"Hey, I'm Having These Experiences":
Tumblr Use and Young People's Queer (Dis)connections

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This article explores LGBTIQ+ young people's use of Tumblr—a social media platform often associated with queer youth cultures. Drawing on data from surveys (N = 1,304) and interviews (N = 23) with LGBTIQ+ young people in Australia, we argue that existing notions of "queer community" through digital media participation do not neatly align with young people's Tumblr practices. Our participants use Tumblr for connecting with others, yet these connections can be indirect, short term, and anonymous. Connections are often felt and practiced without directly communicating with other users, and many participants described their connections to the Tumblr platform itself as intense, pivotal to learning about genders and sexualities, and sometimes "toxic." We suggest that Tumblr use intensities reflect many young people's (dis)connections to queer life. Participant accounts of Tumblr use for identity, well-being, and (dis)connection practices can usefully inform health, education, and community workers engaging with LGBTIQ+ young people.

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Much has been said of the importance of digital media practices for LGBTIQ+[1] young people, in terms of negotiating identity, finding peers and friends, and locating communities that may be unavailable elsewhere (Hillier & Harrison, 2007; Robards, Churchill, Vivienne, Hanckel, & Byron, 2018). Building on such literature, this article explores Australian LGBTIQ+ young people's engagement with Tumblr—a social media platform that has played a significant role in contemporary LGBTIQ+ politics and practice.

As part of a broader study of LGBTIQ+ young people's social media practices, this article focuses on how Tumblr is used for connection to peers, engaging with gender and sexual identities, self-expression, and well-being. Literature informing our discussion highlights how queer young people use digital media to find and build communities and friendships (Hillier & Harrison, 2007; Pullen & Cooper, 2010), yet our participant's use of Tumblr brings the concept of "community" into question. Drawing on Warner's (2002) theory of counterpublics, Ahmed's use of affect theory to discuss queer feelings in queer spaces (2004) and Rainie and Wellman's (2012) *networked individualism*, this article moves away from centering "community" to explore the intensities, temporalities, (dis)connections, and (dis)comforts of Tumblr use. This insight extends our understanding of contemporary queer digital cultures that should be accommodated and recognized within public health and education resources.

This article is written at a time when conservative Australian media and politicians persistently question and challenge LGBTIQ+ rights—particularly the rights of trans youth—resulting in the cessation of federal government funding for the Safe Schools program that offered support to gender-diverse students (Law, 2017). Although we focus on LGBTIQ+ young people ages 16–35 years, we recognize that the current political landscape affects the comfort and well-being of a wider LGBTIQ+ population, as did the Australian "marriage debate" of 2017 (Copland, 2018). Alongside these public discussions of rights and equality, we recognize that LGBTIQ+ young people continue to find and make spaces to connect with supportive peers (Hanckel, Robards, Vivienne, Byron, & Churchill, forthcoming). This article reports on Tumblr as being a key site of connection to "what we might call a queer life" (Ahmed, 2004, p. 151). Although our focus is on Australia, this conservative political climate, and the digital counterpublics we discuss, are not unique to Australian LGBTIQ+ young people.

This article captures data collected in 2016—a time preceding the Australian vote for marriage equality, as well as attacks on the Safe Schools program, yet both matters were in public discussion at this time. These data also precede Tumblr's prohibition of "adult content" that was introduced in December 2018 (Duguay, 2018), and as such, the impact of those changes are not explored here.

Scrolling Beyond Binaries

The Scrolling Beyond Binaries project is an Australian study examining LGBTIQ+ young people's social media practices. In 2016, we surveyed LGBTIQ+ young people in Australia (*N* = 1,304), ages 16–

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[1] We use LGBTIQ+ as a recognizable acronym to refer to diverse groups and identities including trans, nonbinary, intersex, queer, gay, lesbian, bisexual, asexual, and other sexuality and gender diverse people. We acknowledge that this acronym has limitations, but use it here and in the recruitment of participants because of its recognizability.

35 years. Participants were recruited through paid social media advertising (Facebook and Instagram), organic social media sharing (Facebook and Twitter), and recruitment material sent through LGBTIQ+ health and education service networks. Following this, we interviewed a small and purposive sample (*N* = 23) of survey participants to extend key findings through in-depth qualitative inquiry.

Survey

The mean age of our survey sample was 21.9 years. Only 2.9% of respondents indicated being Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. Unfortunately, our data on race/ethnicities is not comprehensive enough to analyze in relation to social media participation. Most participants were from urban locations (71.3%), followed by regional (20.1%) and rural (8.4%) locations.

The gender and sexual diversity of our sample is notable. Although 45.6% of survey respondents identified as female and 26.5% as male, 19.4% identified as nonbinary, with a further 8.6% choosing to describe their own gender identity, including identifiers such as trans, agender, genderfluid, genderqueer, and combined labels (e.g. "trans masculine gender nonconforming femme") or temporal nuances (e.g. "some days I am a girl other days I have no gender"). When it came to sexuality, 33.9% identified as lesbian, gay, or homosexual; 24.7% as bisexual; 18% as queer; and 19.8% chose to describe their own sexuality, which included pansexual, asexual, panromantic, and demisexual.

The survey asked about the social media platforms participants used, how they were used, and how their social media practices have changed over time. Six platforms stood out as most commonly used: Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Snapchat, Tumblr, and Twitter, with significant overlap through concurrent polymedia use (Madianou & Miller, 2012). Of these, Tumblr placed fifth in level of use, yet it placed higher in the time users spent there. Almost half (45.5%) of our respondents who used Tumblr used it for at least one hour per day, with some (13.4%) using it for more than four hours per day. Only Facebook and YouTube use was greater, and of YouTube users, most (74.8%) were not sharing content or interacting with others. Compared with general population surveys of young people's use of social media, our respondents were five times more likely to report using Tumblr (Robards, Byron, Churchill, Hanckel, & Vivienne, forthcoming). Tumblr use was particularly high for trans and nonbinary participants, and while we engaged with users up to 35 years, most participants who discussed their use of Tumblr were in their late teens or early 20s.

Interviews

Following initial analysis of the survey data, we recruited a small purposive sample of survey participants (*N* = 23) by contacting those who self-elected for interview participation. From this group, interviewees were chosen to ensure diversity in relation to age, gender and sexual identities, and locations (i.e., the details made available to us through expressions of interest). Interview participants were ages 16–34 years, with a mean age of 24.6 years. Of the 23 interviewees, nine were female, eight male, and six nonbinary (including genderfluid and agender). Almost half (11) were trans and/or nonbinary. Sexual identities of interview participants include queer (six), bisexual (five), gay (five), lesbian (three), asexual

(three), and pansexual (three).[2] Sixteen participants lived in urban centers, with four in regional centers and three in rural locations. Regrettably, we did not collect systematic details about ethnicity, race, and cultural background, but at least three participants are people of color.[3] These participants did not discuss race/ethnicity in relation to their Tumblr use.

Most (*n* = 19) interviewees discussed their use of Tumblr. Interviews were semistructured, conducted through online video chat, and ran for approximately one hour. Interviews covered four broad themes regarding social media: platforms used and how; perceptions of community and belonging; health and well-being; and social media futures.

Throughout this article, we draw on both survey and interview data to explore LGBTIQ+ young people's experiences of Tumblr, and given the qualitative depth of interview data, this is more dominant throughout. In what follows, we foreground statements from research participants, and (as much as possible) adopt the language, terms, and sentiments given when accounting for their Tumblr practices. We recognize the expertise embedded in young people's accounts of their digital media practices (Byron, 2015), and we understand that researchers, educators, and health professionals can learn much from this.

Queer Tumblr

Research over the past two decades has shown how LGBTIQ+ young people use digital spaces to explore identity, obtain peer support, and access (sub)cultural information (Hanckel & Morris, 2014; Hillier, Mitchell, & Ybarra, 2012; Rak, 2005). Although Tumblr has been active since 2007, only recently have these research discussions focused on this platform (e.g., see Cho, 2015; Dame, 2016; Renninger, 2015; Wargo, 2017). Earlier research indicates how online anonymity is useful to young people exploring noncisgender and nonheterosexual identities through connecting with peers. A predominant focus has been on how young people connect to LGBTIQ+ communities online, and how this supports identity formation and "coming out" (Hillier & Harrison, 2007; Pullen & Cooper, 2010). However, this article questions the value of community frameworks for understanding LGBTIQ+ young people's use of Tumblr, particularly as these are often experienced as diffracted networks of anonymous and pseudonymous peers, in temporally and spatially bound ways.

Although this article offers a platform-specific account of queer and gender-diverse identity practices and networks, we acknowledge the risk in overlooking broader digital media ecologies, including the use of multiple sites, platforms, and networks that inform "queer life." Like José van Dijck (2013), we recognize an "ecosystem of connective media" that she describes as "a system that nourishes and, in turn, is nourished by social and cultural norms that simultaneously evolve in our everyday world" (p. 21). We focus on Tumblr, but our data indicate that Tumblr is not the only media young people use to develop and foster queer networks, connections, and intimacies. However, it offers a significant network that many participants discussed at length, describing it as pivotal to their understandings of diverse genders and sexualities.

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[2] Several participants used multiple identity terms.
[3] For further details of interview participant demographics, see Hanckel et al. (forthcoming).

Within this polymedia landscape, Tumblr offers a particularly safe space for trans and gender-diverse self-representations compared with dominant platforms like Facebook and Instagram (Vivienne, 2017). For example, although Facebook is a site of support for many trans people, its design supports a more static, singular user identity that can be uncomfortable for many trans or gender nonconforming users (Haimson, Brubaker, Dombrowski, & Hayes, 2015). Facebook's "default publicness" has also been described as dangerous for many queer youth of color (Cho, 2018). Much literature on trans young people's use of digital media has focused on YouTube vlogging (Horak, 2014; Raun, 2015), also noting that this platform privileges Whiteness (Raun, 2012) and normative accounts of transitioning (Horak, 2014), as has been noted with coming-out videos on YouTube (Lovelock, 2019). Tumblr has been discussed as affording greater privacy and diversity (Cho, 2015), and our participants' accounts of the "messiness" of Tumblr evidence the platform's appeal to queer and gender-diverse young people who do not conform to mainstream and popularized narratives of coming out and transitioning. As Vivienne (2017) has argued,

> the visual design and architecture of Tumblr has a kind of stream of consciousness that affirms processes of "always becoming." Tumblr's iterative structure, in which meaning is determined through collaboration, parallels the way gender, in and of itself, is constructed in negotiation between people. (p. 135)

It is difficult to make general claims about who uses Tumblr and why, yet it has been established that Tumblr's user base is predominantly young (Dame, 2016; McCracken, 2017). As Tumblr blogs are typically anonymous or pseudonymous, this platform affords a greater sense of privacy, and Tumblr is less likely than other popular social media platforms to bring one's existing friendships and communities into a shared space, though some Tumblr users will display their "real names" and connect with existing friends and social networks. Tumblr also affords the possibility of finding and connecting to fan/topic-based communities and individuals with shared interests, particularly through "tagging" posts (Dame, 2016). Offering access to a range of networked counterpublics (Renninger, 2015), Tumblr affords easy access to ideas and communities beyond one's visible and existing networks. Our participants noted the diverse content available to them on Tumblr:

> **Baylee:** (17, female, bisexual, urban) Tumblr is like my heaven and my home for my self-interests and stuff. There's such a wide variety of stuff on Tumblr, though, that you can kind of go there for anything and everything.

Tumblr use is often described as curatorial, where users can post original content alongside reblogging images, text, and video from others, into a stream of content that makes up their own blog (Cho, 2015; McCracken, 2017). The Tumblr blog has been described as a "virtual bedroom space" (McCracken, 2017, p. 154). The profile-as-bedroom metaphor has been deployed and challenged since early social media research on platforms such as LiveJournal and Myspace (Hodkinson & Lincoln, 2008; Robards, 2010). Arguably, Tumblr offers access to more vast and fragmented communities than those earlier sites, and unlike Myspace, the platform and its use does not center on existing friendships. There is some similarity, however, in that users have more creative control over the design and content of

Tumblr, as they did with LiveJournal and Myspace (McCracken, 2017, p. 155). This distinguishes Tumblr from other contemporary, dominant platforms (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram) that follow a more uniform design aesthetic with little chance for individual variation.

Although the origins of Tumblr can be traced to the weblog, the diary, or both, this is not helpful for considering the current practices and experiences of Tumblr, particularly among users who may never have accessed or considered these antecedents. In discussing queer weblogs of more than a decade ago, Julie Rak (2005) highlights the problems in constructing a logical history of self-writing in which the Internet becomes a new space for an old practice (i.e., diary writing). Following Dijck's (2013) platformed sociality approach, which incorporates the cultural, technological, and economic aspects of platformed social media, we argue that Tumblr is not neutral to the communicative practices that take place there. Arguably, a queer infrastructure is built where the affordances of this platform (as discussed below) meet with the practices of queer use(r)s. Tumblr should not be understood as neutral, as no platform is ever neutral (Dijck, 2013).

On Tumblr, reblogging (the reposting of content from other blogs) is the most common practice (Kanai, 2015), and affective connection is a key aspect of content circulation (Cho, 2015; Kanai, 2015). Cho (2015) describes Tumblr as

> a huge queer ecosystem . . . [in which] Tumblr users favored communication through image, mostly without attribution or caption; they relied less on text and more on the felt register of suggestive imagery, one of intimation, assemblage, intensity, and aesthetic. (p. 43)

Like us, Cho (2015) considers the queer uses of Tumblr, yet he predominantly focuses on content—the circulation of posts and the way materials travel, spread, and diminish through queer networks of affect. His work offers an important discussion about the affordances of this platform and its uptake by queer young people. Our discussion is informed by this, but foregrounds queer young people's accounts of their engagements with Tumblr.

Pairing boyd's (2011) concept of networked publics with Warner's (2002) discussion of counterpublics, Renninger (2015) describes Tumblr as a networked counterpublic. Because "counterpublic communication online is often tenuous, at risk of being disrupted, ridiculed, dismissed, or ignored" (p. 1514), the platforms that house queer counterpublics are of significance. As Renninger and others suggest, Tumblr offers a safer environment to engage with counterpublic or subcultural discussion that would likely be disrupted elsewhere. When describing a public, Warner (2002) states, "It is self-creating and self-organized, and herein lies its power as well as its elusive strangeness" (p. 52). This resonates with our understandings of Tumblr, as informed by the young people we engage with herein.

Lessons on Gender and Sexuality

Tumblr plays an important role in identity work related to gender and sexuality. Our interviewees noted that Tumblr granted them access to other people whose shared experiences they could learn from

and be affirmed by. These shared experiences were often absent in our participants' social and friendship groups outside Tumblr, and served as a crucial resource for connecting to and learning from queer and gender-diverse peers.

Many participants refer to their early engagements with Tumblr as connection to fan-based communities or discussion, or a place they arrived at through friend recommendations. Despite common associations of Tumblr with gender and sexuality-related content (Cho, 2015; Vivienne, 2017), no participants indicated that this was their initial reason for using Tumblr; however, this content would become a significant aspect of their use.

> **Charlie:** (19, trans male, queer, urban) I ended up on Tumblr just as a coincidence because my friends were on it; they said, "Hey try this, you're into this show and this show and this show, there's a lot of content on there that you might like." So I got onto it and then I realized that not only was there content that I liked but there was also a lot of stuff about sexuality and gender and social issues.

Finding queer and gender-diverse content and connections without seeking them was a common experience, also mentioned by Drew (21, genderfluid, pansexual, urban), who stated: "I think just out of coincidence (on Tumblr) I have ended up interacting with people who are LGBT." Charlie also reflects on the impact of gaining access to other queer people through Tumblr:

> **Charlie:** (19, trans male, queer, urban) Knowing there were other people who were this sexuality or they were also transgender, that was a really big thing for me to be able to see—that there were other people that were also figuring themselves out sexuality wise. That was a nice thing for 15-year-old me to find out about.

Many participants associated Tumblr with gaining clarity about their own identities, although this education is not limited to their own gender and sexual identities, but extends to a broader knowledge of gender and sexuality.

> **Casey:** (20, agender, bisexual, rural) I actually learned about agender and all the other genders from Tumblr. Before that, all I really knew was there are men and there are women, and that's it. So I engage with the community on Tumblr with nonbinary people and trans people quite a bit.

Tumblr offers access to knowledge and information about gender and sexual identities that are not easily found on most other social media platforms. Participants described learning about gender fluidity, nonbinary genders, experiences of asexuality, and distinctions between bisexuality and pansexuality through Tumblr. As Casey indicates, this knowledge comes from "the community on Tumblr." a concept to which we now turn.

Communities, Followers, and "People Like Me"

In our survey findings, a key difference between the use of Tumblr and other common platforms was the people with whom respondents were connecting. Where other platforms were used to connect with friends (83% among Facebook users; 87% among Snapchat users), this was only the case for 3% of Tumblr users. Of all Tumblr users surveyed, 65% indicated that they primarily used the platform to communicate with "people like me" (Robards et al., forthcoming). These figures highlight that, unlike Facebook, Tumblr is not primarily used for communicating with friends and existing contacts but is more often used to connect with (often anonymous) peers. Our interview data elaborate on these connections, with many participants referring to a "Tumblr community" in relation to networks they were part of and/or felt distant from. This section explores these discussions and problematizations of a "Tumblr community."

Building on Simmel's theory of social circles, Rainie and Wellman (2012) argue that networked individualism is characterized by "a tangle of networked individuals who operate in specialized, fragmented, sparsely interconnected, and permeable networks" (p. 21). These networks, they argue, meet our social, economic, and emotional needs, which "are more abundant and more easily nourished by contact through new technologies" (p. 9), and networked individualism does not constitute a community. Rather, the shared space within networks provides interconnections that are necessary for communities to develop. This can be seen through connections made around common topics and identities, as per platform-specific themes and discursive norms of Tumblr where shared contexts create opportunities for people to be interpersonally tied together. This resonates with how our participants discuss their use of Tumblr and is therefore useful for conceptualizing Tumblr connections. While Rainie and Wellman argue that networked individualism offers support and connection, they also argue that participation in any network is often time bound and in response to one's needs at particular times:

> *Networked individuals have partial membership in multiple networks and rely less on permanent memberships in settled groups.* They must calculate where they can turn for different kinds of help—and what kind of help to offer others as they occupy nodes in others' extended networks. (Rainie & Wellman, 2012, p. 12, emphasis in original)

This time-bound connection will be further explored later in this article, when we discuss participant accounts of leaving Tumblr. For now, we focus on LGBTIQ+ young people's self-reported sense of community across Tumblr networks, how they feel interpersonally tied together or not, and the temporal and spatial dimensions of their "community participation." Many participants acknowledged that the term "community" was difficult to apply to Tumblr.

> **Carter:** (26, trans male, queer/asexual, rural) It's all a bit messy, but there are, like, discrete kinds of communities, so there's like a whole bunch of asexual people who all follow each other, and there's a whole bunch of people with chronic illnesses who all follow each other, and so on and so forth. There's too many trans people to have a trans community.

Carter draws on the concept of community to indicate spaces and connections of shared interest, where interconnections are forged through mutual following. They acknowledge how Tumblr brings together people with shared interests from unconventional "subcultures," a point Fischer (1995) argued was made more possible with modern technologies. Carter's statement shows how the perceived size of a network of people with shared interests can affect a user's perception of community. The large number of trans people using Tumblr, according to Carter, means there is no trans community on Tumblr. As noted earlier, some participants felt that their Tumblr networks were coincidently queer and gender diverse, further suggesting that trans identity positions are perceived as common to this platform. Carter's observation that "it's all a bit messy" may suggest something about Tumblr's appeal to queer and gender-diverse users, and its accommodation of a range of creative and non/antinormative practices and identities.

Reflecting Rainie and Wellman's (2012) argument, some participants described Tumblr as a social network rather than a community. One survey participant stated, "I stopped [using Tumblr] because I didn't have time, but liked it because it was a real social network where I could feel comfortable and meet like-minded people" (20, nonbinary, bisexual). Another described Tumblr as connecting them to "a community of LGBT+ people" (19, nonbinary, bisexual). In an interview, Jacob (16, male, gay/asexual, regional) refers to Tumblr connections as kinship, saying that Tumblr is "just like just your normal 'everyone's family' thing, [where] there's a few bad people but you just ignore them."

The following discussion with Drew (21, genderfluid, pansexual, urban) suggests that a sense of community might be more apparent in one's earlier engagements with Tumblr, upon discovering "like-minded" peers:

> **Drew:** So I think that without social media, without interacting with other people who were like-minded, I wouldn't sort of see myself as I see myself now.
> **Interviewer:** [Through] which social media did you learn all of this?
> **Drew:** Mostly just through Tumblr. I was 15, 16. I said now there's not really a strong LGBT community that I can see, but I think back then there was a lot of people trying to relate to each other, just like, "Hey, I'm having these experiences, and I'm having these experiences." That was sort of how I learned about it as well.
> **Interviewer:** So on Tumblr there was a stronger LGBT community back then than there is now? Is that what you're suggesting?
> **Drew:** From my point of view, yes. Yes, [but] it could be just as strong now and maybe I'm just not exposed to it.

This account of Tumblr, as a social space for users to "relate to each other" through saying "Hey, I'm having these experiences" highlights Tumblr's common use for indirect yet personal interactions (Robards et al., forthcoming). Sharing accounts of one's experiences of mental health, physical health, gender and sexualities on Tumblr is generally not about soliciting advice or health information (as is typically found in online forums), but centers more on sharing within a culture of disclosure, anonymous support, and bearing witness (Byron & Hunt, 2017). To say "Hey, I'm having these experiences" does not indicate a need for an active response, but is more about saying "I need to share this and be heard."

In Pullen's (2014) discussion of the *It Gets Better* videos, he critiques the assumption that young people are seeking "it gets better" narratives from adults. He argues that an emphasis on adult narratives may unintentionally deny the present pain of young people and therefore argues for a need to focus more on peer narratives that are used to connect LGBT young people "looking for communion and co-presence" (2014, p. 80). This is common to Tumblr narratives among queer and gender-diverse young people, though these peer practices are not limited to Tumblr (Byron & Hunt, 2017).

At another point in their interview, Drew questions the community aspect of Tumblr on the basis of its own lack of connection to other users.

> **Drew:** I know there are a lot of people that see [Tumblr] as a community, but I guess because I don't interact with the community I don't really see it that way for myself. I see it as somewhere I can put things I like.

This speaks to a different use of Tumblr that entails connection (to certain themes, topics, or people) that is less direct and more centered on content curation. This can be likened to the bedroom metaphor mentioned earlier. Another participant, Jacob, likened using Tumblr to being at a party, where you're part of something, but also not:

> **Jacob:** (16, male, gay/asexual, regional) You're in it, but you're not in it—I don't know how to explain it. It's like you're at a party, but you're kind of just sitting in the corner; that would be my level of involvement in the Tumblr community.

This description evokes something broader about queer spaces (such as night clubs and pride parades) and the difficulties many face in belonging to these. The state of having a queer life, yet also feeling outside of queer life, is discussed by Ahmed (2004), who notes that once we start discussing "a queer life" we start idealizing what this looks like. We might feel that "to be legitimately queer, people must act in some ways and not others" (p. 151). Ahmed highlights how queer people do not always find comfort in queer spaces because "queer bodies have different access to public forms of culture, which affect how they can inhabit those publics . . . [and] queer spaces may extend some bodies more than others" (p. 151). This notion of belonging to, yet also experiencing discomfort in, queer spaces resonates with many of our participants' accounts of how they position themselves in Tumblr as well as in queer life more generally. This tension and discomfort causes us to question the framework and language of community that is sometimes applied to Tumblr. Across all participant accounts of social media use, comfort and discomfort are common themes, and many participants shared experiences of not feeling queer enough.

Echoing the hesitation of others to describe Tumblr as community, and Jacob's sense that "you're in it, but you're not," Colin (27, male, gay, urban) states, "I do see the community thing on Tumblr, but I just don't really participate in it." He was reluctant to include Tumblr in a list of social media platforms he uses, saying that Tumblr is "less social media and more something else." When asked why, he states, "I feel like I don't really engage with anyone on Tumblr. Like, I have people who follow me, and I follow people, but I never really broach a connection with anyone." Colin's description points to the varied ways

in which our participants experienced connection and disconnection on Tumblr, from heavily embedded usage to more peripheral engagements. His feeling that he "doesn't really engage with anyone" is at odds with his description of following, being followed, posting, and reblogging, which arguably are engagements, but differ from having or building close connections with other users. Instead, his engagement is more oriented toward processes of documenting, curating, and making queer life visible.

"Somewhere to Put Things": Recording, Documenting, and Processing Queer Lives

Moving away from the collective experience of Tumblr toward a more personal form of media work, Colin describes Tumblr as "like a personal diary or some kind of scrapbook," and "like my own little book of stuff that I can look through if I want." He notes his ability to use Tumblr to "sort of track my year and what happened through the kind of shit that I would be reblogging." In this example, Tumblr serves as a record, or what he describes as "like this online diary [where] it's not me saying today I did this, and then I did this and I felt really bad, or I felt good, or whatever. It's just me reblogging things that had resonance to me. And maybe for no one else they mean anything, and that's fine; it's not really for anyone else." In a similar vein, Jasmine also likens her early Tumblr practices to diary writing:

> **Jasmine:** (29, trans female, lesbian, urban): Tumblr was originally my diary when I was trying to figure out what my gender was, and it was through Tumblr that I figured out what I was, or at least what I wasn't.

These accounts discuss Tumblr as a place to put things—a curatorial environment (McCracken, 2017) for recording, narrating, and processing life experiences. Alex also likens Tumblr to a diary, particularly focused on her gender transitioning:

> **Alex:** (32, trans female, open, urban) In the beginning of my transition, I was trying to post regularly. It was almost like a bit of a dear diary kind of thing. And so that was my personal output under the pretense that I might be helping others, when really it was probably just to help me. And then when I got more comfortable in myself and busier in my life, that kind of tailed off, and I didn't really make any more posts after about a year.

Participants noted Tumblr's value as a personal archive, through which users can look back on past interactions and selves, finding evidence of how they have changed over time.

> **Charlie:** (19, trans male, queer, urban) I once went back to the first thing I ever posted on Tumblr and that was embarrassing. . . . I mean, I was young, it was, like, three years ago, whatever. But I was, like, 15/16 and kind of working things out, so I'm not really embarrassed by it. It's interesting to go back and to see how much I've changed.

Using Tumblr "like a diary of sorts" reminds us again of LiveJournal and other blogging practices that preceded the advent of Tumblr, where, although shared publicly (or within a counterpublic), the primary motivation of self-expression was more oriented toward self-reflection for purposes of self-realization rather than community building.

The negotiations of who is "a part of" or "apart from" a particular community (Vivienne, 2017) has been a fraught topic throughout queer history (Gamson, 1995), and queer theory draws attention to the intersections between groups and individuals who experience more than one form of social stigmatization (e.g., trans people of color). Some of our survey participants made reference to collective identity conflicts as "the oppression Olympics" and described Tumblr as a place where "social justice warriors" (SJWs) might feel comfortable (Robards et al., forthcoming).[4] Conflict on Tumblr is often referenced with humor or self-reflexive derision, indicating that, while respondents might contribute to a heated debate on a particular topic of gender or sexuality on Tumblr, they may also not take it very seriously. As Jacob stated about Tumblr, "there's a few bad people, but you just ignore them." Participants used a range of strategies for negotiating conflict online that might reflect strategies for a broader range of queer interactions and discomforts beyond social media.

Building on the previous section and the inadequacy of "community" frameworks, these data further suggest that connections made on Tumblr are more complicated than "community participation," as per the frequent emphasis on finding similar people while maintaining a certain distance and/or a sense of privacy through anonymity. For many LGBTIQ+ young people, Tumblr can be a space of feeling, sharing, and learning without explicitly or directly communicating with others.

"Everything Was Problematic": Tumblr Intensities

Tumblr use was described by participants as intense, time-consuming, and in some cases, all-consuming. Many described their early use of Tumblr as a period of intense learning about gender and sexuality, as detailed above. This intensity often moved from one's pleasures of learning, realizing, and discovering (i.e., an "identity work" phase) to experiencing more negative or toxic aspects of this intensity. The intensities of Tumblr practice—using a platform that hosts multiple events of learning, discovery, and finding self and community, while also struggling to properly belong to a community or identity whose contours are always up for debate (Ahmed, 2004)—made it necessary for many participants to leave Tumblr, modify their use, or come to accept that Tumblr is an uncomfortable space.

> **Casey:** (20, agender, bisexual, rural) I've learned a lot from Tumblr about sexualities. There's tons of argument—or used to be—between bisexuality and pansexuality. Some people are like, "They're the same." Some people thought that bisexuality was inherently transphobic because it's two genders. . . . But after Tumblr, I'm like, "words don't mean a thing."

For Casey, Tumblr use entails following and learning across shared space. Often, this space can feel intense because of the debates and arguments that become tiresome for some users, particularly those seeking clear definitions around sexual identities. A short-lived and intense engagement with Tumblr was common among participants, and this distinguishes it from other popular social media platforms. This is often explained through references to Tumblr's intensity.

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[4] See Wargo (2017) for more discussion of "social justice warriors" and Tumblr.

Charlie: (19, trans male, queer, urban) I think everyone on Tumblr went through that phase, where everything was just so intense socially and everything was a problem and nothing was like . . . everything was problematic, and that's such like a bad mindset to have. But I think it's good that I went through that phase because I can [now] chill out and not be so "on" all the time.

The term "problematic" is common to the point of cliché in the Tumblr vernacular, and is particularly often found in self-referential humor among Tumblr users, further highlighting the playful use and engagement of the SJW stereotype.[5]

While anonymity affords greater opportunities for direct and honest communication, and can provide a sense of safety for LGBTIQ+ young people developing a sense of their identities, honest and direct expression can also feel uncomfortable.

Isabel: (23, female, lesbian, urban) I think people are very vocal because it's anonymous, well it can be anonymous. But I think people feel free to post quite directly what they think about things, what they *feel* about things.

This statement highlights the affective dimensions of Tumblr and the expression of feeling that can be experienced as both liberating and exhausting. However, participants' descriptions of learning and changing through their use of Tumblr, particularly upon earlier engagements with the platform, suggests that Tumblr's value is greater at particular times, and that its users may not stay connected for long, contrasting with platforms like Instagram and Facebook. Stories of leaving Tumblr were common, often because participants felt that it was no longer healthy for them.

Leaving Tumblr

To identify social media that had been significant to LGBTIQ+ young people, particularly platforms no longer used, our survey asked "Are there any social media you have used in the past that were significant for you? How so, and why did you stop?" Of all responses to this question (*n* = 472), Tumblr rated highest (11.7%) among the six common platforms used, followed by Twitter and Facebook (see Table 1). Aside from abandoned platforms (e.g., Myspace, LiveJournal) and dating/hook-up sites (e.g., Tinder, Grindr), Tumblr is the platform most commonly abandoned. We can discount dating/hook-up apps on the basis that these were not everyday platforms for many young people, but have their own temporality.[6] Many participants nominated more than one platform in their response to this question.

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[5] This is perhaps exemplified by the phrase "your fave is problematic" and the associated Tumblr blog (http://yourfaveisproblematic.tumblr.com).

[6] A common reason given for leaving dating/hook-up apps was finding a partner, and therefore many participants described their use as temporary.

Table 1. Significant Social Media Platforms No Longer Used.[7]

Social media platforms	#	%
Myspace	73	15.5
Tinder	62	13.1
Tumblr	55	11.7
Grindr	46	9.7
Twitter	39	8.3
LiveJournal	35	7.4
OKCupid	26	5.5
MSN Messenger	23	4.9
Facebook	21	4.4

The second part of this question asked why participants had left those platforms, and all responses that mentioned Tumblr (n = 55) were coded into common themes (see Table 2). Many respondents gave multiple reasons for leaving Tumblr, including that it was too time-consuming (34%), it became a negative environment (30.2%), and it had negative health impacts (15.1%).

Table 2. Reasons for Leaving Tumblr.

	#	%
Too time-consuming	18	34.0
Became a negative/toxic environment	16	30.2
Negative health impacts	8	15.1
Boredom	7	13.2
Outgrowing the platform	6	11.3
Movement away from fan communities	4	7.5

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[7] Taken from 472 responses to this question.

In these open-ended responses, almost one-third of respondents mentioned Tumblr as negative or toxic, relating to our previous discussion of Tumblr intensities. Examples of this include the following:

I deleted my account due to an atmosphere of negativity and call-out culture I found unavoidable. I do still check individual trans support blogs occasionally. (19, nonbinary, asexual)

Because I found it boring & the community was toxic. (18, nonbinary, bisexual)

Statements about Tumblr's "atmosphere of negativity," its "toxicity," and "call-out culture" highlight the intense affective experiences of Tumblr for many LBGTIQ+ users, and how such experiences can turn them away from (or toward) a sense of community or collective belonging. For many, disengaging from Tumblr was about self-care:

I stopped because the mentality surrounding mental health was becoming detrimental to me recovering from anxiety. (16, female, bisexual)

Others dismissed Tumblr as no longer needed:

I used to use Tumblr for blogging about personal stuff. I stopped using it because I no longer needed that outlet. (23, nonbinary, queer)

For these respondents, Tumblr was useful as long as it contributed to their well-being and offered pleasurable connections—to other people, new knowledge, useful information, entertainment, and more. Participants turned away from Tumblr when it no longer offered the support, information, and connection that had been embraced, or when it was found to negatively affect their mental health and well-being. This reflects a networked individualism (Rainie & Wellman, 2012) where feeling connected to a community is less secure, more temporal, and perhaps unnecessary.

Despite the negative aspects and effects of Tumblr, 30% of survey respondents who discussed leaving the platform also pointed out how valuable it had been:

I stopped because I spent too much time on there. It was a significant place of learning and discovery for me, though. (21, nonbinary, queer)

Tumblr was a great outlet for connecting with other queer individuals; however, I discontinued use to focus on studies so I didn't have too many platforms as a distraction. (17, female, bisexual)

[Tumblr was] significant because it was how I found the article that introduced me to the concept of asexuality. Stopped [using] because Tumblr is 90% toxic cesspool now, sadly. (27, female, asexual/aromantic)

These reflections complicate a discourse of "Tumblr toxicity." These shared narratives of "great then bad" or "useful then not" highlight a common experience of Tumblr temporalities among LGBTIQ+ young people we interviewed. Responses to the above question (n = 14) also noted a movement to Tumblr after leaving other platforms, particularly LiveJournal (n = 10), further situating Tumblr as a transitory space. One survey participant noted her movement from Reddit to Tumblr, aligning this to her feminist politics:

> Before I moved on to Tumblr, I used to frequent Reddit. It was significant in the way it introduced me to a social media platform of pure discussion and expression of other people's opinions. Subreddits specifically for lesbians/bisexuals were very helpful in making me more aware of my sexuality, I guess. I stopped once I joined Tumblr and once my feminism really began shaping up my life and making me aware of the predominate male voice on Reddit, which a lot of the time expressed sexist, misogynistic opinions. Tumblr for me was just more beneficial, more inclusive. (19, female, queer)

This statement highlights the intersections among sexual, gender, and political identities; how these converge and overlap in platforms like Tumblr and Reddit; and the ways users might feel at home in (or disconnected from) certain platforms and their perceived communities. This also highlights ongoing movement between and beyond certain platforms for health and/or political reasons, and the entanglement of these. In such accounts, a discourse of departure often aligns with a discourse of selfhood, greater self-comfort, and less need for gender and sexuality learning and affirmation.

Concluding Discussion

The value of Tumblr as a peer-based, inclusive digital network speaks to the sophisticated coping and support practices among LGBTIQ+ young people (Hanckel et al., forthcoming). Although used within a broader media ecology—in conjunction with other platforms such as Facebook, Snapchat, YouTube, Instagram, and Twitter—Tumblr sits apart from these as a space for engaging with people outside of one's existing friendship networks, and as a significant site of learning and self-discovery.

Participants highlighted the significant value of Tumblr for LGBTIQ+ users while also describing it as overwhelming or toxic. Key to Tumblr's success is its trade in affective exchanges and experiential knowledge, and in offering more "subcultural" content than other popular platforms. Navigating Tumblr successfully requires a specific kind of subcultural capital (Thornton, 1996). It is difficult to understand the memes and vernacular of queer Tumblr, for instance, without being well-versed in adjacent cultural texts such as *RuPaul's Drag Race* or *Mean Girls*. Spaces in which young people autonomously discuss and organize their gender and sexual identities and share common experiences through reaction GIFs (Kanai, 2019) and memes that reference popular culture (Milner, 2017) are important, yet it is also important for researchers and adults who work with young people to acknowledge these spaces without seeking to infiltrate or intervene.

We do not want our findings to encourage unwanted interventions into spaces that LGBTIQ+ young people build and inhabit for peer support. Rather, we seek to further document some of the complexities of

Tumblr practices and how these overlap with and inform queer and gender-diverse identities. We also hope that this article is valuable to educators and health professionals through the way we have articulated some of the knowledge that young people may bring to other spaces. Educators and health professionals should not diminish or ignore such knowledge, but rather accommodate these experiences of "queer life," including the affective and networked practices of knowledge sharing, peer support, and presentations of self that are practiced through Tumblr and other queer spaces.

Our findings suggest that connections made on Tumblr are more complicated than traditional understandings of an "LGBTIQ+ community," as per the emphasis on Tumblr use to find "people like me" while also maintaining a sense of privacy through anonymity, and connecting to others without a need for direct communication. The aspect of diary writing, or using Tumblr as "somewhere to put things," troubles conceptualizations of Tumblr as a neat community. For some young people, Tumblr offers community, but for others it offers a chance to disconnect, or engage in personal self-reflection when needed. For most participants cited here, Tumblr offered an affective space of sharing and learning, and the opportunity to share one's experiences beyond existing personal networks, in a setting that feels safer and more anonymous. These affective networks can be traced in the sharing of memes, GIFs, and other images and statements that link to common experiences of grappling with issues that may include gender and sexuality, but also mental health, body image, racism, politics, feminism, and more. The themes mentioned above, along with the Tumblr blogging interface through which different strands of content interweave and brush against each other, can make Tumblr feel more intersectional and accommodating of diversity compared with other social media platforms.

For many of our participants, a departure from Tumblr correlates a certain self-realization with a need to step away from problematic aspects of this platform. This is not simply about finding oneself, or reaching a level of self-acceptance, but also realizing a need for self-care that requires a movement away from Tumblr's intensities. Several participants noted that heated debates and intense emotional investments among Tumblr users can only be sustained for so long. However, when Tumblr had offered participants a meaningful collective space of queer becomings, their Tumblr histories permeated a current sense of self.

Arguably, negotiating comfort in queer spaces like Tumblr—finding comfort and also learning to cope with ongoing discomforts—is a key aspect of having a "queer life" (Ahmed, 2004). Our participants' accounts of Tumblr suggest that there is no simple transition into queer comfortability, and sometimes these tensions and failures feel difficult or toxic. These experiences speak of (and to) queer life and its ongoing negotiations for many of us. The affective dimensions of Tumblr connect to queer life more broadly, and to LGBTIQ+ young people's ongoing negotiations of identity, privacy, and safety. Although Tumblr itself is not queer—evidenced by its recent prohibition of "adult content" (Duguay, 2018)—its infrastructure has lent itself to queer practices, and its communicative possibilities can reflect queer life (in its broader sense, including nonnormative and nonbinary gender identities/practice). Tumblr has offered much to queer life, particularly a sense of queer networks, sensibilities, and connections exemplified through shared experiences and vernacular. It also offers a shared space in which to consider, promote, and actualize our desired queer futures.

As characterized by Warner (2002), a counterpublic always has an audience, develops its own language, and offers a circulating discourse that is oriented to a future. This can be seen in our participants' engagement with Tumblr for gender and sexuality related discussions. Part of existing in a counterpublic is one's ongoing creation of that space, and as Warner (2002) argues, "Writing to a public helps to make a world, insofar as the object of address is brought into being partly by postulating and characterizing it" (p. 64). Expanding the notion of writing to include (re)blogging, queer and gender-diverse young people are using Tumblr, in part, to write their own existence. In sharing content, a user's existence finds an audience, imagined or otherwise, and this might be perceived as a network, a community, or a bunch of random strangers. Regardless, there is an available audience if and when required, and within this, other queer and gender-diverse people exist to bear witness and affirm feelings and experiences.

These practices, and the histories of queer counterpublics that they reference and build, remind us that Tumblr users will continue to write themselves into being, and that Tumblr, for as long as its affordances remain, will continue to offer valuable aspects to queer users, even amid more conservative platform policy decisions—whether that is a sense of belonging, an education, a space to put things, intense arguments, or all of the above. Each of these themes underscore the enduring significance of queer (dis)connection.

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