerged as more girls became literate, as domestic crafting moved into diary-keeping and letter-writing (pp. 25-28). Kearney argues that writing as a leisure activity did not threaten traditional femininity, yet still allowed girls to transcend their marginalized positions as both women and youth, either through the self-reflective process of personal writing or through connections with pen pals or soldiers. In the twentieth century, we can see this writing becoming more public, with girls beginning to publish letters and collages in fan magazines, and contributing to the production of music and writing within subcultural spaces (p. 40).

Despite this long history, however, girls' media engagement went almost entirely overlooked by scholarship until the 1970s. Thus, in tracing the history of the literature on girls' writing and media-making, I begin with Angela McRobbie and Jenny Garber's study *Girls in Subcultures*. McRobbie and Garber (2000) were the first to argue that girls had previously been ignored in studies of postwar subcultures to the point that they appeared invisible. To counter ideas of girls as passive participants who only take part in subcultures for male attention, they analyse how girls responded to teenybopper culture, creating and participating in their own media cultures (p. 22). They termed the way that girls engaged with media "bedroom culture," because it allowed girls to participate through the consumption of magazines and other cheap media objects without risk of either predators outside the home or sexual contact with males (p. 23). They suggest that girls are active consumers, contrary to stereotypes that cast them as

passive viewers and listeners who did not think critically about media content. Girls use the media they consume to express themselves individually, as well as to connect with friends through their shared interests (p. 24). This study was the first to examine how girls engage with media culture in private, a practice that continues today with the bloggers in this study, who work in their own bedrooms making media on the Internet instead of via magazines or in the form of print diaries.

The McRobbie and Garber study opened doors for girls' media to be taken seriously as an object of study. At the same time, it has been critiqued by Kearney (2014) for its narrow focus on white, heterosexual, middle-class girls in the postwar West (p. 134). It is important to note, however, that despite Kearney's criticisms of McRobbie and Garber for only studying a particular type of girl, modern studies of girls' media have still done too little to ameliorate the inclusiveness of the term "girl". While girls of colour and queer girls are more present in studies now than in the late twentieth century (Brown, 2009; Driver, 2007; Gray, 2009; Kanno, 2011; Taft, 2011; Valdivia, 2011), there is still an overwhelming lack of diversity in this work and too little representation of girls outside of the middle-to-upper-class United States.

In addition, Kearney critiques *Girls in Subcultures* for only focusing on girls' *consumption* of mainstream media products, rather than the creative *production* of media that girls engage in. McRobbie and Garber do not account for the history of girls' original media production. Kearney notes that, since 1976, when the study was published, new technologies such as camcorders, computers, and the Internet, have altered bedroom culture by allowing girls' media production to reach audiences far beyond girls' bedrooms. The Internet provided a means of networked distribution for various media, as well as creating new ones, such as blogs (p. 134).

Camcorders led to amateur filmmaking, while computers allowed for fast typing and word processing of zines.

Zines were a primary type of media created by girls in the 1990s, especially by members of the Riot Grrrl movement. Zines are still produced today, though online activities like blogging and social media have become much more common expressions of girls' writing. In the studies of zines I will examine, there are three themes that I want to explore that will provide the basis for my own work on Tumblr: identity, community, and consciousness-raising. The trend of studying zines also represents a shift to studying girls' media that are more explicitly political and feminist.

Alison Piepmeier (2009) cites Stuart Hall in stating that identity is constructed through discourse (p. 145). She explains how, through writing and other creative aspects of zine-making, including drawing, collaging, and designing the layout, girls "try out" different identities (p. 148). They explore what it means to be a girl, what it means to be a feminist, and how other identities, such as race, sexuality, and disability, intersect with those experiences. This writing is often very personal, with writers exploring both their anxieties and their dreams through their zine-making.

While zines are often crafted in solitude, they are distributed more widely among zine communities. In the 1990s, the most popular way of circulating zines was person-to-person. Zines were traded or given as gifts among friends, or were distributed through the mail, where they were often sold for just the price of postage (p. 74). While the zine community was disparate, it existed as an imagined community; reading a zine was like reading a letter from a friend one hadn't met (p. 79). Zine writers often received letters back from readers, which served

as evidence of a larger community of zine readers that formed through the channels that circulated feminist print cultures.

According to Piepmeier, the distribution of these often quite personal texts worked like consciousness-raising groups from the Second Wave of feminism did (p. 121). Reading about similar experiences of girls and women that one could identify with led to a feeling of solidarity, and the discovery of structural problems that one may otherwise have explained away as individual. However, unlike the consciousness-raising groups of the past, little collective activism came of zine culture. Members of this subculture were geographically separated, and shared few connections other than the texts they read and, perhaps, the subcultures they engaged with. Instead, Piepmeier writes that zines do "work that I would characterize as micropolitical—because it alters power structures by strengthening individual subjectivities" (p. 163). This work, despite being very important in feminist consciousness-raising and the building of networked support, is often made invisible due to its artistic disguise and its lack of tangible link to social change. Feminist zines, in doing this micropolitical work, made and continue to make readers feel as though they belonged to a community of other women, thus encouraging them to bring a feminist sensibility to interactions in their own lives. However, they do not produce activism in the traditional sense of a collective movement.

This is an important distinction, as this is the work that I believe most online feminist writing does, including feminist writing on Tumblr. It works in tandem with feminist organizing, by offering information to newcomers to the topic and solidifying existing feminist identities through interactions between members of the community. It is certainly political, but it is does not take political action.

Some scholars, however, suggest that zines and digital blogging can be a form of activism, including Jessalynn Keller in her book *Girls' Feminist Blogging in a Postfeminist Age* (2015b). This work represents a transition to studying the online media production of young feminists. Keller examines feminist blogs run by teenage girls. Unlike the zines discussed above, the posts she studies are not personal – they are informational and more journalistic in nature. Still, Keller situates herself within the history of girls' writing practices (p. 7), as these posts are examples of girls engaging in media production. They also display the same three functions I discussed with reference to zines – identity formation, community creation, and consciousness-raising.

Keller argues that blogging allows teens to explore their feminist identification, which may otherwise be marginalized in the offline part of their lives due to the lack of acceptance for feminism expressed by peers and family (p. 28). It also enables girl bloggers to explore how feminism intersects with other aspects of their identities, such as ethnicity (though Keller examines this aspect less thoroughly than Piepmeier). Keller links this online expression of feminism to self-esteem, showing that the ability to share that side of themselves instills confidence in girls.

Keller, like Piepmeier, also links the formation of community to the circulation of discursive texts (p. 79). Unlike zine-making, blogging allows for more communication, and more *immediate* communication, between members of the community. Keller's feminist bloggers link to each other's pages on their blogs, directing traffic to friends' websites, and comment on each other's posts, creating a public conversation that serves to draw in new members as well as established ones (pp. 81, 94). There is an expectation of more immediate exchange that was not present in zine culture, as well as an increased visibility.

In this context, consciousness-raising takes two forms in Keller's study. First, her participants eagerly list consciousness-raising in the traditional sense – awakening girls to the idea of feminism – among the goals of their blogging practices (p. 58). Second, Keller attributes to the community-making function a shift in thinking, wherein girls stop conceiving of feminism as an individual identity and start thinking about it as a collective (p. 27).

The blogs that Keller examines position themselves as explicitly feminist. Keller makes a point to distinguish their feminist practices from the postfeminist media landscape that they inhabit, and shows how they challenge popular postfeminist rhetoric. As I will argue, challenging postfeminist also means disrupting aspects of neoliberalism. Not all girls' media do this work, however, and, contemporarily, not even all *feminist* media manage to challenge postfeminist culture. I aim to explore this in reference to Tumblr feminism; first, however, I turn to studies of postfeminist culture to flesh out exactly what it entails.

The Inextricability of Postfeminism and Neoliberalism

Postfeminism, according to Angela McRobbie, is "a process by which feminist gains of the 1970s and 1980s are actively and relentlessly undermined" (2009, p. 11). Unlike Susan Faludi's backlash theory, postfeminism does not directly challenge or attack feminism. Instead feminism is "taken into account" as something of the past, something that is no longer necessary (p. 12). According to postfeminist ideology, feminism has solved the problems it set out to fix. As a result, postfeminism erases the more radical aspects of second wave feminism and incorporates liberal feminism into all kinds of institutions, while simultaneously praising traditional models of femininity. It celebrates the successes of women as a means of portraying feminism as unneeded, despite the fact that those successes would not have been possible

without feminism, and that they continue to only be possible for certain women and not others (p. 14).

One popular expression of the celebrated successes of feminine girls is "girl power" discourse. Emilie Zaslow (2009) traces the history of girl power, explaining how it encourages girls to paradoxically identify as both feminist and traditionally feminine at the same time, successful but still submissive. Girl power originally arose from Riot Grrrl culture, but became commodified upon its entry into mainstream media (p. 4), spreading through products aimed at girls, such as toys. The Spice Girls are often held up as the pinnacle of girl power (as it was a catchphrase of the group's) and postfeminism, representing both femininity and Anita Harris's can-do girl.

Harris's can-do girl is an archetype of the modern girl who is able to "have it all" (2004, p. 16). She is individualized and self-made, and easily able to achieve success in the new meritocracy. Harris focuses on the can-do girl's purchasing power, linking modern girls' success to their market appeal (p. 19). These links to capital and competition are key to my understanding how postfeminism intertwines with neoliberalism. For the purposes of this thesis, I define neoliberalism as a new form of classic liberalism, which praised individual freedom above all, that is intertwined with late capitalism. Though it is beyond my scope here to delve into the market characteristics of neoliberalism, it is necessary to understand the connections between the formation of the neoliberal and the postfeminist subject.

Postfeminism is a slippery term, and though I have outlined a short history of it here, it can be difficult to pin down exactly what it represents. In describing the media culture of postfeminism, Rosalind Gill states that it has a *sensibility*, which comprises six prominent qualities (2007, p. 148). Briefly, they are: femininity as a bodily property, the sexualization of

culture, individualism, choice, and empowerment, self-surveillance and discipline, a makeover paradigm, and the reassertion of sexual difference. The qualities I wish to focus on in my analysis of Tumblr feminism are individualism, choice, and empowerment. Gill argues that, in postfeminism, decisions women make are framed as personal choices, and never the result of the influence of politics or their culture. She links this directly to neoliberalism: "what is striking is the degree of fit between the autonomous postfeminist subject and the psychological subject demanded by neoliberalism" (p. 154). Neoliberalism and postfeminist form the same type of subject, one who is individualized and self-regulating (p. 164).

Liberalism, and liberal feminism, also produce an individualized subject, but what makes neoliberalism key to my argument in this chapter is the way that specifically capitalist ways of thinking can turn liberal freedom into something that causes anxiety about competition. Christina Scharff's (2014) study of young female cultural workers exemplifies this. Upon interviewing these young women, Scharff found that they think of themselves as a business to be managed, incorporating neoliberal ideas about the market into their personalities, and reprimanding those who do not govern themselves this way. They primarily compete with themselves instead of others. Instead of critiquing the systems of gender oppression that makes their lives challenging, they instead turn their critiques inward, assuming they are, individually, to blame for any difficulties they face. This results in "a prevalence of self-doubt, insecurity and anxieties" (Scharff, 2014). They operate like the model of the can-do girl, but show the psychological consequences of that lifestyle when applied to real girls. Scharff's subjects were unamenable to feminism because it clashed with their neoliberal sensibilities (2011b).

However, feminism has never completely disappeared under postfeminist culture, even before the popular resurgence of feminism that has happened in the past few years. But for those

too young to remember the feminism of 1970s and 1980s, postfeminism has changed what feminism looks and acts like. Under postfeminism, many feminisms in the US and Canada are more fragmented and individualized, less organized, and more commodified and branded.

As Scharff notes in her study of pseudo-feminist lifestyle guides aimed at young girls, even those willing to accept the term "feminism" remain reluctant to provide any political agenda for addressing the problems feminism critiques (2011a, p. 273). Many see feminism as an individualized tool for self-improvement rather than a collective movement. Those young women who do engage with feminist activism more explicitly do so differently from their forbearers. Harris (2008) examines feminist activism under a neoliberal and postfeminist culture, noting three distinctions between it and traditional activism that often cause young people's activism to go unnoticed and to be delegitimized.

First, Harris echoes Piepmeier's idea that much of the work of girls' activism, and particularly their writing and online activity, is micropolitical, and takes place at the level of their everyday interactions (p. 477). Even when it is somewhat individualized, feminism can still be a tool for (small) social change. Second, girls' activism has become less "state-oriented" and hierarchical, instead allowing for more flexible, ad hoc groups to be formed around particular issues, especially those of media and culture, and then to be dissolved and reformed when necessary (p. 478). Third, as my above history of girls' writing practices also shows, Harris notes that much of girls' activism has moved online in its attempt to reach audiences and broadcast its voices (p. 479). Even though the Internet also allows for hegemonic femininity to be broadcast more widely, it provides a space for feminist girls to produce activist content (p. 480).

Keller (2015a) speaks directly about how feminism and postfeminism clash in her study of *Rookie Mag* founder Tavi Gevinson. Gevinson's media production spreads feminist messages

that heavily reference Riot Grrrl culture and attempt to challenge structural inequalities, yet is still highly branded, a mark of postfeminism (p. 277). Importantly, however, her content is still very explicitly feminist.

This clash of feminism and postfeminism is key to my argument in this chapter. Keller and Harris both describe particular types of modern feminist activism in which young millennials attempt to revitalize feminism for their peers, despite their growing up in a postfeminist world. Tumblr, I believe, produces a slightly different form of feminism, where its users are unable to escape their postfeminist and neoliberal subjectivities *even when engaging with feminism*. This subject position results in a very different experience of feminism on Tumblr than in previous incarnations of the movement, and from other contemporary forms of feminism. The tone, or mood, of its writing, the way it makes people feel, is different affectively from other feminisms' rhetoric.

In the following section of this chapter, I demonstrate the differences between the aesthetics of the Riot Grrrl movement of the 1990s (following previous research on the movement), and Tumblr feminism. Unlike Riot Grrrl, which was spirited, angry, and whose participants thought of themselves as revolutionaries, Tumblr feminism is often apathetic, sarcastic, and written by young people who feel that, in whatever battle they are fighting, they have already been defeated.

Riot Grrrl Feminism

History and Consciousness-Raising

The Riot Grrrl movement began in Olympia, Washington in 1990, and was organized by female members of the punk rock bands Bikini Kill and Bratmobile (Downes, 2007, p. 23). The

use of the word “riot” in the name stemmed from a letter Jen Smith, a member of Bratmobile, wrote to another band member, reacting to a May 1991 race riot in Mount Pleasant, Washington. She wrote that they were “going to have a girl riot this summer” (quoted in Downes, 2007, p. 25).

The movement centered on the male-dominated punk scene, and attempted to challenge it by spreading feminist messages. These girls made and distributed zines, wrote music in all-female or female-fronted bands, and organized events for girls to come together. The movement spread across the US and internationally through media coverage. Bikini Kill member Kathleen Hanna lied to a reporter, stating that there were already Riot Grrrl chapters in cities all over the country. There were not, but this influenced girls to start Riot Grrrl clubs in their own cities (Kearney, 2006, pp. 62-63). That coverage posed a challenge to the movement: Riot Grrrl’s messages quickly became commodified as “girl power” discourse. Though members of Riot Grrrl refused to engage with mainstream media later in the 1990s to curtail this commodification, and though girls still continue producing texts influenced by Riot Grrrl today, the movement is widely accepted to have moved out of the zeitgeist in 1996, with the release of the Spice Girls’ first album representing the complete mainstreaming of the Riot Grrrl message.

Riot Grrrl drew heavily on do it yourself tactics that subverted norms and power structures through art, a technique that began with the Situationalists in the 1950s and was later adopted by civil rights activists of the 1960s and 1970s and subcultural groups of the 1980s (Downes, 2007, p. 13). Several of the original Riot Grrrls, like Kathleen Hanna, were exposed to this activism at a young age, either through their schools or their families (Biography, 2014, p. 17; Downes, 2007). Despite critiquing second wave feminism for its inaccessibility and narrow-

focus, they drew on their ways of organizing, specifically the creation and circulation information in novel forms of media like pamphlets (Chidgey, 2007, p. 115).

Furthermore, they also drew on second wave feminist consciousness-raising. Riot Grrrls organized group meetings, drawing members in from local punk rock scenes. These meetings were safe spaces where girls and women could discuss their experiences with oppression due to gender and sexuality, often considered off-limits in everyday life, and especially in masculinist punk communities (Downes, 2007, p. 25). Like consciousness-raising groups of earlier generations, these meetings were the first opportunities many of these girls had to learn that their own stories were connected to larger structural problems of sexism and heteronormativity (Kearney, 2006, p. 60).

Riot Grrrls also spread their message through personal writing, and what they specifically called "cultural activism," the production of media, such as zines and music, rather than other activist forms of information dissemination that focus on facts rather than individual stories (Downes, 2007, p. 27). This sharing of stories as evidence of similarities between the experiences of different girls makes the personal political, allowing for consciousness-raising to take place (Chidgey, 2007, p. 121).

Aesthetic

In Riot Grrrl writing, the movement is frequently described as a revolution (Downes, 2007, p. 23). This is how the Riot Grrrls imagined themselves; as fighters in a struggle against the patriarchy. They have been described as simultaneously tough and vulnerable, unruly and unapologetic (Chidgey, 2007, p. 103). They believed themselves to be autonomous, able to do anything demanded of them, especially anything that men could do. They wrote lists of goals and

demands in the form of manifestoes, the word itself evoking traditions of social rebellion. For example, the zine HER JAZZ, cited in Red Chidgey's work on Riot Grrrl writing, reads: "Let's TRASH all the dichotomies that the academics and the lads have created that threatens [sic] to alienate and oppress us… let's show them an explosion of gymnastics and eloquence, make those skinbags run! run! run!" (2007, p. 106).

The spirit of the Riot Grrrl movement is reflective of the contexts in which it was born. The Riot Grrrls had experienced protests firsthand. They were from Washington state and Washington D.C., two sites with rich activist history in the US, and they were active in those cultures (Downes, 2007, p. 17). Thus, they understood, to some extent, the nature of collective organization. They knew how to mobilize people, both through their actual words, which urge others to act, and through the way they circulated their ideas using second wave media tactics. Their punk rock ethos, and their musical tradition, gave their calls-to-action its take-charge, smash-the-patriarchy attitude. Drawing on a mythos of rebellion, they imagined themselves as leading a collective movement reminiscent of past campaigns against gender oppression.

But still their neoliberal era dictated how they mobilized this imaginary, and led to it being mobilized in a somewhat individualized way. While they did organize consciousness-raising groups in major cities, the majority of the output of the Riot Grrrls movement was the aforementioned "cultural activism" in the form of writing and music, as well as coverage in the popular media. Kearney even refers to the movement as an "imagined community," which denotes how most girls who thought of themselves either as Riot Grrrls or as fans of the Riot Grrrl movement were exposed to it through the media rather through a known community of friends or peers (2006, p. 64). This turn towards individualized participation rather than collective activism represents the beginnings of postfeminism.

Despite their name, the Riot Grrrls did very little actual rioting, but their ability to remember draw on imagery of protests and punk is what gave their version of feminism its specificities. Their behaviour fit with neoliberalism, but their thoughts combatted it. They believed themselves to be *powerful* rather than the postfeminist *empowered*, and thus, their feminism was angry, but joyful. In turning now to Tumblr, I contrast the Riot Grrrls to one of their modern subcultural feminist counterparts, who are not as well-equipped to challenge neoliberal individualization.

Tumblr Feminism

History

Tumblr feminism, unlike Riot Grrrl, did not evolve out of earlier activist movements, but instead was created online. Though not as clearly traceable as the Riot Grrrls are, Tumblr feminism appears to be the result of some combination of a growing interest in feminism in society as a whole, especially among young people, and the existing facility of Tumblr as a way to quickly share information, specifically fandom-related information, with wide audiences. Tumblr feminism evolved in already-solidified practices of depoliticized online communication, and blogging in particular, so Tumblr feminists' patterns of use mirror those of less-political communities on the site rather than offline activism.

By virtue of its digital nature, Tumblr draws a particular type of subject: one who has free time to spend browsing the site, as curating a blog can be time-intensive (and addicting), and one who does so largely individually, whether at home or on a public computer. There is a somewhat "geeky" connotation to being a heavy user of the Internet, an activity that is often undertaken in isolation, which may appeal to some, and repel others. Many heavy Internet users tend to be

introverts, and sometimes self-identify as such (Amichai-Hamburger, Wainapel, & Fox, 2002; Mitchell, Lebow, Uribe, Grathouse, & Shoger, 2011; MOSGTeam, 2017)[1]. They often use the Internet to form connections to others. Browsing online is a very different activity than attending a protest (or a punk rock show, for that matter), one that can be more isolating, but also safer and more accessible. This may be preferable to some people who may not have had interest in or may not have been able to participate in the type of events hosted by the Riot Grrrls, though there would definitely be overlap between the two groups. The growth of Tumblr feminism out of already-isolating, apolitical Tumblr use is important in understanding Tumblr feminist writing.

Consciousness-Raising

Through this writing, the Tumblr feminist community, like the Riot Grrrl community, facilitates consciousness-raising among its members. Because this work all takes place online, the products of the community are quite different. Both a more traditional model of consciousness-raising conversation and the personal writing practices discussed above in the Riot Grrrl section are present here, but in a hybrid form that combines the two.

Tracey Kennedy (2007) has written about blogging as a consciousness-raising tool, using the term "virtual consciousness-raising" to describe the reciprocal sharing of feminist information via blogs. She notes how bloggers can use their posts to explore their identities, similar to how zine-makers used their writing practice to test out different identities. Furthermore, blogs allow for a type of instantaneous conversation via the comments function that zines did not. Kennedy explains that commenting can be a way for feminists to receive feedback

[1] Interestingly, personality tests are very popular on Tumblr, users often adding their results to the short biographies they write on their blogs. Myers-Briggs Type Indicator test results are common (my own blog informs new followers that I am an INTJ). The first variable of the test, I/E, stands for Introversion/Extroversion. The MBTI results users share on Tumblr almost always indicate introversion.

on the content of their writing. The line between sharing one's story via writing and via conversation is thus blurred when written conversation can become as fast as a face-to-face conversation, creating a hybrid practice.

The following is an example of a feminist conversation on Tumblr. Our first poster, dwelldreamer, is lamenting about the double standards of heterosexual relationships, in which women are meant to support men's dreams, but men are not required to reciprocate. They reject the premise, stating succinctly, "fuck that." Joharimarley responds, sharing their own experiences related to dwelldreamer's statement:

joharimarley:

> dwelldreamer:
>
> > I never understood why a girl is always suppose to be that ride or die chick that stays with a man and helps him build and become the man she deserves but a guy is never told to stay with a woman while she finds herself. A guy will always look for that perfect woman but we are suppose to settle for a building project?! Fuck that.
>
> I love seeing posts like these because it really makes me realize how much I've been conditioned to live to uplift men. We really don't ever hear about people telling men to stand by a woman when she has nothing and helping her reach her full potential.
>
> There was this other post about women learning to love what their men love and how men don't do the same in return and thats so fucking true.
>
> It just makes feel like I've been brainwashed into settling for a partner that really isn't as great as I probably think he is in my head.
>
> Posts like these really have taught me what to look for in a partner because sometimes I feel like i can't discern between what I really want and what I've been conditioned to want.

183 842 notes

(dwelldreamer & joharimarley, 2016)

Dwelldreamer's post has been reblogged and/or liked by other users besides joharimarley (as of October 20th, 2016, it has 183,000 notes). This short, personal story has been shared widely, likely far wider than the reach of any homemade zine. It has also attracted feedback, in

the form of joharimarley's comment (and likely that of others), which facilitates a consciousness-raising conversation between the two or more users. The conversation between the two Tumblr users, who are likely girls or women, does the work of identifying a structural problem previously thought to be an individual one. This post exemplifies the hybridity that forms between personal writing and consciousness-raising conversations on platforms like Tumblr; one person writes their story, and others, maybe one person, maybe a thousand, can respond.

Despite the fact that popular Tumblr posts can be distributed so much more widely than the average zine, the production of information in this community is actually much more individualized than in the Riot Grrrl era. Some Riot Grrrls met at consciousness-raising meetings, or through the local music scene. Even those who only participated through zine-making and reading still may have had the advantage of trading zines with others in person or otherwise engaging in the embodied community that zine culture creates, where readers and writers sometimes exchanged handwritten letters and small gifts (Piepmeier, 2009, p. 82).

Unlike the Riot Grrrls, many members of the Tumblr feminist community never meet each other in person. Some may know each other offline, and others may choose to use instant messaging on Tumblr or another website to begin a friendship, but for many users, their writing and sharing of others' posts is the only contact that they have with each other. As discussed in Chapter Three, those I interviewed did not interact with other young feminists in ways that made them feel as though they were part of a community. Furthermore, because posters are writing not only to the original poster, but also to the audience of their own blog, responses in the form of comments are often not very conversational at all, and instead are directed away from the original writer.

In this example, Tumblr user amorevolous challenges the idea that girls are supposed to wear their hair long, sharing a personal story of their experience cutting their hair shorter after being advised not to. Another user, boar-q-pine, replies with a story of their own:

boar-q-pine:

> redrosepetalclub:
>
> > ppl always guilt girls right before they cut their long hair… “o no don’t you’ll regret it!” “ur not gonna be able to do anything with it!” “but ur hairs so long & pretty r u sure u want to cut it?” boi I Know what my hair is bc I Lived with it & if I wanna cut it then let me!! lemme tell u everyone told me I’d regret cutting my hip length hair to my chin but guess what!! I’ve had it for a month now & I absolutely adore it I have absolutely no regrets & I would’ve done it much sooner if I hadn’t been guilted into doing otherwise!! stop forcing girls to fit into “conventional” beauty standards & girls do whatever u want ur gonna look great & if it doesn’t look great it’s ok it will grow back but pls don’t let others opinions dissuade u!!!!!!!
>
> I’ve had a buzzcut for like 3 months now and this haircut is a god sent. It makes my life so much easier (I don’t have to do anything with it when I exercise!) and it looks cute as hell too.
>
> Since cutting it I’ve had dozens of women tell me “I’ve always wanted to do that but never had the guts!” And like. It shouldn’t take guts. It’s just a haircut. The fact that we’ve all been brainwashed by the media & men to think that only long flowing hair is beautiful is complete horse shit. Support girls with short/frizzy/messy/different colored/unconventional hair
>
> 46 122 notes

(redrosepetalclub & boar-q-pine, 2016)

In the first example of the exchange between dwelldreamer and joharimarley, joharimarley responded directly to dwelldreamer, even thanking them for making the post. Here, boar-q-pine addresses the audience of their own blog rather than amorevolous. They draw on the original post instead to provide context for their own thoughts – likely having been reminded of them by the original post – yet they do not converse with amorevolous, thus leaving the coming to understand sexism as a structural problem that needs structural solutions aspect of consciousness-raising unfinished, both problems still appearing somewhat individualized.

In instances like this, Tumblr users speak past each other more than communicating directly. This shows that sometimes, even when Tumblr users are using technical means to respond to and comment on each other's posts, they are working individually, unable to connect directly to others. They speak to an audience rather than each other, despite the fact that most Tumblr users know little about the majority of their followers and do not communicate with them personally. This lack of knowledge of to whom one is even speaking leads Tumblr users to colloquially describe posting on the site as "shouting/screaming into the void," a phrase that is oppositional to the goals of consciousness-raising.

Aesthetic

Tumblr feminism, generally, is more individualized than other forms of feminism, and is often apathetic, cynical, and hesitant. Its writers are self-critical like the young women interviewed in Scharff's study (2014). Unlike the Riot Grrrl movement, which was spunky and playful, angry and rebellious, Tumblr feminism is sarcastic, and often does not articulate any goals. Like the Riot Grrrl movement, it is all of these things because of the context it was created in.

In addition to the individualistic properties of consciousness-raising I described above, Tumblr feminists' way of conceptualizing feminist issues can be individualizing. Despite Tumblr users' ability to recognize issues of sexism and misogyny as structural, they sometimes fall into the postfeminist trap of asking individual people to fix those problems themselves, rather than calling for a structural change in society as a whole.

The following post from imreallybad draws attention to norms of heterosexual sex. Imreallybad calls on girls who have sex with boys to assert their rights to sexual pleasure in their personal sex lives:

imreallybad:

> don't cater to straight boys laziness by pretending they're better in bed than they are. don't fake orgasms. don't tolerate bad sex. if you go down on them, ask them to go down on you. tell them how to make you orgasm. **tell them if something hurts.** don't let men think they're sex gods when they have no fucking idea what they're doing.

371 220 notes

(imreallybad, N.D.)

This post, while pointing out a collective problem, offers a solution only meant to be enacted individually. There is no collective call to action here, no challenge to the status quo offered. If there were, it might look like, for example, a call for more gender-sensitive sex education in schools. Micropolitically, this post offers important information, but it also fails to acknowledge that there are prohibitive factors that might explain why women are not already doing this, such as the societal pressures women face to please men in bed, or the fear of negative consequences many women have of speaking up about their desires.

This individualism, I am arguing, is partly due to the isolating nature of neoliberalism, and a lack of ability to draw connections to others is not the only symptom of this type of upbringing. J.D. Taylor (2013) has studied the negative effects of living in late capitalism, noting the prevalence of anxiety, especially among those in the workforce, and, I would suggest, in young people within late capitalism, for whom high school and college undoubtedly *feel* like work, and a trend of cynicism and nihilism among millennials. This results in the sort of writing that identifies a problem, but fails to offer a solution because no solutions seem possible or worthwhile.

In this post, saxrohmer1 expresses frustration at the way that audiences treat female characters. The post uses a format that is popular on Tumblr (and online in general): the "when" at the beginning of the post is derived from the abbreviation "tfw," which stands for "the feel when." The Feel When posts describe a common situation that people experience, and ask the reader to recall the emotions that go along with that situation. In this case, the "feel" is frustration directed at the way members of fandoms read the behaviour of female characters as a conscious choice on that character's part, rather than as the decisions of male writers. This post calls on its readers to commiserate about this situation, based on the assumption that many readers will have experienced it too:

saxrohmer1:

> when ppl defend the hypersexualization of female characters by acting like they r sentient real ppl who make their own choices instead of being written and drawn by gross men

82 209 notes

(saxrohmer1, N.D.)

While this post may be collective in its hail, it has no political drive beyond acknowledging that this problem exists; it does not offer any solutions. Saxrohmer1 cynically treats this issue as something that is unchangeable, and is only able to be addressed through mutual lamentation.

In this next example, rubyfruitjumble uses a similar rhetorical positioning, this time sending up men's lack of respect for women, mansplaining, and the way men often take credit for women's intellectual labour very succinctly. They draw on the idiom "give a man a fish, and

you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish, and you feed him for a lifetime" to do so:

rubyfruitjumble:

> teach a man to fish and he'll forget who you are and then he'll see you in a bar a month later and he'll try to seduce you by telling you things he assumes you don't know about fishing

50 697 notes

(rubyfruitjumble, N.D.)

This post is different from saxrohmer1's because it calls for sarcastic laughter rather than a sympathetic ear. Still, it is nonetheless cynical, because it too sees the problem it addresses as unresolvable – its only purposes are to lament and to offer the reader a laugh about this negative situation.

Finally, I return to the post I cited at the beginning of this chapter, in which paintgod (now at the URL gabriellabowden) gives us a series of questions interrogating the ways in which girls' lives are shaped by gender oppression, specifically focusing on the fear girls experience of walking alone at night:

paintgod:

> Being a girl in this world is honestly so strange like do u know how much we miss out on because we are scared? How much of the night We don't get to see because walking around alone is too dangerous? Do u notice the way girls walk at night, and does your heart hurt when U see them quicken their pace and lower their gaze when men walk past? Mine does

462 252 notes

(gabriellabowden, 2015)

Gabriellabowden expresses clearly the anxiety discussed above. The post still offers no solution to its problem – that girls feel unsafe walking alone at night – but it expresses fear for other girls' safety and well-being, as well as a reflexive anxiety due to gabriellabowden's own inability to walk alone (how much "we" miss out on).

Tumblr feminists' frustration, sarcasm, and anxiety are a reflection of their era and their specific contexts. Subjects who grew up under neoliberalism are individualistic, competitive, and self-critical. Tumblr feminism as a whole does not identify collective action as something that it would be possible for them to undertake. Millennials have been taught, by schools, in their workplaces, and at home, that the only way for them to succeed is to beat out any competition. The idea of eliminating the need for that structure of competition altogether makes little sense to Tumblr feminists, because they have never observed that in practice. Even those who are well aware that this problem of lack of collective action exists still cannot get outside of their subjectivity and think of a solution. Postfeminism, in its turn, has only added to the fact that feminist organizing seems impossible. Feminism, in their lifetime, has either been seen as over, or as commodity.

The Riot Grrrls grew up in the same conditions. However, the context in which they created their movement gave them more tools to resist neoliberalism's pull towards isolation. They connected with one another using tactics they learn from the punk scene and protests. They were also often physically in the same place.

Tumblr feminists were not exposed to these same tactics. First, almost none of them have ever met offline. This already gives them a disadvantage in coming together collectively as compared the Riot Grrrls. Second, they did not grow out of protests and punk, two scenes with traditions of building unity. Their use of the site is completely removed from the activist cultures that the Riot Grrrls were in the middle of, cultures that gave the Riot Grrrls their spirit of rebellion. Instead, they come to Tumblr feminism from fandom cultures and regular social media use, both activities that are usually depoliticized in nature, that assume a subject who is already isolated, and that encourage self-monitoring. Without access to, or interest in, the explicitly

political communal spaces the Riot Grrrls had, it is easy to see how much more easily neoliberalism could isolate the already-isolated.

Thus, Tumblr users show their dissent against neoliberalism in the only ways they know how to given the resources they have at hand. They offer advice to individual girls to improve themselves and to stave off harm from men as much as they can manage to. They vent together and tell jokes to provide support in a system of patriarchy that they do not feel they can change. They do their best in a world that prohibits them not only from changing it, but from even seeing through it to imagine a better possible future.

Conclusion

Tumblr feminism tends to be more individualized and less hopeful than its subcultural predecessors. It is representative of the world in which its creators live, which is neoliberal and postfeminist, and its particular means of creation have made it less resistant to isolation and pessimism than the Riot Grrrls before it. Tumblr feminists resist a traditional model of collectivity through their inability to imagine it. The fact that collective action is not a main goal of this work, however, does not mean that it is unimportant, nor that it fails. It supports feminist consciousness-raising, to an extent. Furthermore, this accumulation of feminist writing may not produce traditional activism, but it does work that it is micropolitical; as Piepmeier writes of zines, it "strengthens individual subjectivities" (2009, p. 163). Reading these posts repeatedly allows young feminists to strengthen their own feminist position, and to share that information with others. These young people can use that knowledge to create change in their own lives on a micro level.

As noted in the introduction to this chapter, Tumblr feminism is not the only feminism of its time, nor does it represent the only form of activist practice that youth today engage with. Take, for example, the girl activists groups represented in Jessica Taft's (2011) book *Rebel girls: youth activism and social change across the Americas*. She wrote about girls the same age as the Tumblr feminists who are doing work in political theatre, public television, and community education. Some of these girls may be Tumblr feminists themselves; the trends that I have described above are representative of the site's content, but are not universal, and do not prohibit girls from taking part in different forms of feminism. However, I would suggest that there are factors that make a person more likely to engage in one or the other, including personality, family political and other values, level of privilege, and geographic location.

However millennial feminists are coming to Tumblr, they are producing content, and doing so in spades. I turn next to an analysis of the content that makes up Tumblr feminism, and the ways that content circulates.

Chapter Two: The Culture, Content, and Circulation of Tumblr Feminism

In February 2014, a thread appeared on the Reddit AskWomen channel asking users to share their thoughts on Tumblr feminism (Vladith, 2014). The responses were incredibly varied. Tumblr users came to the site's defence, saying that Tumblr served as an effective way to get young people interested in and talking about feminism. Others took a moderate stance, asserting that some parts of the website were fine, but other enclaves circulated uninformed or immature content. Some denied that they could define Tumblr feminism as a singular phenomenon at all: "I don't think 'tumblr [sic] feminism' is a thing," wrote the user clairebones. "There are many branches of feminism and many of them have strong voices on tumblr [sic], but that isn't the same thing" (clairebones, 2014).

But many commenters felt that Tumblr feminism could be defined, and that it could be defined negatively. Reddit user LadyCotton wrote: "[i]t's horrible, harmful, hypocritical, disgusting and needs to die a firey [sic] death" (LadyCotton, 2014). Even from self-identified feminists, the site drew criticism. "Yikes, just no thanks," wrote another user. "I definitely consider myself a feminist, but Tumblr is full of radical feminists who hate men, hate cisgender men and women, hate people who aren't people of color, and generally think that anyone who is born with privilege is a scumbag who deserves the worst" (Username Deleted, 2014). Reddit user mrmcbastard writes "[t]he lunatic fringe of any movement often does more harm than good for the cause" (mrmcbastard, 2014). Reddit user sjm689 puts it simply, "If you're talking about the stereotypical tumblr feminist then I think they are fucking ridiculous and give feminism a bad name" (sjm689, 2014), showing that Tumblr feminism is regarded as extremist and damaging to the feminist movement as a whole. This criticism from feminist-identified posters is not unique

to Reddit. An article on Everyday Feminism, a popular feminist blog, tells us that "[a] lot of feminists have beef with 'Tumblr feminism'" (Rios, 2015).

So does Tumblr feminism exist in some way that can be qualified? And does it really constitute an extremist and fanatical mutation of feminism whose members' views greatly differ from those of other feminist circles? These are the questions I aim to answer here. In this chapter, drawing on literature on participatory media as well as content analyses of posts from Tumblr, I argue that while one can find a diverse amount of feminist content on Tumblr, there are factors that influence which types of posts will become popular and which will not. By popular, I mean they are widely circulated on the website (and perhaps off of it as well), likely to be reblogged and commented on (and thus likely to have a lot of "notes"), and likely to resonate with many feminist Tumblr users.

The five factors that I will discuss in particular are: timeliness and proximity, adherence to the genre conventions of Tumblr, an ability to produce particular affective responses, a tendency towards the liberal feminist view over the radical, and a connection to teen or youth culture. These factors, placed alongside seven different types of posts I have identified – personal, editorial, mantras, news/political, entertainment, art, and discussion – create a picture of the heterogeneous culture of Tumblr feminism that does indeed exist. It reflects the trends common in the mainstream contemporary feminist movement, but emphasizes issues important to young feminists, and uses methods of communicating that are particular to both Tumblr users and teenagers and young adults.

Following my discussion of what constitutes Tumblr feminism, I delve deeper into intersectionality on the website. I argue that while Tumblr feminists do tend to support marginalized groups' interests, they do so at a remove. Meta-posts about supporting these groups

tend to be more popular and to diminish the actual voices of the marginalized people they are claiming to want to help. I then discuss the uses of Tumblr feminism. I suggest that Tumblr feminism serves three functions: it is a platform for content production by millennial feminists, a hub for the circulation of content from other sites, and finally a social media site that facilitates conversations about each type of content.

Finally, I explore whether or not Tumblr feminism is an extremist branch of the feminist movement. I argue that Tumblr feminism is not very different from other brands of feminism. To further that point, I look at how information enters Tumblr from other sources, and how Tumblr feminist content circulates beyond the website. I conclude by suggesting some reasons why the stereotypes noted by the Reddit users above exist.

Participatory Culture, Memes, and Spreadability

Henry Jenkins coined the term *participatory culture* "to describe the cultural production and social interactions of fan communities, initially seeking a way to differentiate the activities of fans from other forms of spectatorship" (Jenkins et al., 2013, p. 2). The term has since been adapted to refer to groups outside of fandom communities, challenging the traditional view of media industries as top-down distributors. Participatory culture acknowledges media work done by online communities to *produce* media content rather than simply consume it. Along with deconstructing traditional boundaries between producers and consumers, Jenkins et al. have also argued that participatory culture has led to interaction between different communities involved in media production, such as fans and activists (p. 28).

Participatory cultures are formed around "shared sociality and shared identity" (p. 166), meaning that they are made up of people who interact with one another and feel that they have

something in common. “Content spreads,” Jenkins writes, “when it acts as fodder for conversations that audiences are already having,” or when it reflects what members of the community have common interest in (p. 199). Trends in what Tumblr users share creates norms of what information one can expect to find in a community.

The media used to disseminate information also influence what can be spread. Tarleton Gillespie (2010) studies the ways in which platforms do or do not police the information users upload and write on their sites depending on how they want to position themselves. A key point to my discussion in this chapter will be the removal of copyrighted materials. Gillespie, in writing about YouTube, examines how the site both allows copyright-infringing material to remain online by positioning itself as a neutral common carrier, but also gives copyright holders the tools to prosecute infringers themselves (p. 359). What material platforms allow to circulate in an online community produces norms about what users expect to find there.

Jenkins et al. note that the “perceived social value” of media texts – the social capital a user might gain by sharing a post – can make them more interesting to members of the community, and, thus, more spreadable (p. 199). So, a user will be more likely to share information that fits with the established norms of the community, and to ignore information that does not. Adrienne Massanari (2015) named this phenomenon “herding” in her study of Reddit communities, explaining that popular information is likely to become more popular exponentially. This is due to the way Reddit’s algorithm promotes content that is already popular through upvoting, another example of the platform politics that Gillespie discusses.

Media producers have all of this in mind when they create posts, and they are quite adept in designing media to be shared. Limor Shifman (2014) writes about memes, units of content that are shared and remixed in huge numbers. Shifman details six factors that gave memes more

potential for virality: "positivity, provocation of high-arousal emotions, participation, packaging, prestige, and positioning" (p. 66). She notes that the best memes are those that are amateurish and/or unfinished, as they are easier for people to adapt and reproduce to create new versions (p. 87). Community members learn these production skills intuitively by using social media sites.

Shifman also notes that memes are an "accessible, cheap, and enjoyable route for voicing one's political opinions" (p. 122). Carrie Rentschler and Samantha Thrift (2015) have written about the feminist "Binders Full of Women" meme that circulated during the 2012 U.S. Presidential Election. They observe that the meme created networked communities of feminists united by the meme event, not only converting people to feminism but, importantly, "reconverting the converted" in the feminist community by strengthening their existing feminist subjectivities (p. 340). Thus, political communities within participatory culture form networked support systems that function through the circulation of information.

Research Methodology

In formulating my lists of trends and types of posts, I read hundreds of Tumblr posts from a number of different sources. My first line of inquiry was through Tumblr's search functions, which allowed me to search for posts tagged by users as "feminism," "feminist," "Black feminism," etc. Tumblr has two search functions: one is a curated search that sorts by popularity and newness, so users only see posts that have gained a few notes already and that have been made in the past few days. The other is an older function that simply displays every new post made in the tag in chronological order. I used both to find posts.

I also combed through current feeds and archives of feminist blogs, both general ones and more specific ones dedicated to, for example, women of colour feminism or lesbian feminism, as

well as sites dedicated to anti-racism or LGBT spaces that interacted with the feminist community. I searched for Tumblr feminism on Google to find results both on and off the site. Perhaps the most useful, however, was scrolling through the posts that people had reblogged and tagged as "feminism" on their personal blogs, and scrolling through my own dashboard[2], and the dashboards of friends who were kind enough to allow me to look over their shoulders as they used the site. This is because what I am most interested in is circulation – what posts travel to find the widest audience. I was interested in seeing what individual posts, or types of posts, many people were seeing in their self-curated feeds.

What Makes a Feminist Post Popular on Tumblr?

I have identified five characteristics of popular posts in the Tumblr feminist community. They are: timeliness and proximity, adherence to the genre conventions of Tumblr, an ability to produce particular affective responses, a tendency towards the liberal feminist view over the radical, and a connection to teen or youth culture. The first three are somewhat applicable to Tumblr as a whole, while the final two are specific to Tumblr feminism. While not all popular feminist posts on Tumblr will contain all five of these characteristics, chances are that if a post has become very popular on the site, it has two or three of them, at least.

The first factor is proximity, which also includes timeliness. This applies mostly to posts that consist of information brought into Tumblr from another website, typically on the topic of news, entertainment, or art. Proximity and timeliness are more generally known as factors that make stories newsworthy. Topics that users discuss on Tumblr, just like topics being discussed offline and on other media platforms, follow the news cycle as it unfolds in real time. For

[2] This is the primary means through which Tumblr users receive information. Viewing individual blogs at length is secondary.

example, when I was doing research for this chapter in late 2016, the United States presidential election, and specifically Hillary Clinton's campaign and loss, was by far the most popular news-related topic on the site. The second most popular was the story of actress Amber Heard's domestic violence case against actor Johnny Depp. New information was being published in the press about these stories every day, especially regarding the election, creating links to be shared on Tumblr and, in turn, fodder for conversations there. These posts typically circulate through the site for a few days, until the next piece of news comes along to replace them. They disappear so quickly that when one does turn up on the dashboard days or weeks later (perhaps because someone scheduled it in their queue of posts rather than posting it immediately), there is a sense that the post does not belong there. Because of the fast turnover rate, breaking news reports are much more popular than long-form investigative journalism.

Location is more complex than time because Tumblr users are dispersed worldwide. Normally, what is newsworthy is what is close by, but nothing can be local to every Tumblr user. Thus, the top spot goes to the United States, which is where 42% of Tumblr's traffic comes from (Tumblr, 2017b). Posts about news in the United Kingdom, a topic that in 2016 was dominated by news concerning the UK's vote to leave the European Union (or "Brexit"), were also circulated widely. That English functions as a lingua franca on the site exacerbates this Anglo-centrism; posts written in other languages circulate much less than English posts.

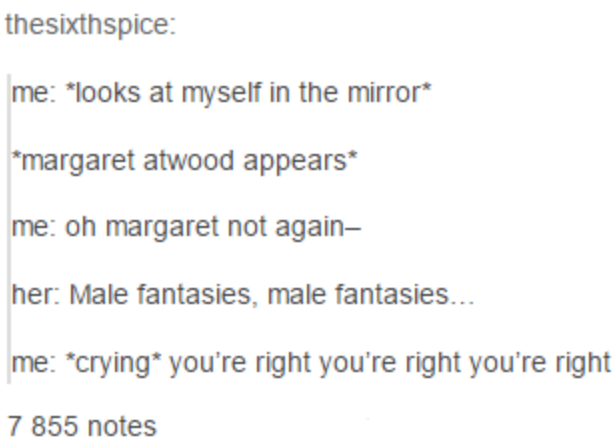
Posts about other countries only become popular when they are embroiled with US foreign relations issues or when there is something else driving their newsworthiness. Usually it is because there has been a very significant event that produces a strong affective response, such as the November 2015 Paris attacks. Furthermore, these posts are not likely to be made by those

close to the event, but instead are often news stories written in English by US-based media, or commentary made by English-speaking Tumblr users.

Tumblr, while offering a platform for users all around the world to share information, tends to reproduce the same pattern of US and English dominance that is prominent in media worldwide. Country-specific information does circulate within networks of users from that country; for example, there are several blogs dedicated to Canadian politics that many Canadian Tumblr users share posts from. But they rarely overtake the US-centricity of the site to become what one might consider "front-page news" on Tumblr.

The second factor that influences the popularity of posts in Tumblr feminism is genre. Just like in other participatory media communities, there are genre conventions on Tumblr that writers and creators whose posts get popular know how to use, and use well. Just a few popular conventions of Tumblr text posts include: plenty of slang and curse words, a lack of capitalization or correct punctuation or an overuse of punctuation in unorthodox ways, a specialized vocabulary of common terms, phrases, and abbreviations both used on Tumblr and used in feminist literature outside of Tumblr, meme literacy, and the ability to strike the right tone, which I will address further in the next section on affect.

The following text post, which performs a short, internal dialogue about the feeling women have of needing to adhere to beauty standards, displays a number of these key features:



(thesixthspice, N.D.)

This post presumes knowledge of the dialogue meme, a form of writing derived from Tumblr's dialogue post function. The dialogue post option was likely intended to capture conversations but often is used to express users' own thoughts as dialogue. As such it represents a specific example of how the affordances of certain platforms can influence content and form. The meme also relies on readers being Internet-literate enough to understand that text enclosed with asterisks describes action. It uses lowercase letters, which typically are used on the site to eschew standard grammar in favour of appearing amateurish, and thus more relatable. Finally, and almost seemingly at odds with its efforts to appear base, it requires a knowledge of Margaret Atwood's poetry, quotations of which can also be found circulating in the feminist Tumblr community.

Posts that don't follow these conventions, such as posts with proper grammar and capitalization and minimal use of slang, are far less popular than those that do. This is significant, because a larger number of people would be likely to understand those posts since they do not rely on the same specified types of knowledge specific to Tumblr. However, as Shifman argues, "bad" texts make better memes because they are easily transformed (2014, p. 87). I would also argue that the "badness" here is desirable not just because of remix capacity,

but also because it is less intimidating than something written in more expert language; it makes the reader feel as though the writer of the post is a peer, and as though the writer is inviting the reader to be in on the joke.

There are other genre conventions related to visual posts, such as photos and animated gifs. Creating gifs takes quite a bit of effort and technical know-how, and has rules. For example, text subtitles on gifs are almost always yellow with a black border. These requirements extend to content imported from outside of the site as well, such as the convention that sequences of tweets must be arranged in the opposite order than they are found in on Twitter. Tumblr users must also provide context for the content that they import. Finally, there are conventions on how to hold discussions on posts, such as keeping frivolous comments like "haha!" in the tag section rather than writing it as an addition to the post.

As is the case with most genres of social media communication, none of this is written down. These rules are instinctively learned through continuous use of the site, and they change over time, sometimes fairly quickly, as is the case with memes. A lack of knowledge of these conventions can keep posts from gaining notes for two reasons. The first is that improper usage of these conventions can mar affective reactions, such as the humorous response to posts. The second is that it makes it simple to spot users who are new to the site and have not yet paid their dues, so to speak, and learned the "right" way to express opinions, or worse, outsiders like anti-feminist trolls or corporations trying to pass themselves off as natives.

The third factor influencing what users circulate is affect. Post are more likely to be shared if they evoke a strong emotional response from readers. Specifically, the posts that become the most popular arouse feelings of anger or unfairness, evoke expressions of support or solidarity to a particular person or group, or make the reader laugh. The arousal of anger at

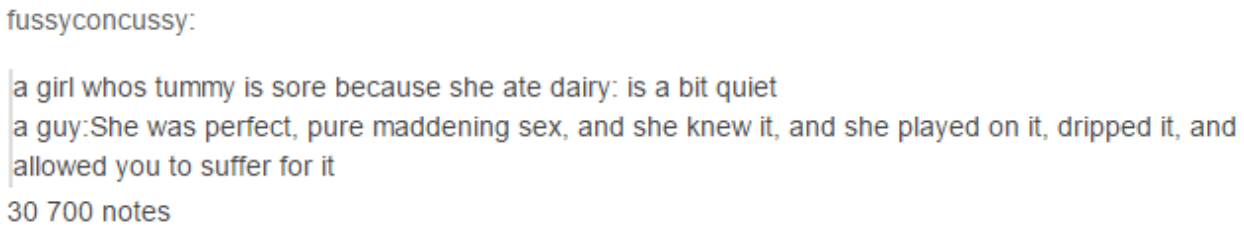
various injustices, usually at news events or tales of everyday life that clearly represent misogyny, is a common reason to share ireful posts. People share, for example, posts containing news reports of systemic violence against women to condemn it by writing in the comments or tags, or perhaps to tell a story of their own experience with violence. On the other side of the issue, supportive posts, such as personal writings or what I have termed "mantra" posts – posts that contain short phrases such as "fight the patriarchy" and the like, usually embellished with typographic art – can function to fight back against the discouraging realities of gender oppression.

These affective responses need not exist in isolation; posts can evoke more than one emotion at a time. The below post offers an example of both emotive responses described above. In this post, forestpunk urges Tumblr users to support their trans sisters in the face of a heightened risk of violence against them:

(forestpunk, 2016)

By citing the "high risk" for trans women of transphobic violence, this post calls upon the reader to sympathize and consider that risk, and the injustice of it. It incenses readers about the situation facing trans women, drawing out a visceral reaction. Then, it calls upon readers to sympathize, to show their support and solidarity by reblogging the post, in effect pledging to help protect trans women in their own lives and promoting the visibility of their causes.

Finally, amidst the more serious posts addressed above, posts containing humour were also likely to be shared. The humour on the site tends towards sarcasm over playfulness, in the feminist community and in general. This example, which relies on the dialogue meme discussed above, takes to task the way male writers often write women in literature. Fussyconcussy tells us how a male writer prone to sexualizing women's mundane human activity might describe a woman being quiet and minding her own business:



(fussyconcussy, N.D.)

This example, which relies on the dialogue meme discussed above, is offbeat and sardonic, and may even seem strange to those unfamiliar with the type of humour Tumblr users find amusing. But ultimately, it makes readers laugh because it's a common experience that frustrates many feminists, and that laughter encourages them to share to make others laugh, too.

One affective response that I haven't mentioned here is the heartwarming feeling that often fuels news puff pieces or human interest stories. As noted above, Shifman names positivity as one feature of popular memes. She reasons that content that promotes feelings of happiness is more easily spread than content that makes viewers sad or angry (2014, p. 66). While posts that are uplifting or inspirational do circulate, such as posts celebrating femininity or girlhood, they are few and far between. Even the mantra posts discussed above are usually rooted in some form of struggle, or at least derive their happy sentiments from the feeling of a challenge being taken on or overcome (such as "fight the patriarchy"). While Tumblr feminist posts are not always entirely negative, they are not often positive, either.

Fourth in the list of factors influencing spreadability is a slant towards liberal feminism. Liberal in this case means reformist, or geared towards changing gender roles without addressing the larger economic and political organization of society. I addressed the general sensibility of Tumblr feminism in Chapter One, but to recap, Tumblr users (and many millennials in general) tend to imagine feminism less as a collective movement and more as an individual source to draw on in combatting sexism. This is not due to naïveté, but to a lack of context for collective movements upon which to draw in conceptualizing their feminism. Thus, on Tumblr, we see fewer systemic analyses of patriarchy and more individual stories about experiences within it. We see more liberal feminism that supports choice, inclusivity, and reform within the boundaries of neoliberalism, and less acceptance for revolutionary feminism and/or separatism.

I have already discussed the (neo)liberal aspect of Tumblr feminism at length in Chapter One, but I bring this up again to discuss the enemy that has been made of radical feminism on the site. Indeed, Tumblr feminism can perhaps most easily be defined by shining light onto what it is not, and what the majority of Tumblr feminists seem determined not to be identified with is the type of radical feminism practiced in small pockets on the site. Though radical feminism tends be positioned as the opposite of the liberal feminism I described above, thus representing a desire to revolutionize economic and political systems rather than to adapt them, it has a particular sensibility on Tumblr. Specifically, Tumblr radical feminism tends to put focus on perceived inherent biological differences between men and women, as well as espousing anti-pornography and anti-sex worker views popular in the Second Wave.

Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminists (TERFs) or Trans Woman Exclusionary Feminists (TWEFS) are acronyms commonly used in a derogatory way to describe anti-trans, and often anti-pornography and/or anti-sex worker, feminists on Tumblr. It is unclear how many

of them frequent the site because the term is not one that is self-ascribed, but given that the term has become part of the Tumblr feminism vocabulary, it is safe to assume that there are a significant amount of "radical" feminists using Tumblr.

While these more radical Tumblr users can be counted as part of the wide-reaching community of feminists on Tumblr, their posts are both actively avoided and policed. Posts made by radical feminists that are anti-trans are almost never widely shared. Furthermore, Tumblr users have been known to message others to warn them that they have reblogged a post (any post – even innocuous ones not at all related to feminism) from a Tumblr user identified by the community as a TERF and to ask them to remove it from their blog. There are even posts made to call out the TERFish behaviour of individual Tumblr users, which of course often devolve into ad hominem attacks[3].

None of this policing has served to completely eliminate radical feminism from the site; radical content continues to circulate and provoke those who disagree with its tenets. However, despite no formal organization against radical feminists, this monitoring has made radical feminism wildly unpopular on the site. While there are similar efforts made to limit the visibility of ableist or racist content from feminists, Tumblr feminists do not critique those posts on the same scale. This is either because there is a larger population of radical feminists than racist or ableist feminists on the site, or because radical feminism does more to infringe on Tumblr feminism because it is within the same movement (feminism). Interestingly, for users outside the site, radical feminist views tend to be overrepresented in their notions of what Tumblr feminism is – the word "radical" popped up often in the Reddit forum I cite in the introduction to this chapter. I will suggest why I believe that is later in this chapter.

[3]I don't cite any here because these posts sometimes border on outright harassment.

This regulation of content suggests to me is that Tumblr feminism can be defined as a coherent phenomenon. That Tumblr feminists actively regulate their politics to a slant towards liberalism is evident because users rarely critique the most liberal of posts, and when they do, they do not critique them at all to the extent that they do radical posts and users.

Finally, the fifth factor that effects the popularity of Tumblr posts is relevance to teen culture. Posts are more likely to circulate if they relate to the interests, both political and cultural, of the young audience that Tumblr attracts. While the exact demographics are unclear, the highest estimates put nearly half of users of the site under the age of twenty-five (Smith, 2013). Thus, the feminist issues discussed on the site are those that effect teenagers and young adults. Topics like rape culture on college campuses, body positivity, and issues related to abusive parents were popular; wage and economic issues were far less so, as were issues that primarily effect older women, such as motherhood-related topics like maternity leave. Electoral politics, a classic activist concern, became very popular during the 2016 election, but was much less popular before that.

A relevance to popular culture is also a plus for posts, though they must still be significant or affectively charged and also be relevant to the popular culture content and personalities enjoyed by teenagers and young adults. When celebrities are mentioned, the bigger the celebrity, the higher the notes are driven – a point Shifman noted was consistent across popular memes (2014, p. 69). But again, that celebrity must be one whose work is aimed at young people for the content to find traction.

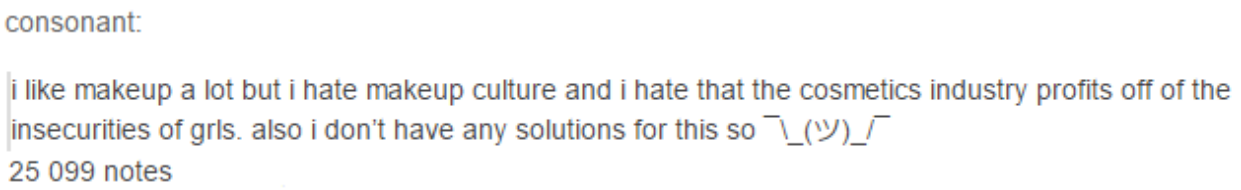
These five factors encompass the majority of popular posts in the Tumblr feminist community. We can already begin to see that Tumblr feminism does indeed have a specific

character across its multitude of voices. Next, I want to explore the means by which these factors are produced and reproduced by looking closer at the feminist posts themselves.

The Landscape of Tumblr Feminism

There are seven different types of feminist posts that I examine here: personal, editorial, mantras, news/political, entertainment, art, and discussion. Like the factors above, these categories I have created are not discrete; more often than not, they are blended together in some way. I came up with these categories by sifting through hundreds of posts on Tumblr feminism and looking for common themes in the way issues were presented.

Personal posts are posts in which users write about their everyday experiences with sexism or patriarchy. They could tell readers a thought the user had, a story about something sexist that happened to them or something they witnessed happening to someone else, or even a positive experience that they have had related to gender issues. They usually take the form of a text post, the most basic of all social media postings, and they tend to follow in the genre conventions described above. The below example is typical of this type of post. In this post, Tumblr user consonant tells us their thoughts about the makeup industry. The post is conversational, and was likely made after consonant experienced or read something that brought this subject to their mind:


consonant:

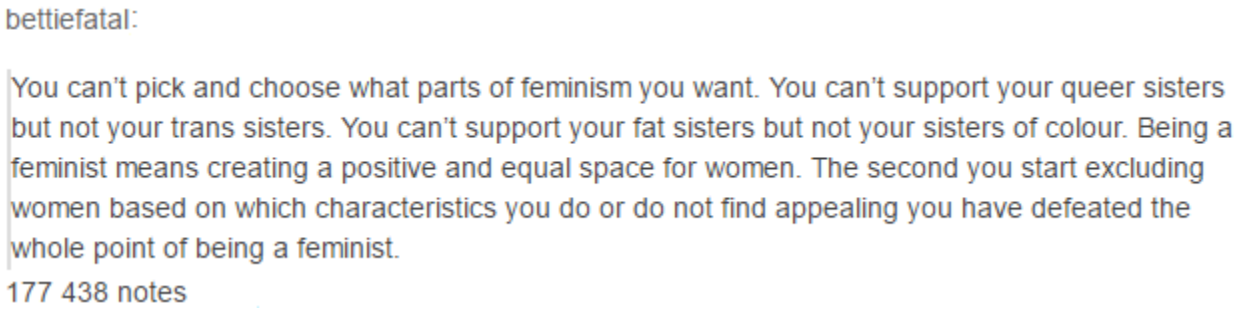
> i like makeup a lot but i hate makeup culture and i hate that the cosmetics industry profits off of the insecurities of grls. also i don't have any solutions for this so ¯_(ツ)_/¯

25 099 notes

(consonant, 2016)

Posts like these read like hearing a friend tell you about something that they're thinking. Other types of posts in this category can include photographs documenting instances of sexism, or even screenshots of texting conversations in which the poster felt harassed.

What I term editorial posts are very similar to the personal, but instead of describing a personal experience, users write them to comment on the state of feminism itself, to call people to action, or to educate users about a feminist issue. The most circulated of these posts, again, are written within the genre conventions of Tumblr, tend to have a liberal bias, and often use rhetoric to evoke an affective reaction. The following post from bettiefatal is an example of an editorial post that points out hypocrisy within the feminist movement:


bettiefatal:

> You can't pick and choose what parts of feminism you want. You can't support your queer sisters but not your trans sisters. You can't support your fat sisters but not your sisters of colour. Being a feminist means creating a positive and equal space for women. The second you start excluding women based on which characteristics you do or do not find appealing you have defeated the whole point of being a feminist.

177 438 notes

(bettiefatal, N.D.)

This post functions to describe a negative aspect of feminism that bettiefatal has witnessed. They then argue for an end to these exclusions and a renewed directive to ensure inclusivity within the movement. The post is meant to educate and lead readers to follow their advice.

I group personal and editorial posts together because they are both usually text posts that are written directly on the site rather than being imported from somewhere else or even referencing a media source offsite. These two categories of posts are the bare bones of Tumblr feminism, the user-created content that differentiates the site from mainstream media sources.

"Mantra" posts are the name I give to a third type of post, and they tend to be visual rather than text-based. Mantras are one-sentence phrases such as "boys will be held accountable for their actions" or "destroy the patriarchy." On Tumblr, artists give them an aesthetic treatment to make them stand out – imagine here how one of the above phrases might look on a T-shirt, or a button. The aesthetics used in their adornment match those of Tumblr in general, and are usually "girly," featuring lots of flowers and the colour pink. They too are often focused on liberal feminist ideals.

Visual artists with an interest in feminism, either amateur or professional, are usually behind these posts[4]. Below is an example of a mantra post:

(thefrizzkid, 2016, used with permission of the artist)

[4] Though I have a separate category for art created off of Tumblr and later imported onto it, I want to state here that these mantra posts are works of art as well, often ones that artists have spent a significant amount of time on, and which can be very beautiful. I only separate them from the other forms of art here because they serve a different purpose within the Tumblr feminist community because of their short and to-the-point nature. But they are no less valuable than the novels and photography that I talk about in the art section.

This post's purpose is the fortification of feminist ideas, specifically regarding healing from some type of trauma. It provides the user with encouragement to continue the healing process. Mantra posts are little reminders to keep doing feminist work and living a feminist life, little gifts of reassurance that feminists are on the right track. Through their repetition of key phrases and their aesthetic consonance, they are artifacts that emblemize the taste culture of Tumblr feminism, perhaps in the way that songs might represent and reproduce music-based subcultures.

News and political posts are the fourth category. I have already discussed them at length in the section on timeliness and proximity, as they are the key category in which that factor becomes important. These posts can take the form of editorials, but most often, they are links out to other websites. These are very different from the types of posts I've mentioned thus far because their information does not originate on Tumblr, but is imported in by a user who finds it interesting or informative and wants to share it. When created using Tumblr's link feature, these posts automatically import a photo from the outside source and format the title of the story below it. However, they also often come from other social media through screenshots. For example, reproducing series of Tweets about news events is common.

Celebrity and entertainment-related posts also tend to be timely and US-centric, and, of course, reference media that are coming from outside the site. One difference between these posts and news stories is that there is much more content about entertainment media and fandom written *for* Tumblr specifically than there is about news events.

There is also a significant amount of feminist discourse within fandom communities on the site that never circulates out of those intimate circles because the context is lost on those who are not avid readers or viewers of the particular text under discussion. However, occasionally something significant will happen that will break into the "mainstream" of Tumblr feminism, so

to speak, such as when the fan uproar about the violent death of a lesbian character, Lexa, on The CW's *The 100* circulated more broadly on Tumblr (Murphy, 2016). This event was able to bypass fandom barriers because of its affective arousal of injustice in many queer and/or feminist users of the site, even those who do not watch the show.

Art is the sixth category, and I am using the term here to encompass a number of different works that get brought into the site, including poetry, photography, literature, visual art, and more. Some of this is produced on Tumblr, but again, most of it is quoted or reproduced from other sources. One such post, with 191,745 notes, features a photography project by an artist named Aria Watson that displays naked women with misogynistic quotes from Donald Trump written on their bodies (#Signed By Trump, 2016). The posts in this category have in common their evocation of an affective response related to the type of emotive experience one has when looking at a piece of art or reading a novel. These experiences become networked expressions of affect as the posts circulate.

Furthermore, while the above example is timely, artwork tends to have more lasting effects than news stories. Posts featuring art created decades or even centuries ago may still become popular. Despite being centuries old, young people are experiencing these works for the first time, and they then post them to their blogs for others to experience, or re-experience.

It is worth nothing here as well that many of the news, entertainment, and art posts on Tumblr contain copyrighted images and text used without permission. Though Tumblr pays lip service to the US Digital Millennium Copyright Act in its Terms of Service, copyright takedowns almost never happen. Tumblr, like YouTube in Gillespie's study of platform politics, positions itself as a hosting site rather than as a media producer, taking little responsibility for copyright violations on the site. Furthermore, production companies that make the television

shows and movies that are abundantly "giffed" on the site seem largely unconcerned about the practice. This is likely partly because Tumblr is far less effectively monetized by users than, for example, YouTube, and thus does not represent much of a threat to these conglomerates profit structures. In fact, in producing these fan communities, fans are often doing production companies a favour by recruiting new viewers to their content. All of this, along with the technological affordances of Tumblr, especially those for image and video hosting, has allowed for a rich culture of mixed-media content on Tumblr left alone by copyright holders.

All six of the above categories can be considered fodder for the final one: discussion. Discussions are the threads of feminist conversation that happen on and around any post, be it a post that was already part of the feminist landscape, or a post not about feminism but one which feminists have co-opted. This conversation can be anything: messages of support, an assertion or a critique of an argument, or a story of similar or shared experience. The original author of the post may be a part of the discussion, or they may ignore it, or not even be aware of it.

In the following post, orriculum, knowingly or not, begins a conversation about the way men write female characters. They lament the often two-dimensional characterization of women as sex objects and how they feel it leads them to dislike those characters. Cumaeansibyl reblogs the post and chimes in with their own opinion, suggesting that they often take an oppositional stance and love characters they are meant to hate. Finally, Prokopetz offers a complementary opinion on male characters:

prokopetz:

> cumaeansibyl:
>
> > orriculum:
> >
> > > yknow how you want to like female characters and not immediately hate them but at the same time they're often written by those men that have a limited understanding of women as people and it's really hard to like a character that is less meant to be a person and more of a wanking hand puppet intended for the male gaze
> >
> > the flip side is when we're supposed to dislike a female character but she's obviously a straw-woman the writer's using to work out some unresolved issues he has with an ex or his mom or an unrequited crush so you actually kind of like her out of spite (especially when the narrative insists she's terrible but the real person she's based on was wholly reasonable and the writer can't conceal that)
>
> Bonus points when the dude we're supposed to think she's such a harpy for being hostile toward is just an endless parade of predatory red flags, but the narrative never acknowledges it due to the writer's evident honest belief that that's just how you interact with women.

43 281 notes

(orriculum, cumaeansibyl, & prokopetz, 2016)

These Tumblr users may or may not follow one another, and the original poster (orriculum) may not have even seen these responses to their post. However, thousands of others viewed this pseudo-conversation and shared it on their own blogs, perhaps adding their own commentary, as we can see from the 43,281 notes this post has (as of January 18th, 2017). Some of those notes account for people who may have only seen the original post, some only the first two paragraphs, and some the entire thing. There may also have been other conversations happening on different versions of this post (e.g. if someone other than cumaeansibyl reblogged this from orriculum and added their own commentary).

I would also add "ask" posts to this category. Tumblr has multiple features that allow for private messaging between users, but it also allows users to answer questions publicly on their blogs. In feminist circles, less-experienced or younger members of the community often begin

these posts asking for advice or clarification on a feminist topic. The following is an example of a post in which an anonymous user asked a question to a general interest feminist blog and was able to find an answer:

Anonymous: Could you help me explain why the "keep asking until the girl agrees to go out with you" trope is harmful? The argument against is that some girls like to be pursued like that-is that true or a myth perpetrated by the media?

the-daily-feminist:

> I think the issue is that it isn't just someone trying hard to impress a girl to get them to go out with them, it is inappropriate behavior that causes girls to feel like they HAVE to go out with someone. A lot of people use the movie "The Notebook" as an example, the male character hangs himself off a ferris wheel saying he will let go and fall to his death is she doesn't agree to go out on a date with him…to me that is wrong on so many levels. Telling someone to do something or you will essentially kill yourself is something that people from abusive situations deal with all the time, so why do we let this happen in movies and act like it is sweet and romantic? Even if there are people out there who like to be wooed and "chased" this isn't a message that we should be sending to children, that this behavior is okay and almost expected. Thanks for the question, and keep fighting!
>
> <3 The Daily Feminist

182 notes

(The Daily Feminist, 2016)

This post offers an example of a feminist conversation directly between two Tumblr users, unlike the previous post, which is more a performance of conversation for an audience. Here, we see someone who clearly has some knowledge about feminism directly educating someone else.

As I mentioned at the beginning of this section, none of the categories are hard and fast: news can be linked to editorials, mantra posts can be art, and poetry can be personal. Discussion, as it can take place on any type of post, further serves to unite a vast corpus of posts into a media environment.

Finally, as we move now into the intersectionality of the community, there is one honorary category of posts that must be noted: posts that enter the feminist community that are not explicitly feminist, but instead come into Tumblr feminism from anti-racist, LGBT, trans, or disability communities. Feminists on Tumblr, just as they do offline, often reblog and comment on these posts either as forms of solidarity or because they are a member of one or more of these communities that have close ties with the feminist community. The boundaries between these groups are flexible and ever-changing; often, they do not even exist for, for example, feminist Tumblr users of colour whose posts address both audiences. However, there are patterns that arise in the ways in which these communities interact with one another that require a closer look.

Intersectionality in Tumblr Feminism

The Tumblr feminist community has the appearance of intersectionality in its simplest form: the community discusses issues related to forms of oppression other than just gender, and they take into account critiques of white feminism and transphobic feminism coming from their members. That said, there is one key factor that influences the popularity of posts about marginalized groups that actually serves to silence their voices and inhibit their ability to self-represent: the posts about marginalized groups that tend to be widely shared are those that speak about them **from a distance**.

We can see this in action if we return to forestpunk's post above about protecting trans women. By writing that "*we* need to protect trans women" because "*they* are at such a high risk of being harmed," the reader is positioned outside of the community of trans women (2016, emphasis mine). The audience assumed by this post is someone who is not a trans woman, despite the post being about them. Furthermore, given that most of the notes on this post would

have been created by users who have seen the post secondhand rather than on forestpunk's own blog, the author of the post – and their gender identity – is effectively irrelevant. Users see the post somewhat in isolation on the dashboard, making its framing the most important identifying part of its message. This post was popular, having reached almost thirty thousand notes by January 17th, 2017.

However, compare that post to the following post written by a trans woman:

l0ve-natalie-nat:

> Everyday conversations in a cisgender normative world:
>
> 1) *Knowing I was married to another woman
> Lady: Is your son biologically yours?
> Me: Yes
> Lady: *as a follow up she asks about giving birth
> Me: I didn't have him
> Group of women: *confused faces
>
> 2) Lady: Do you have any kids?
> Me: Yeah my son is five
> *conversation leads to height
> Lady: So is his dad tall too?
> Me: Yes she is
>
> 3) Doctor: Any chance your pregnant?
> Me: No
> Doctor: What birth control are you on?
> Me: Being transgender.
>
> A huge part of socialization centers on kids, pregnancy and giving birth. Ultimately it leads to me having to choose whether to out myself, lie, or be evasive with answers. It is painful and makes me loathe these topics with new people.

29 notes

(l0ve-natalie-nat, 2017)

This post discusses everyday life experiences of a trans woman, the same community referenced in forestpunk's post. It follows genre conventions, it is funny, and it is not particularly controversial. And yet it received only 29 notes (as of January 17th, 2017).

The difference between the function of these two posts in the Tumblr feminist community is clear. Reblogging or liking the first post would allow the average user to show solidarity with trans women, and that proved a popular initiative. Reblogging or liking the second would allow the user to amplify the voice of a trans woman discussing her everyday (and, notably, far less ominous) concerns, and that did not prove popular. What's more is that Tumblr users who actually *are* trans women can unconsciously repeat the same patterns based on what they see others doing. This is because, as per Jenkins, users tend to replicate the norms of a site because they learn that reblogging what is popular will earn them social capital.

This phenomenon remains constant for every marginalized group on the site. It is common for white users to offer vague support to bloggers of colour and then not reblog their posts about their lived experiences. It is also common for straight users to offer partial support to LGBT users, without also reblogging their posts written about their lives. The most obvious reason for this would be that the experiences of the privileged within the Tumblr feminist community, as is within most offline feminist communities, tend to be privileged in conversations. This is similar to, for example, the way feminism sometimes privileges the issues that most affect white women. By positioning the reader within that privileged group as someone offering support in almost a saviour-esque way, the privileged can join the marginalized folks in supporting with the cause and reblog the post. Marginalized folks can still reblog the post, too; trans women, for example, can still reblog forestpunk's post, because it directly relates to their lives. However, the argument follows, when trans women or any other marginalized group

speaks up about their own experiences, privileged Tumblr users tend neither to identify nor care, and thus do not reblog the post to indicate that they support the marginalized group represented.

However, there are other forces at work on Tumblr that keep people from doing just this. First, there is a sometimes implicit, sometimes explicit rule on Tumblr that members of the feminist community should not try to co-opt the narratives of others. When Tumblr users reblog posts, they are not just sharing information with others – the posts that they place on their personal blogs also represent them and contribute to their identity formation. While promoting the voices of others is a good thing, it can be confusing how to do so without appearing as though you are appropriating their stories. For example, if I, a cisgender woman, reblogged l0ve-natalie-nat's post, there is a chance that someone may "call me out" for appearing to present myself falsely as a trans woman or as someone who has lived those experiences, because that is part of the signifying work of placing that on my personal blog. Sometimes the implicit threat of this callout is enough to stop users from reblogging, though occasionally, the threat is made explicit, written directly on posts in phrases such as "straight people, don't touch this post" or "white people please don't reblog this."

Second, we can also note that, because of past feelings of betrayal or distrust, users from marginalized communities sometimes do not want their posts to become popular, hence phrases like the above. There are good reasons for this, such as a need to create somewhat-safe spaces in which communities can speak online without being harassed by others, but it is also reflective of the tribalism that often divides offline feminist and leftist movements.

Tumblr feminism is intersectional in that it discusses many different marginalized groups' roles and concerns within the larger feminist movement. I would even wager to say that Tumblr feminism is more intersectional than mainstream feminism, because despite my

critiques, the platform structure does allow anyone to *write* a post, and it allows anyone to comment on and *critique* a post. Marginalized folks at least have the opportunity to voice their opinion, even though there are very real cultures of harassment that might keep them from doing so. Through this accessibility alone, it is likely that a more diverse selection of voices are speaking on Tumblr than on, for example, feminist blogs whose content comes from paid writers. However, as we have seen, Tumblr is not a feminist utopia that is exempt from the real-world race, sexuality, and gender identity politics that shape every feminist movement. There are problems to that need to be addressed with the ways in which Tumblr feminism continues to speak for others rather than allowing them to and encouraging them to speak for themselves.

So What Is Tumblr Feminism?

The first question I set out to answer in this chapter was "does Tumblr feminism exist?" The answer is yes. Drawing on the categories I have provided, Tumblr feminism can be defined as a community (in a broad sense of the word, to be discussed more in Chapter Three) that is liberal-leaning, concerned with and centered on youth culture, and that follows the genre conventions of the general Tumblr community. It often follows the mainstream news cycle while adding an analysis of everyday life experiences alongside its political and cultural critique.

Then, in asking what Tumblr feminism *does*, I would suggest that Tumblr feminism has three functions. First, it is a platform for participatory content production, such as personal or editorial posts. Some of its original content may be about news events, but it is largely about the everyday experiences of its users, which is one unique component that mainstream media almost never provides. Second, it is a hub for content produced by others, such as news and entertainment posts. Like all social media sites, it allows users to broadcast and share the

feminist information that is important to them. Finally, it hosts a conversation about the content in both categories, through discussion posts and its private messaging features. Tumblr feminism has essentially vertically integrated everything that young feminists need to explore feminism online.

The third question I had hoped to answer in this chapter is whether or not the Tumblr feminist community is an extremist branch of feminism full of strange ideas not found elsewhere on the web or offline. The answer is no. First of all, nothing I have described above is inherent to or exclusive of Tumblr. Posts are almost always either drawn from outside sources on the web, or from the real-life experiences of Tumblr users. Those that talk about online experiences are a small minority, and they *do* constitute, again, real-life experiences of Tumblr users, as any perceived divide between online and offline life is fictitious (Keller, 2015b, p. 72). But so much content on Tumblr comes from outside of the site that to rightly call Tumblr "ridiculous," you could have to call the entire Internet "ridiculous" as well (sjm689, 2014).

Furthermore, it is not as though information comes into Tumblr and then never leaves, either. Tumblr posts circulate through other social media and news websites all the time. See, for example, the seemingly-infinite number of BuzzFeed articles with titles such as "21 Times Tumblr Spoke The Truth About Feminism," "The 31 Realest Tumblr Posts About Being A Woman," "31 Hilarious Tumblr Posts That Only Feminists Will Get" (Golder, 2015; Nigatu, 2014; Pugachevsky, 2015). Or see the many Tumblr posts that are screenshotted and shared on Facebook, Instagram, or Twitter, just as posts from those sites are copied and shared on Tumblr. Tumblr feminism is just one part of the larger media ecology and the larger feminist culture that its users inhabit, and it generally reflects the values of the mainstream feminist movement.

So Why the Bad Reputation?

There are three explanations I want to suggest for why Tumblr feminism has received the bad reputation displayed in the comments of the posters in the Reddit AskWomen forum. First, there is an amplification of young people's voices for those who are not used to hearing them. Normally, Tumblr's type of talk about everyday experiences of teenagers and young adults would be relegated offline to private conversations in the halls of high schools and in private homes, and online to more private social media with much smaller audiences. Even parents are usually not privy to the thoughts their teenagers share with friends. Now, however, (older) people are listening in on these conversations, and, somewhat understandably, finding them strange and unfamiliar, and thus mockable. Also, the heavy influence of teen girl culture in Tumblr feminism's aesthetics means that some adults, in particular, do not take the site seriously because of Western society's tendency to deride almost everything that young girls stereotypically find enjoyable (boy bands, fashion, etc).

The second reason I posit for this bad rap is that Tumblr provides a handy, searchable documentation of everything a user has written on the site, readily available to their detractors. One main purpose of conversations about feminism amongst youth is to help them learn and grow into more informed people. Offline, their mistakes – which no one is exempt from – would be forgotten. Online, however, anyone can find the silly or naïve thing that a person wrote three years ago within seconds. Furthermore, the comments others have added to the posts are archived alongside them, which means that many posts come packaged with ready-made takedowns written by other detractors who, like above, found what was written to be strange or scary.

These posts fuel a **confirmation bias** in critics, which is my third reason for the negative opinion of Tumblr feminism on the Internet as a whole. Despite, as I hope I have shown in this chapter, most posts on Tumblr being reasonable discussions of feminism that could be found in any feminist circle, there are always a few posts that deviate from the norm. Detractors of Tumblr feminism likes those in the Reddit AskWomen forum ignore, either consciously or unconsciously, the vast number of posts that pose no threat to their sensibilities and focus on the few that confirm their existing opinions about young people, feminism, and/or Tumblr feminism as a whole.

Tumblr users themselves are not exempt from this bias. In the conversations I had with people on the site in doing research for this project, I encountered many who, despite being Tumblr users who identified as feminist, did not want to be associated with the term "Tumblr feminist" due to the negative stigma that surrounds it.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have outlined Tumblr feminism as a cultural phenomenon. I have suggested that it is liberal-leaning and concerned with young people's issues, and fits into the broader genre conventions on the site. It is not a bizarre cyberspace mutation of feminism, but a fairly ordinary one, incorporating information from outside sources and its users' experiences. Though seemingly intersectional, it often privileges nods to intersectionality over the actual voices of marginalized groups within the Tumblr community.

Tumblr is not utopic. In this chapter, I have raised issues of tribalism, callout culture, and the above-mentioned lack of intersectional commentary. Though I do believe that the good outweighs the bad on the site, generally speaking, the community must address these issues to

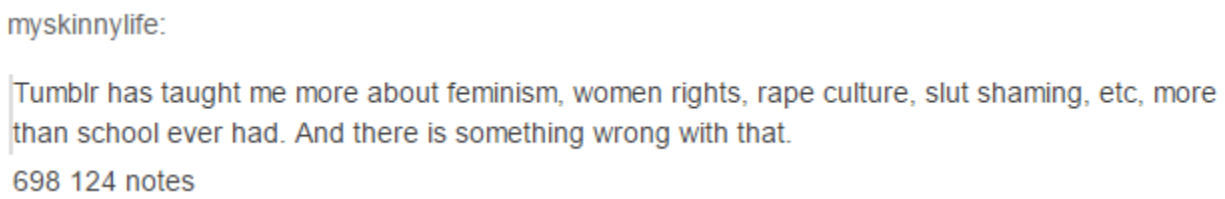
ensure that everyone is allowed to participate equally. Also, there remains to be studied the way in which writing and sharing posts on the site relates to the production of one's identity, especially one's feminist identity. I will return to some of these points in Chapter Three.

Chapter Three: Tumblr Feminism as an Apolitical Tool of Politicization

There are numerous testimonials online written by Tumblr users who exalt the site for what it has taught them about feminism. One reads:

> *When I first joined Tumblr years ago, it was because I just started watching The Vampire Diaries and wanted a place to geek out over my new favorite guilty pleasure show. What I didn't expect to find were frequent posts on my dashboard about feminism, a word I was for the most part unfamiliar with* (DeBlase, 2015).

Another reads: "while shamefully reblogging the newest memes… I somehow learned a lot about social issues" (Desotell, 2015). Tumblr users have also echoed this sentiment on the site; myskinnylife writes:



(myskinnylife, 2013)

Each of these writers speaks of Tumblr as the place where they were first exposed to feminism. Furthermore, all of them seem somewhat surprised to have found it on the site. They originally joined Tumblr to discuss and read fandom content or fitness advice, and somehow wound up politically changed.

These pieces of writing exist within a larger debate about the value of online activism, or, as it is so often called derogatorily, clicktivism or slacktivism. Some people, not least Malcolm Gladwell, are of the opinion that real social change must begin and end in the streets for it to count as real activism or even as a real act. Millennials tend to be called out the most for practicing this form of public engagement – or disengagement, depending who you're asking.

Scholars have been speaking back to critics of slacktivism for more than a decade now, defending the importance of online spaces for activism, specifically feminist activism. Tracy Kennedy (2007) wrote about the use of blogs as consciousness-raising spaces for women to work through political issues long before social media use became a quotidian activity. More recently, Jessalynn Keller's book *Girls' Feminist Blogging in a Postfeminist Age* (2015b) comprised a book-length study of the online feminist activism undertaken by teenagers.

Yet the stereotype of the laptop activist persists. Those who sign online petitions and repost news stories are often criticized not just for "doing nothing," but even for detracting from the value of "real," offline activism. Some interpret clicktivism as making people so complacent and satiated by their social media use that they feel they need not contribute anything to activism outside the home. By that logic, those of us who simply read reposted stories without signing or sharing are still worse; we couldn't even be bothered to click the button. This is hardly surprising, given that despite widespread adoption, many still see social media as a brainless activity. Even the Tumblr evangelists above describe use of the site as "shameful" or as a "guilty pleasure."

My goal in this chapter is to examine the value of Tumblr feminism through studying how its members use the site, and how they understand what is gained from that use, either by the users themselves or by the feminist movement as a whole. I am interested in where Tumblr feminism fits into the debates over clicktivism. To this end, I conducted interviews with six young feminists, who ranged from casual users of the site to every-day posters. Drawing on these interviews, I argue that casual, personal Tumblr use, unlike more focused feminist blogging, exists at a middle point between online activism and apolitical social media use. It integrates feminism seamlessly with the almost mundane daily online activities of young people and

because of this, not in spite of it, it is a powerful tool for feminist politics. I first look at the labour that my interviewees do on the site. Then, I examine how they describe Tumblr as a part of their typical social media experience, especially their insistence that, despite Tumblr's large role in their feminist practices, they remain unconvinced of the existence of a community on Tumblr; they also express ambivalence at defining their work as activism. I follow up by then detailing what is derived from their use of the site, which they variously explain as: a working knowledge of feminism, help with the formation of their feminist and personal identities, a politicization of their various positionalities in the world, and a desire to become proselytizers for feminism and to take part in traditional activism.

Millennial Activism and Social Media Politics

Jessalynn Keller (2015) has conducted the largest study to date on girls' online activism. She argues that girls' blogging is "accessible activism" that is relative to their position as students (p. 49). She refutes the tenet that activism requires participation in electoral politics, noting the historical ostracization of both women and youth from this arena. Blogging thus offers a way for youth to become involved in activism when they are barred from entering other areas.

Keller notes that blogging allows girls to explore and perform feminist identities that may be unwelcome in their offline lives. She argues that "a feminist identity also serves as a tool that girl feminist bloggers use to chip away at postfeminist constructions of feminism and femininity that populate their daily lives" (p. 28), showing that the self-esteem boost and feminist identity solidification that occurs due to blogging can prove helpful for young women's navigation of their lives. Keller then argues that this identity-formation becomes the basis of affective networks formed through mutual support (pp. 82-83).

Keller echoes Anita Harris's (2008) earlier work on the micropolitical aspect of girls' online activities (which I drew upon in Chapter One). Harris argues that "young women's feminist activism has taken on marginal, cultural and de-collectivised forms consistent with a broader shift in protest politics away from hierarchical and formal organisations as well as state-oriented activism" (p. 478). These new cultural forms have often served to make young people's activism unrecognizable to older generations, which has led to a further dismissal of young people's efforts as frivolous. In line with Keller's emphasis on identity, Harris also notes that young women involved in new forms of activism occupy a feminist perspective in order to tackle problems in their everyday lives (p. 477).

One new form of activism illustrative of Harris's argument is fan activism. Henry Jenkins's (2014) work on the Harry Potter Alliance presents an example of the melding of fandom and activism causes. Jenkins describes how the Alliance was formed from "the shared interests of fans, often conducted through the infrastructure of existing fan practices and relationships, and often framed with metaphors drawn from popular and participatory culture" (p. 66). The HPA used these existing channels to encourage fair trade, support positive body image, and prevent teen suicide, among other causes, showing how teens and young adults can co-opt depoliticized spaces for political goals.

Outside of the directly political realm, there have been studies done on the ways in which productive spaces for girls online help to build up their senses of self and identities, as well as communal spaces. Sarah Banet-Weiser (2011) argues that girls' use of YouTube for self-branding play allows them to explore their personal identities. Though not explicitly feminist, like the identity-formation described by Keller, the strengthening of female subjectivities outlined by Banet-Weiser serves a similar goal. Banet-Weiser cites Anthony Giddens in speaking

of a "project of the self" to examine how girls engage in online labour to produce their constantly-growing identities (p. 281). She also states that while their self-presentations often depend on branded objects, such as, for example, Barbie dolls, and are required to make sense within an economic structure, they still allow room for subversion outside of the narratives intended for the objects' play (p. 284).

Shifting from identity formation to community formation, Sharon R. Mazzarella (2005a) has studied the use of homepages and guestbooks made by girls. She explored the Chad Michael Murray fandom's connections online, stating that rather than being entirely dedicated to the actor, the websites were actually more about making safe spaces for girls to connect (p. 156). This echoes Jenkins's writing about activism and collectivity developing through shared interests: just as the Harry Potter Alliance adapted a fandom space to activism, these girls have adapted a fandom space to community-building.

Despite varying degrees of politicization, all of the above work falls under the broader category of young people's social media habits. Danah boyd (2014) has written extensively about teenagers' social media use, especially arguing against the fatalistic moral panics that follow the topic around. She debunks the notion of the Internet as a dangerous jungle where sexual predators abound, instead showing how online life reflects what happens offline. The same drama and harassment that pervades high schools flourishes online in new forms like cyberbullying.

Social hierarchies are also reproduced online. Alice Marwick (2015) has drawn on Theresa Senft's term "microcelebrity" to discuss the ways in which social media users have adopted media practices traditionally reserved for the glitterati to brand themselves and gain massive online followings. While Marwick mostly speaks about wealthy social media users who

use images of their luxurious lifestyles to attract others, she also notes the existence of subcultural stars (p. 156). One such figure that Marwick mentions is *Rookie Mag* founder Tavi Gevinson, whom Jessalynn Keller has also written about for her particular brand of indie-but-capitalist feminism (Keller, 2015a; Marwick, p. 138). Figures like Gevinson's use of online representation to gain fame from obscurity show that a celebrity culture that looks similar to structures of popularity teenagers are familiar with from school exists even in feminist spaces.

I have a drawn a path here through the research that has been conducted on the various types of social media use that teenagers and young adults engage in, from the deeply political, to the implicitly political, to the banal and everyday. I have done so because I aim to show that Tumblr's eclectic mix of fandoms, feminism, and personal posts incorporates pieces of each of them in a way that is specific to the site, and that facilitates the casually political space I sketch out below, after a brief introduction to my interviewees.

Meet The Tumblr Feminists

I interviewed six Tumblr users in February 2017: Abigail, Ymke, Raquel, Sarah, Carol, and Mars. I conducted four of the interviews through email, as well as conducting a group interview over WhatsApp with Carol and Mars, who are friends with each other, and who I also knew through my own Tumblr blog prior to beginning this study. I recruited them directly, and did the same with Raquel, who I met on Tumblr through this project. Sarah, Abigail, and Ymke responded to a call for participants that I posted to my personal Tumblr blog.

My interviewees' ages range from 18-23. Four identify as cis women, one as non-binary, and one as a non-binary woman. Three identify as White, one as White and Choctaw Native American, one as White and Hispanic, and one as Afro-Brazilian. Two identify as pansexual,

two as bisexual, one as queer, and one as asexual panromantic. Raquel, Abigail, and Sarah are American, Ymke is Dutch, and Mars and Carol are Brazilian.

At the time of writing, Abigail and Sarah are high school seniors; Raquel, Mars, and Ymke are completing undergraduate degrees; and Carol is a Master's student. All six use Tumblr for personal blogging and some use it for interacting with fandoms; some run two or more blogs, one for personal use, and others for particular fandoms in which they are invested. Raquel uses her blog primarily to post her poetry.

Learning About Feminism on Tumblr

For most of my interviewees, Tumblr was not their first exposure to feminism. Raquel states that she was "outspokenly feminist from the start" of using her blog, while Carol cites going to university as her first point of contact (Raquel, author interview, Feb 9, 2017). Abigail notes that they came to feminism through working through their sexuality and coming out to their parents and friends as queer. Sarah, on the other hand, states that she, like the bloggers quoted in the introduction of this chapter, became informed about feminism through Tumblr:

> *I did not blog about feminism in the beginning because I'd never really heard about it. I'd watched Mean Girls* [the 2004 film] *and heard "the rules of feminism" without understanding what feminism was. The main reason I started blogging about it was that I became informed through Tumblr. People I followed posted about it or reblogged others' posts, giving me information.* (author interview, Feb 18, 2017)

Sarah describes here how feminist posts that circulated onto her Dashboard raised awareness of feminism for her and let her learn about the topic.

All of my participants identify as feminists, and all are able to clearly define the term, drawing on popular definitions of feminism as "equality for everyone" as well as more nuanced ideas like intersectionality, which are mentioned or referred to indirectly by four of the six. Mars,

for example, writes: “I believe in equality, and not just gender equality because I really don't think you can separate feminism and gender issues from racial issues or sexuality issues or anything” (author interview, Feb 12, 2017). Sarah connects feminism to defending rights for men as well as women, such as feminists’ work to support male rape survivors.

When asked about using Tumblr to share feminist ideas, my interviewees bring up a number of reasons why those choose to do so. Most of them want to educate others. As Ymke explains, “I reblog feminist posts, because it is important that the message is spread” (author interview, Feb 26, 2017). Abigail also speaks about education, but adds that they saw the practice as creating “a daily reminder of empowerment for myself and others,” adding an aspect of solidarity formation (author interview, Feb 15, 2017). Mars and Carol both speak about their blogs as a space for voicing their opinions; Mars says “my blog is kind of my space, so, like, it's a place where I like putting stuff I agree with… and since feminism is something that is very important to me, I have it on my blog” (author interview, Feb 12, 2017). Carol adds, “it means that I'm making a statement. I frequently use my blog to express my opinions” (author interview, Feb 12, 2017). Carol also notes that posting on the site can be a good way to start conversations, calling Tumblr a “forum” where people can share their “own takes” and others can agree or disagree (author interview, Feb 12, 2017).

Some of the participants say that they use Tumblr to talk to others about feminism directly, while others focus more on reblogging other people’s posts. Abigail says that they speak to people they both do and do not know “IRL” (in real life, offline) about feminism. Carol actually says that she has met “most of her closest friends on Tumblr” and that because feminism is a shared interest, they discuss it both on and off the site (author interview, Feb 12, 2017). Keller’s research participants had similar experiences to Carol in that they drew no divide

between their "online" and "offline" friendships, saying that they were of equal importance (2015, p. 100).

When I ask my interviewees if they use Tumblr to talk about feminism more than other social media sites, all of the participants either agree that they do or state that they do not have profiles on other sites. When asked why, they bring up two reasons. First, three of them identify that Tumblr has a feminist culture present on the site already. Carol notes that there is a "Tumblr mentality," stating that "it's more acceptable to be an 'SJW' on Tumblr than anywhere else on the internet" (author interview, Feb 12, 2017). "SJW" refers to a "social justice warrior," a term used popularly on Tumblr to describe people interested in leftist causes, originally used to deride them.

Where this Tumblr feminist culture comes from, however, it still not clear. One suggestion of its origins may be, as Sarah explains, that it arose because "other social media is more social, while Tumblr is more informational" (author interview, Feb 18, 2017). Tumblr, as I have mentioned previously, relies more on the spread of multimedia content than, for example, Facebook, which deals primarily in personal connections, though this is gradually changing. Furthermore, sites like Facebook tend to be places for us to connect with people we know, either online or offline, while Tumblr sees much more circulation of ideas from people that users have no connection to whatsoever. Mars cites this as one of the benefits of Tumblr, stating that "the nice thing about Tumblr (compared to other social media) is that you get to know other points of view from people all around the world," which may add to its appeal for feminists looking to widen their perspectives (author interview, Feb 12, 2017).

Between Political Community and Ordinary Blogging

My interviewees describe above the basics of Tumblr feminism, and how they came to the site. I am also interested in is what role it plays in their feminist practices and in their lives in general. In short, what use is Tumblr to them? In this section, I explore ways in which their Tumblr use differs from traditional notions of activism. First, I examine how their use of the site is integrated with their other blogging experiences in a way that renders it casual and almost mundane. Next, I look at their reliance on other sources for feminist information. Finally, I attempt to understand their lacks of feelings of community or activist practice.

When asked about what they enjoyed about using Tumblr, many of my participants do not differentiate between the types of blogging that they engage in, be it personal, feminist, or fandom-related. Sarah best encapsulates this idea when she explains that her favourite part of using Tumblr is the "sharing of information, whether it is political or just a head canon" (author interview, Feb 18, 2017). A "head canon" refers to information about a fictional universe or character that a fan has created and that they accept to be true despite a lack of confirmation from its creators. To Sarah, her use of Tumblr includes both political and apolitical aspects; she does not experience a difference between the two. In this way, feminism is viewed as yet another interest that one can blog about, rather than a collective movement in which one participates, per se. Carol echoes Sarah's feeling, mentioning a number of reasons for enjoying the site: "my favorite part [of using Tumblr] is that it has given me the opportunity to meet incredible people, shown me different perspectives of the world, and made me care a lot more about social justice… and allowed me to discover a lot of cool media" (author interview, Feb 12, 2017).

When I ask them about their least favourite aspects of Tumblr, the answer is unanimous: the "callout culture," in Raquel's words, that exists on the site (author interview, Feb 9, 2017).

Callout culture refers to "the tendency among progressives, radicals, activists, and community organizers to publicly name instances or patterns of oppressive behaviour and language use by others" (Magicalersatz, 2015). While callout culture has its roots in traditional activism, its online use, especially among teens, seems to have another predecessor: cyberbullying. A story Raquel tells me about "someone who was chased off of [Tumblr] for no other reason than a 'mutual' making an off-color joke" mirrors the case studies boyd offers us about teenagers being run off of messaging apps due to fights with friends (2014, p. 129; author interview, Feb 9, 2017). This connection tells us that there is a similarity in the ways in which young people interact with one another in activist and apolitical circles; feminist spaces are not exempt from the personal conflicts of everyday life and everyday social media use.

This similarity may be partly due to the gradual increase of feminist content on Tumblr. Mars describes "people from [their] dash changing their blogs little by little and starting to blog/reblog things about feminism and other political/social matters" (author interview, Feb 12, 2017). This incremental addition of feminism into the mix of content on the site may have blurred the differences between feminism and personal or fandom blogging. Indeed, in some cases, the objects of interest are the same, with Tumblr forming a subculture of its own, complete with common trends and fashions, and social hierarchies topped by community heroes. These range from well-known celebrities like Beyoncé and Taylor Swift, to lesser-known musicians and actors like Halsey, Hayley Kiyoko, and Amandla Stenberg, all of whom users know for their feminist ideals and some of whom, like Stenberg and Swift, actually use the site to interact with the feminist community.

Raquel also notes that callout culture can be extended to celebrities. In her comment about Taylor Swift, she recaps:

> *A good example of this is the Taylor Swift cycle: she was hated for having too much sex. Tumblr hated her too only to forgive her for it. She came out as feminist and Tumblr loved her, only for people to go back to hating her because her feminism is "white feminism"… this sort of backlash happens all the time. It is only a matter of time before the newest face of "Tumblr Feminism" is eventually outed as having some problematic behavior or another* (author interview, Feb 9, 2017)

Raquel here describes the application of callout culture to Taylor Swift. Tumblr users saw her behaviour – having too much sex, practicing "White Feminism" – as "problematic," and thus she was attacked. Not only does this celebrity culture, replete with "backlash," occur for traditional celebrities, it is also present for subcultural stars like those discussed by Marwick. Raquel speaks of her own experiences with fans of her writing calling her the "Guardian Angel of Tumblr," and how she has felt worried that she or other popular Tumblr users like her may one day face the pattern of "hero-worship" of celebrities followed by widespread harassment that she describes above (author interview, Feb 9, 2017).

Despite Tumblr's immersive feminist subculture, and perhaps partly because of some of the issues with harassment discussed above, my interviewees are universally adamant that people should not use the site as their sole source of information about feminism. Opinions about the value of learning feminist concepts from the site ranged from Carol's moderate reaction that "I learned a lot on there, but I'd recommend not sticking to it, trying to read some of the theory, and most of all trying to learn from real-life situations" to Raquel's bold statement that "it is a terrible place to learn about feminism" (Raquel, author interview, Feb 9, 2017; Carol, Feb 12, 2017). Raquel speaks of the oversimplification of information and a lack of diversity of both thought and backgrounds of bloggers to justify her claim. Ymke cites "a severe lack of fact-checking" as her reason for relying on other sources of information (author interview, Feb 26, 2017).

Even though everything above so far suggests that there is some kind of cohesive Tumblr community or experience, most of my interviewees do not feel as though they are a part of one. For example, to suggest that people seek "outside" sources for learning about feminism inherently suggests that there is an "inside" to speak of. As Ymke states: "I don't interact with a lot of feminist blogs so I'm not really part of the community," specifying a need to interact with others as part of community-building (author interview, Feb 26, 2017). "I wouldn't say that I feel like I'm part of a community,' Abigail seconds, "but I do feel like when someone posts something pertaining to feminism people support it," suggesting that there is some feeling of community, even though they cannot define it (author interview, Feb 15, 2017). Carol is willing to say that there "probably is a feminist community (or many) on Tumblr," but that she herself is not a part of any (author interview, Feb 12, 2017).

A large part of the reason why I believe they may feel isolated from a community, imagined or otherwise, is due to the sway that neoliberalism has on their feminism, as discussed in Chapter One. Tumblr feminism tends to call for individual solutions to structural problems, and does not offer the same types of support that other feminist spaces do. It doesn't invite itself to be thought of communally. Their lack of feeling of community may be then reflected in the posts they make, which may circle back to increase their lack of feeling of community even more, until it is unclear which cause begets which.

Interestingly, by many scholarly definitions of the word, Tumblr feminists *do* form a community, or a public. Michael Warner, in *Publics and Counterpublics* (2002), defines publics as being "constituted through mere attention" and as "the social space created by the reflexive circulation of discourse" (pp. 87, 90). Both boyd and Keller cite Warner's definition in coining the terms "networked publics" and "networked counterpublics," respectively, to discuss how

publics and counterpublics have moved online (boyd, 2014, p. 9; Keller, 2015b, p. 79). Also cited by boyd are Benedict Anderson's imagined communities, which too are based on the circulation of text (2016, p. 37). By these definitions, reading about feminism on Tumblr necessarily entails imagining that others are doing so as well, which makes one a part of the public. Contributing to the conversation is not necessary: as Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green write, "lurkers," those who consume online content but don't comment or otherwise indicate that they were ever there, "[provide] value to people sharing commentary or producing multimedia content by expanding the audience and potentially motivating their work" (Jenkins et al., 2013, p. 157). They may also "curate" information by reblogging it to their personal blogs. Thus, anyone who interacts in some way with Tumblr feminism is included in the community, but my interviewees do not feel that connection.

The importance of publics like Tumblr for supporting traditional activism and consciousness-raising must not be understated. Tumblr provides a space for interacting with feminism for thousands of people, not a small feat. Yet that significance is disregarded by even its most devoted members because of its simultaneously isolating and connective nature.

Following the fact that Tumblr users don't feel enthusiastic about Tumblr's value as a community, it makes sense then that they are also divided on whether or not to name their online labour as "activism." Two of them – Mars and Ymke – decide that it isn't. Ymke writes that she "[doesn't] really think of it as activism, because I don't really do anything other than click a button" (author interview, Feb 26, 2017). Her explanation is in line with criticisms of clicktivism. Mars feels that the chances of their blogging actually changing anything real are "very low" (author interview, Feb 12, 2017). Raquel takes a middle position, unsure whether or not to call her writing activism. The three who do call their work activism – Abigail, Carol, and

Sarah – are ambivalent about their decisions to use the word. Carol writes: "I do think that online activism is an accessible way to raise some awareness, but I'm not very sure that it has a real effect" (author interview, Feb 12, 2017). Abigail seconds this opinion, stating that they "do think of it as a form of activism, but one that doesn't carry a lot of impact by itself, so if you're able you should back it up by doing other forms of activism off the site" (author interview, Feb 15, 2017).

Both Abigail and Carol almost directly reference the same phenomenon Keller was addressing in terming her research participants' feminist blogging work as "accessible activism" (p. 49). However, unlike Keller, who argues for the legitimate consideration of accessible activism *as* activism, Carol and Abigail feel that their online work as less effective than traditional activism, and Mars and Ymke feel it is not particularly effective at all.

Thus, I feel it would be safe to assume that there is something different about the way Tumblr is structured by its users that makes it more casual and even mundane than, for example, the blogs *about* feminism that Keller studied. Tumblr feminism is embedded in the repetitive landscape of personal blogging, sometimes background to other interests and so commonplace as to become monotonous. This distances it from traditional forms of political engagement, which, I argue, actually makes it *more* appealing to teens and young adults as a source for political information. It is created by them and for them, mirroring practices and forms that they are familiar with, and thus catches their interest in ways that adult-centered or offline activism may not.

Compare Tumblr feminism with another current form of feminism: "cool feminism," the watered-down, branded type of feminism marketed by companies like Dove and celebrities like Emma Watson. It may seem a simple leap to draw connections between this trendy feminism and

Tumblr feminism, which relies on being depoliticized and appealing to young people. Furthermore, Tumblr is indeed a corporate space, replete with advertisements both from the site's advertising mechanism and produced and circulated by corporate blogs. As Banet-Weiser notes in her work on YouTube videos, some young people's narrations of the self depend on branded products for meaning-making, either used ironically or sincerely (2011, p. 284). However, despite this influence from corporate culture, their narratives can still be, and are, on Tumblr, subversive.

I want to indicate a few ways in with Tumblr does not follow the "cool" feminism trend. First, it is free to use and accessible to anyone with an Internet connection and a working knowledge of the English language. Second, it is firmly subcultural, while cool feminism is, for the most part, mainstream. Natalee Desotell, whose piece "What Tumblr Taught Me About Social Issues" I quoted in the introduction, describes Tumblr as her "last true guilty pleasure and something that I try not to bring up in conversation *ever*" (Desotell, 2015, emphasis in original). Cool feminism is something to show off on a slogan T-shirt; Tumblr feminism is something to hope your friends don't find out you engage in because of its nerdy connotations. Finally, it is made for young people by other young people through free labour (Terranova, 2004), and often also the emotional labour involved in personal storytelling, despite the transactionality sometimes felt in this kind of rapid information-sharing economy. In all, Tumblr feminism serves as a free and accessible way for millennials to politicize each other, rather than being politicized from those older than or more powerful than them.

What Does Feminism Gain

Tumblr's feminist community supports the politicization of its users in a process that begins with identity-formation and ends with these users engaging with others about feminism. Using the site offers gains for users that both help them personally and help feminist politics as a whole. First, Tumblr supports the strengthening of subjectivities (Piepmeier, 2009), both personal and political. My interviewees describe how using Tumblr helped them come to terms with their identities as women, people of colour, and queer people. Raquel, who began using Tumblr to share her personal poetry, notes that "[Tumblr] can be an incredible source for female voices, for sharing otherwise unheard-of lives" and that she "[doesn't] believe that my views would have ever been published without Tumblr… my voice is too controversial" (author interview, Feb 9, 2017). This presentation of selfhood online is the first step towards identity formation, and its repetition allows for identities to be solidified.

Both Carol and Abigail state that the site had helped them better understand their sexualities, and Raquel and Sarah feel that there are a number of diverse voices speaking about the identities of people of colour. Carol states: "Tumblr guided me through a great part of the establishment of my identity (more specifically my sexual orientation)" (author interview, Feb 12, 2017). Sarah writes that "I think that women of colour continuing to make posts about their personal struggles and their thoughts on 'white feminism' is the best thing about Tumblr feminism" (author interview, Feb 18, 2017), and Raquel agrees:

> *It does an excellent job representing underprivileged women, if you're looking to find out more from them. Since blogs tend to be personal, you can get more than just a 'slice of life' sort of view from one particular feminist - instead you have thousands to sort through, each with their own opinions* (author interview, Feb 9, 2017).

As these young people's identities are strengthened via their use of Tumblr, they are able to present their lives in more cohesive ways. This in turn provides models for those who are new to

the site, or who are struggling with issues of identification, or both, about how identity work happens on Tumblr.

Furthermore, as we have seen in the interviewees' responses so far as well as examples from the other chapters of this thesis, Tumblr allows its users to develop feminist subjectivities as well, which they, like their personal identities, are then able to model for others. Emilie Zaslow (2009) argues that the performance of a feminist identity, even without evidence of involvement in actual political work, can have a role-modelling effect that allows girls to see how they may become feminists themselves, or how they may subvert traditional gender roles (pp. 149-151). The same work is happening on Tumblr; just seeing other young people writing and posting feminist ideas online may have the effect of encouraging others to take up a feminist identity.

Next in this process is the impetus given to these young feminist to go seek out feminist information off of the website. Getting a taste of feminism from Tumblr seems to increase users' desire to seek out more information about feminism elsewhere. As mentioned above, my interviewees believe that those interested in feminism should not rely on Tumblr as their only source. They speak about how they had explored other sources. Abigail notes that they accessed information about feminism through "academic journals and articles," as Carol had done as well (Abigail, author interview, Feb 15, 2017). Carol also "took a class on Gender Psychology and it was amazing" (author interview, Feb 12, 2017). Mars and Raquel speak about finding feminist information outside Tumblr. Mars explains that when they read something on the site that leaves them feeling confused or that piques their interest, they will try to read more about it off the site or speak to people offline about the topic. While detractors may call Tumblr "feminism lite," it is not as though users will be satisfied by their one experience with feminism, and thus discouraged

from looking at other sources. In fact, the opposite appears to happen; using Tumblr encourages young feminists to read and learn about feminism further.

This interest in feminism may serve two purposes in creating feminist subjects in society: putting feminists in positions of influence as these users grow older and enter the workforce and adult world, and encouraging them to become proselytizers for the feminist movement and to take part in activist causes. Mostly unprompted, my research participants tell me about how they want feminism to influence other parts of their lives, including their careers. Raquel, who is a very talented young writer, feels that her work was imbued with feminism. She explains: "my work isn't intentionally 'down with the patriarchy' and is instead feminist simply by being an honest account of what it means to present as female in this world" (author interview, Feb 9, 2017). To Raquel, honest writing includes feminism. Mars, who is unsure of what career they want to pursue after they finish school, instead talks about how feminism influences their desire to make sure that they, and everyone else, are not discriminated against in whatever workplace they end up in.

Others speak of a future within the academy. Both Abigail and Sarah, the two high school seniors in the group, believe that they will be speaking more about feminism in classes and with new colleagues when they start college. Carol, who is a Master's student and will be starting a teaching job in the near future, writes that she hopes she "gets more opportunities to talk about feminism when I'm teaching" (author interview, Feb 9, 2017). Those who read Raquel's writing, or take Carol's class, will have more access to feminist practices than those whose teachers or favourite authors have not engaged with feminism.

All of the Tumblr users I interviewed also talk to friends and family about feminism in what could be called interpersonal activism. As Abigail explains, "I engage my peers and family

in conversations about feminism pretty regularly. If I think it's relevant, I do also bring feminism up in class if it pertains to the topic we're discussing" (author interview, Feb 15, 2017). All of my interviewees say they have spoken to friends about feminism. Carol and Mars, like Abigail, say that they have spoken to their families about feminism as well. Mars adds that they "talk as much about feminism offline as I do online," while Raquel says that she "talk[s] about it probably every day. I'm very outspoken about it" (Mars, author interview, Feb 12, 2017; Raquel, Feb 9, 2017).

Finally, as the connection between traditional, protest-and-politics-oriented activism and online behaviour seems to be the key issue that detractors of clicktivism are concerned with, feminist Tumblr use does appear to contribute to an increased desire to participate in offline activism. Sarah draws the connection directly, stating that:

> *a post I reblog could make someone else aware of an issue in their state/country, and then they could do something about it, by protesting or starting a petition. I also think [Tumblr use] is education. I think if more people are informed, more people have a chance to make a difference* (author interview, Feb 18, 2017).

Mars has attended pro-choice and queer women's rights protests, and is planning on getting involved with their campus women's collective. Abigail has also gone to marches and protests, and is involved with academic research on gender and sexuality. Those who have not yet gotten involved express a deep interest to do so in the future. Carol, for example, voices her desire to work with other Black women in a collective way if she can find such a group. Thus, Tumblr feminism is not representative of the critique of slacktivism that says that it assuages people's need to participate offline. Instead, it serves as part of young feminists' larger feminist practices, and may directly encourage Tumblr users to get involved with feminism outside their homes.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that Tumblr occupies a middle ground between purely social and apolitical social media use and explicitly feminist social media use. It combines features of both and creates a place where millennials can explore feminism casually alongside the fandoms and other interests that originally brought them to the site. Feminism exists on Tumblr as a subculture with trends, famous faces, and interpersonal drama like any other subculture. It helps to politicize the individuals who use it and inspire them to both become more involved in feminist blogging and to explore feminism offline.

I want to emphasize that Tumblr does not manage to do this political work *despite* its casual properties and its distance from traditional politics – it works precisely *because* of these attributes. While traditional politics may be time-consuming, inaccessible, and unwelcoming to young people, particularly girls, Tumblr is accessible and Tumblr feminism is a space that regular users of the site come prepared to navigate. Furthermore, unlike feminist-specific blogs, even those run by and made for girls, Tumblr is able to capture a large audience of participants who may not be invested enough to spend hours reading feminist writing (at least at first), but still want to feel represented and to explore the subject. It is a more gradual process of politicization that takes less effort over more time to create its subjects.

There are also likely some who would be quick to say that creating this type of semi-political, semi-involved subject does more harm than good. I vehemently disagree. Having a large population of people aware of feminist values is incredibly useful to the movement, as interpersonal activism is key to recruiting new feminists and creating safe feminist spaces. In addition to the benefits outlined above, one other area I would suggest effects of Tumblr's widespread casual and accessible feminism could be felt is in electoral politics. Everyone gets a

vote, and knowledge of feminism may very well influence those votes. In metaphorical terms, I see Tumblr feminism as creating a sort of herd immunity against anti-feminist rhetoric and behaviour, as well as creating a population of interested, inspired young people ready to take part in social change.

Conclusion

In this thesis, I have argued for a nuanced and generous view of Tumblr feminism and of young people's politics in general. Tumblr feminism is definitely not without faults, but overall, it contributes positively to the feminist movement and to the lives of its users.

First, I want to address the amount of labour that goes into creating communities like Tumblr feminism. The dismissal of free online labour primarily coming from women and girls, both by academics and journalists and by participants in those communities, is still a problem. Those who have never been part of online communities perhaps do not realize just how much time and brain power goes into creating a piece of digital art, or an informational post on feminism, or a poem. Moreover, this labour is almost entirely unpaid, with the rewards coming from gaining notes and hopefully hearing feedback that you've influenced someone positively. This content is often exceptionally creative and smart, even as others deride it as brainless or insignificant. I instead have argued that we ought to take seriously the content production on Tumblr so that the contributions of young people to culture do not continue to go unnoticed and unrewarded.

We also need to acknowledge that young people's activism can look very different from what has come to define activism – historical records of protests, news coverage, and the narratives we use to tell stories about it. We cannot discount it simply because it is unfamiliar, and works in different ways. Perhaps the largest issue to address here is the challenge of organizing under neoliberalism, and the tendency to move away from more collective work that this isolating and demoralizing climate creates in their writing. This problem is not going away, and indeed only seems to be getting worse. I hope that this study has revealed some of the

challenges that come with trying to organize resistance in the current political climate of the Western and developed world. I wish I could offer solutions, as I'm sure do the Tumblr feminists trying to find ways to connect despite their feelings of isolation. What I do want readers to take away, however, is the message to not discount politics that tend towards postfeminism or neoliberalism for lack of ideological purity. Just because a feminist post on Tumblr does not, and cannot, fully address a systemic issue does not mean that it is not valuable, or that it is not a step in the right direction. It is important to remain critical of these discourses, but also to understand why young people come to occupy them and why they work for them. The benefits to feminist and other movements, as I have hopefully shown, far outweigh the costs of this type of politics. Tumblr feminism may not overhaul the entire political and economic organization of the world, but that doesn't make it worthless.

In calling for further research, I would like to suggest more work on the intersectional forms of activism happening on Tumblr. I only looked here at the ways in which other communities interact with the generalized Tumblr feminist community, and at the intersectional politics of that main group. But there are smaller subset communities present on the site of Black feminists, LGBT activists, and more that deserve closer inspection. Furthermore, some of the more conservative communities on the site, like the radical feminist community or the "anti-social justice warriors" are deserving of study as well, as understanding their motivations is key to understanding the current online political climate.

Also of interest are the cultural and artistic trends that Tumblr communities produce. The amount of cultural capital needed to communicate effectively on Tumblr, about feminism or anything else, is staggering, as the pop culture lexicon on which users draw is enormous. These come not only from broadcast and news media but also from aesthetic forms that are generated

on Tumblr and remain there (for example, the "art hoe" movement started by women of colour on the site). These trends that begin on and are propagated on Tumblr are fascinating looks into subcultural styles that deserve more study.

Furthermore, the tastes of Tumblr users change quickly. Memes are sometimes created and then abandoned within a week's time. Users adapt to these changes, often picking up skills in writing, art, web design, and interpersonal communication along the way. These skills are almost always self-taught or learned from friends, making for a very interesting pedagogical landscape that needs closer examination. Young people are gaining proficiencies that are useful both for amateur media production and even for professional development by using Tumblr, and it creates opportunities for them to explore creative careers and hobbies. Some even monetize these skills, such as writers who began writing poetry online who go on to self-publish books, or Tumblr artists who begin selling commissions. This potential for career-building, especially in the precarious artistic fields, needs more attention, as for some it serves to alleviate the financial troubles millennials face.

As for who will do the work I've suggested above, I would also like to encourage scholars, especially young or emerging ones, to make connections between their own online communities and their academic practices. Many Tumblr feminists see a future in academic work in gender studies and other fields, and many scholars who I have spoken to over the course of writing this thesis have told me that they are Tumblr users themselves. Tumblr feminism and academic work on feminism have the same goals, yet work towards them very differently. More collaboration and exchange, especially in terms of scholars finding ways for young people, whom we depend on for so much of our research content, to gain more recognition for the work

they are doing, would represent a more fruitful relationship between media research and media maker.

In summary, Tumblr feminism has a bad reputation that, frankly, it does not deserve. It has helped get a new generation of young people involved in feminist activism, and it continues to function as a network of support and encouragement for young people engaging in political conversation around the world. As I hope I and my interviewees have demonstrated here, its participants are smart, informed, and capable agents of change who are not only ready, but excited, to be the future of feminism.

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