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Youth Intimacy on Tumblr: A Pilot Study

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Abstract

I examine young people's intimate relationships formed on Tumblr. Research has extensively documented how and why adults utilize online dating services to articulate relationships online; however, scholars of this phenomenon have largely overlooked the lived experiences of young people. This article presents the initial findings of a qualitative pilot study in which 10 young male and female Tumblr users participated in hour-long, in-depth, semi-structured, synchronous online interviews via Skype. The initial findings generated by the pilot study suggest that young people are engaging online technologies to practice intimacy and sociality in diverse ways. Responses suggest that young people conceptualize Tumblr as being distinct from existing social network sites (SNS) as a result of its perceived affordances. I con clude that the ways in which young people engage and date and socialize on Tumblr suggest a rethinking of established contemporary notions of intimacy and community in the digital era.

Introduction

One of the most striking changes in personal life during late modernity is the use of social media for conducting personal relationships. Online sociality is contributing to new ideas and experiences of intimacy, friendship and identity through new forms of social interaction and techniques of public social display (Chambers, 2013). Social network sites (SNS) are one form of social media that have become an increas ingly ubiquitous feature of everyday life, aligning with a growing perceived need to be constantly connected with others (Banasiewicz, 2009). While much Internet research has investigated SNS platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, there is a paucity of scholarly work concerning Tumblr, a social media platform wherein soci ality is expressed through blogging, 'reblogging' and 'liking' of digital content.

Tumblr is most commonly populated by blogs that are maintained by individuals; however, a closer look reveals that many users are engaging with collective, collaborative spaces. In this pilot study, I interviewed 10 young people from two such dating spaces on Tumblr which operated in similar vain to the dating classifieds of newspapers. One space functions as a platform for young chubby men and women seeking relationships, while the other assists LGBT women in forming intimate connections. Research into online intimacy itself is by no means novel; however, Tumblr has yet to be explored in great scholarly detail. These platforms thus present an exciting opportunity to begin to examine how sociality and intimacy are either reinforced or reconfigured by young people in online environments.

Intimacy is commonly defined within the literature as the deep sense of knowing and closeness between people (Jamieson, 1999), generated through sustained physical co-presence and emotional disclosures (Valentine, 2006). Online dating as a mode of being intimate is thus conceptualized as a purposive form of meeting new people through specifically-designed websites. In this sense, online

dating can be compared with more traditional dating techniques mediated by commercial interests, driven by social factors such as the growing constraints of working conditions, and the impact these conditions have on our personal lives (Barraket and Henry-Waring, 2008; Gregg, 2011). Within the field, scholars have tended to conceptualize online intimacy as 'something romantic or sexual that is initiated via online contact and maintained through electronic conversations' (Valentine, 2006). Indeed, this litera ture commonly asserts that relationships that begin online rarely stay there (Carter, 2005; Couch and Liamputtong, 2008; Hardie and Buzwell, 2006).

In this article, I focus on the online dating practices of young people to examine the impact Tumblr has on intimate relationship formation, maintenance and expectations. It suggests that the intimacy and meaningful relationships negotiated by young people may in fact be cultivated without physical co-presence. A review of the theoretical and empirical literature on intimacy was conducted in order to explore the conceptual questions that are raised concerning the role of sociology in understanding this phenomenon. As this article is based upon a pilot study of young people on Tumblr, its intention is not to make definitive claims about intimacy, sociality, or shifts in technology use. Rather, its purpose is to stimulate discussion around the rethinking of entrenched understandings of intimacy and sociality in a rapidly-changing and technologically-mediated world. In the remaining sections of this article, I consider the available research, and discuss the initial findings in response to the following questions:

1. What types of intimate relationships are mediated and sustained on Tumblr?

2. What motivates young people to be intimate on Tumblr, and in opposition to existing specifically-designed online dating platforms?

3. In what ways, if at all, does Tumblr reconfigure the nature of contemporary intimacy and sociality?

Literature Review

The sociological analysis of contemporary intimacy draws heavily on two perspec tives offered by Giddens and Bauman (Barraket and Henry-Waring, 2008; Briggle, 2008; Gross, 2005). Both theorists posit that in late/liquid modernity contemporary intimacy has become detraditionalized through a combination of factors, such as the rise of information communication technologies (ICT), globalization and changes in cultural attitudes. Whilst much unites their perspectives, they diverge when it comes to their analysis of the impacts these changes have on everyday life.

Giddens (1992) argues that intimacy has become detached from traditional con cepts of romance, leading to the rise of 'pure relationships' built upon notions of confluent love. Giddens argues that confluent love exists in contrast with romantic 'one and only' love. Indeed, deliberately seeking intimacy online through online dating websites is becoming increasingly normalized behaviour amongst adults, par ticularly when seeking sexual relationships (Malta, 2008). One needs only to look at the rise in popularity of dating apps, such as Tinder. As a point of curiosity, Giddens (1992, p. 135) argues that same-sex female couples are at the vanguard of the pure relationship, noting that they have a high levels of intimacy, communication and relationship breakdown (Jamieson, 1999: 487).

Conversely, Bauman argues that within Western consumer culture, contemporary intimacy is viewed as a commodity in which we whimsically invest in and upgrade if and when better opportunities arise

(Bauman, 2003: 21–22). Bauman is particularly critical of online dating, which he argues typifies the 'love experience', such that intimacy models 'other commodities that allure and seduce…and promise to take the waiting out of wanting, sweat out of effort and effort out of results (ibid, p. 7, 65). Drawing on Bauman, some scholars have likened online dating to an atomized experience, coining terms like 'relation shopping', wherein relationships are akin to making financial transactions. The end result, they argue, is a 'clinical approach to finding a mate' (Heino et al., 2010; see also Jagger, 2005).

Despite the differences in theoretical standpoints, the empirical literature on online intimacy shares a number of common threads, though what follows is by no means an exhaustive list. First, until recently, most studies of online intimacy have typically examined online intimacy as a romantic or cyber-sexual experience mediated by commercial dating websites (Malta, 2008). Second, most studies have found that relationships that are initiated online rarely stay there (Carter, 2005; Parks and Floyd, 1996; Valentine, 2006), and various social conditions such as the blur ring between work and home life are increasingly motivating people to find 'the one' online (Barraket and Henry-Waring, 2008). Lastly, people will often intention ally deceive others with regards to their appearance or personality traits in order to present a more attractive image (Bargh et al., 2002; Ellison et al., 2006). Such discourses serve to reinforce traditional conventions and expectations of intimacy, leading some to suggest that online technologies are 'concurrently mediating new patterns of interactivity and reinforcing existing socio-cultural norms in the forma tion, erosion, and reformation of intimate relationships' (Van Acker, 2001).

What appears absent both in the field and the wider literature on online intimacy then are studies of young people's experiences in forming and maintaining intimate personal relationships. It is important to acknowledge that there is a vast wealth of increasing research into young people's use of social media, which has detailed the impacts and benefits young people are leveraging from their technology use (see for example boyd, 2007, 2014; Collin et al., 2011; Harris, 2009; Lee, 2005; Third et al., 2011). Indeed, there are a number of internet research scholars who have contributed to the field of youth research. Hodkinson and Lincoln (2008) studied weblogs such as Livejournal in order to understand the increasing importance of personalized online platforms in the lives and identities of young people. Hodkinson and Lincoln (2008) are credited with developing the 'bedroom metaphor' to describe the ways in which young people make sense of and curate their online private spaces. In an examina tion of his own research practices, Robards (2013) discussed the ethical implications of the public and private domains for researchers interested in young people's SNS use. More pertinent to the research aims of this article however, are studies by Elm (2007) and Siibak (2010). In a study of 500 young Swedes, Elm (2007) explored the gendered experiences of 15–20 year old men and women who manage their impres sions and represent their personal relationships on the Swedish SNS Lunarstorm. Similarly, in a study of the Estonian SNS Rate, Siibak (2010) explored the masculine self-presentations of over 100 young men aged between 15 and 28, and found that 'new media environments encourage the expression of alternative masculinities and eliminate the need for purely stereotypical masculine self-presentations'.However, lacking from both the field and empirical literature are studies of Tumblr, though I do note the recent work of Katrin Tiidenberg (2013, 2014) and Bryce Renninger (2014). The purpose of this article is therefore to add to a limited pool of research into what appears to be a salient, under-examined site of everyday interaction. In her recent book It's Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teens (2013), danah boyd posits that young people are increasingly excluded from public life, and are consequently seeking new places to develop their sense of self and connect with others online. The young people I spoke to, and their use of Tumblr, suggests it as one of the new 'cool' online spaces in which they can stake identities and connect with their peers in ways that are meaningful to themselves and each other.

Methodology

Before elucidating the methods and rationale for the study, it is perhaps worthwhile briefly outlining what Tumblr is. As mentioned earlier, scholarly studies on Tumblr are few but increasing, such as studies into identity work (Tiidenberg, 2013) and the function of 'counter publics' (Renninger, 2014). It should be noted, however, that neither examine youth agency. Launched in 2007, Tumblr is described as a microblogging social networking website in which users can upload and share textual, visual and audio content. Recently, it was purchased by Yahoo for $1.1 billion dollars (Blodget, 2013). Based on observations from my preliminary research, users on Tumblr adopt pseudonyms; they obfuscate their offline identity behind unique usernames. Furthermore, while you might hypothetically follow my blog, there is however, no social norm on Tumblr dictating that I must reciprocate this gesture.This pilot study found that most Tumblr users do not publicize the connections with others. These features make it difficult to ascertain at what scale users network with each other, and with whom. Rifkin (2013) argues that the primary reason Tumblr became so popular was that it became the 'anti-blog', while others posit that Tumblr is 'not a blogging platform' at all; that to suggest as much 'reflects little understand ing to how Tumblr is used, and why Yahoo (bought) it' (Graubart, 2013). I note the extensive literature on online blogging, such as studies of weblogs and queer identity (Rak, 2005); the public/private binary of blogs (Cadle, 2005); and case studies of blogging platforms such as LiveJournal (Hodkinson, 2007; Hodkinson and Lincoln, 2008) which predate Tumblr by a number of years. While the initial findings of this pilot study could plausibly suggest Tumblr as being neither strictly a blogging plat form nor a social network site, it is not the intention of this article to stake a defini tive claim that Tumblr is distinct from existing social media. Rather, its intention is to contribute to the discussion surrounding Tumblr as an emerging site of social and empirical enquiry.

The pilot study was conducted between 2012 and 2013. The research included a literature review of the theoretical and conceptual debates and empirical research into online relationships, the nature of towards contemporary (Western) intimacy, and the impact online technologies have on these factors. An ethnography into online dating groups on Tumblr, which aimed at identifying one heterosexual dating group and one queer dating group, was conducted. As Giddens (1992) posits that the ability to adapt to the transformation of intimacy in the contemporary era differs between genders, it was deemed appropriate to gain an insight into how young heteronorma tive and queer people were initiating and sustaining relationships through Tumblr.Studies concerning vulnerable young people present researchers with potential ethical dilemmas (De Laine, 2000; Melrose, 2002). Defining vulnerability is prob lematic, given that it is a socially constructed term often thrust upon young people (Beckett, 2006; McLeod, 2012). Drawing from Melrose (2002) I define vulnerable as being interchangeable with terms such as 'sensitive', 'hard to reach', 'hidden', 'mar ginalised', or 'peripheral'. Each are terms which can be argued to apply to young people, particularly those who identify with having queer sexualities (Liamputtong, 2007). Researchers need to exercise extreme sensitivity when dealing with vulner able people, or perhaps more broadly, sensitivity should be exercised when dealing with anything which would normally be kept private and personal; result in offence or lead to social censure or disapproval; or cause the respondent discomfort to express (Wellings et al., 2000). Recently, a Pew Internet survey on online dating attitudes noted that despite shifts in cultural attitudes, online dating is still regarded by many with stigma (Smith and Duggan, 2013; see also Couch and Liamputtong, 2008). In this sense, the formation and maintenance of intimate relationships on Tumblr, and the emotions and desires of the vulnerable young negotiating these experiences, can all be contextualized as 'sensitive' elements.Liamputtong (2007, p. 7) argues that qualitative research is best placed to conduct sensitive research, because of its flexibility in understanding the meanings, inter pretations and subjective experiences of vulnerable groups.

In-depth interviewing was chosen as it is a method that recognizes the need to 'address the ways in which people understand their lives' by engaging directly with those whose life-experiences differ from the researchers own (Travers, 2011: 298–292). In this way, participants were given the

opportunity reflect upon their virtual lives and discuss the significant or interesting aspects of their online agency, rather than having prescribed judge ments placed upon them (Boellstorf, 2008: 76). Online interviewing is an emergent method for collecting data, though it is one which provided participants with a familiar method of online interaction. This made establishing trust and rapport easier, and given my position as a heterosexual male, minimising the discomfort felt by the participants was a salient factor in the designing of the pilot study (Hine, 2005; Reinharz and Chase, 2001). By removing the co-present aspect and empowering the participants to control the location, timing and response pace, I believe online interviewing can prove to be an efficient means in gaining access to and retaining a wide sample of participants that would not have been possible, had the research been conducted in a face-to-face format (Bashai, 2012; Deegan, 2012; Kazmer and Xie, 2008; Opdenakker, 2006).

Rather than manually search for and directly contact each individual purposefully, I decided to create an opportunity for self-selection. Snowball sampling was used as an alternative method when self-selection became problematic. Browne (2005) notes that snowball sampling can 'enable researchers to gain access to individuals who live outside the boundaries of normative heterosexuality', while also lamenting the lack of reflexive documentation by researchers who have employed its method in studies where sexuality is involved. I contacted the admins or 'gatekeepers' of both the queer dating group and the heteronormative dating group. The message introduced myself as a researcher hoping to understand the motivations and lived experiences of young people seeking intimacy online, and included a link to my own Tumblr profile, which contained more detailed information about the project, its aims and requirements.

The gatekeeper of the queer dating group was supportive of my intentions, and shared my research flyer with the group, much in the same way a young queer woman would upload her own photo and biography to attract the interest of others. All five queer participants chosen for the study were self-selected. In contrast, the gatekeeper of the heteronormative dating group was not interested in helping in a similar manner. I was instead referred to a young person who had used the dating group, and through her I was able to recruit the remaining four through snowball sampling. The sample included eight women and two men, ranging in age from 18 to 25. Half identified as queer, two identified as having a fluid sexuality, and the remaining three were heterosexual. Five participants resided in the United States of America, three lived in Canada, one was from the United Kingdom and one from Australia. The participants were all university or tertiary-level educated. Each par ticipant was given a pseudonym for participation in the pilot study.In total, 10 in-depth, semi-structured online interviews were conducted. In order to increase comfort and rapport, participants were given a choice of interview medium. All participants self-nominated Skype as the interview site. The interviews lasted approximately one hour each. The interview questions sought to identify participants' experience with relationships on Tumblr, and their motivations for initiating and sus taining them there as opposed to specifically-designed online dating sites. I was also interested in how young people represent themselves on Tumblr, and what impact this had on relationship formation. The interview data was analysed thematically in order to identify dominant and contradictory elements or constructions of online dating experience among the participants. Sample questions included the following:

1. How and why do you use your specific Tumblr dating blog?

2. How do you present yourself on the dating blog, and in what ways is this the same or different to your personal blog, and why?

3. How does Tumblr compare to other social spaces such as Facebook, and dating websites, such as eharmony?

It must be stated that there are a number of limitations in a pilot study such as this. The sample size was small, and there was a potential for self-selection sampling bias. Additionally, it is plausible to suggest that those who self-selected to respond to my request were more likely to have strong feelings about their intimate online practices. Furthermore, a higher percentage of women self-selected to participate in the pilot study than men. As such, I acknowledge that a small, gender-skewed sample does not permit me to make definitive claims representative of all young people's online dating experiences on Tumblr. However, in spite of these limitations, the pilot study did manage to generate a significant amount of qualitative data that provided important preliminary insights into the ways young people attach meaning to their Tumblr connections from their own perspectives. The viewpoints and experiences discussed in this article should not be read as being universally representative of all young people seeking intimacy on Tumblr. Instead, it is hoped that this article will offer a talking point of difference amongst the existing scholarly work involving young people, intimacy and online technologies.

What Types of Intimate Relationships are Mediated and Sustained on Tumblr?

Contemporary accounts of online intimacy have noted that online technologies enable individuals to form relationships with others despite great distance and time barriers, thereby allowing them to meet new people with increasing efficiency and scale (Barraket and Henry-Waring, 2008; Castells, 2001; Chambers, 2013). However, despite the romantic and sexual opportunities granted by online technologies, social theory continues to focus on physical relationships (Bauman, 2003; Giddens, 1992). This is reflected by an array of scholars who have posited that people involved in online relationships meet the challenges of non-traditional relationship formation by reproducing traditional, real-world scenarios and expectations, dyadic couplings and 'taking things further, offline' (Ellison et al., 2006). The pilot study yielded mixed results when asking young people to describe their intimate relationships they had initiated on Tumblr, and if and how they were sustained there. All participants commented that they had experienced a traditionally intimate relationship with someone they met through the queer dating blog, with comments such as:

I uploaded my pic to (the dating blog) and one day a girl messaged me. We got to talking and a few months later I bought a plane ticket and we met. It's been 5 months now and we're still together.

In this respondent's case, as with others who used the queer dating blog, it became evident that geographic proximity to potential partners as an important factor in their relationship choices. In this sense, these participants did reproduce the traditional expectation that a relationship initiated on Tumblr should eventually transition offline to be developed further face-to-face. As one particular participant said:

Tumblr is a good way to stay connected in less than ideal situations and get to know each other in the beginning. but physically being together is always the goal, the idea, the reason we look on Tumblr is to find someone to be physical with.

This response is somewhat resonant with the optimistic accounts in the literature concerning the potential for online technologies to open up new opportunities to meet people outside one's typical social networks (Castells, 2001). However, the finding potentially problematizes the Giddensian notion that same-sex female cou ples are a 'vanguard' of social change in the transformation of

intimacy. Rather than articulating intimate relationships in new ways, most queer female respondents sought a means to reproduce traditional norms and expectations about intimacy and intimate relationships online. Relationships entered into online should transition offline into co-presence if they are to be deemed legitimate or a chance of success. Most of these respondents also noted that they had encountered limited social oppor tunities in which to be intimate with others in their respective towns or cities. This might be as a result of a small dating scene, in which everyone invariably dates everyone over time within a small dating pool, or by living in remote or conservative areas, in which freely expressing ones sexuality and desires is socially stigmatized.

Surprisingly, despite using a 'dating site' on Tumblr, most young heterosexual people recruited from the heteronormative case study were more interested in expe riencing intimate friendships than the personal relationships sought by the queer par ticipants. Being young, many felt they lack the financial or material means to travel and meet the people they spoke with on Tumblr, as one male participant explained:

Tumblr being what it is (a website people all over the world use) means you can fall for a girl in London while you live in Kansas. And if you're just a kid, how can you go and see them? It's really difficult to ask your parents for airplane tickets as you tell them you're in love with a person you met over the internet.

While one young woman explained how Tumblr created a space to form supportive relationships. Surprisingly, this participant made effort to point out that the relationships she cultivates on Tumblr are seen to have greater insight into her identity and desires, fostering an intimacy incapable of being sustained offline or elsewhere. As she put it:

I'm very big in the fetish community on Tumblr, and developed different kinds of intimacy online—cybersex, taking and sharing nude photos, etc. My particular interests aren't something I can talk freely about on Facebook or IRL. However, Tumblr being what it is, it allows me to meet a community of like-minded people and feel safe/free to engage with them, more so than I would in person.

Although community is a contested term, both in pre-internet (Hillery, 1955) and in internet research (Tiidenberg, 2014), I include it here given the ways in which my participants make use of it. A detailed analysis of the problematic nature of 'community' was not the focus of this research, however, I explore this to some extent at the end of this article. Regardless, the initial findings shown suggest that regardless of sexuality, young people are potentially invested in a spectrum of intimate relation ship building, on Tumblr, and that perhaps that a notion of intimacies are at play in the online social media use of young people.

What Motivates Young People to be Intimate on Tumblr, and in Opposition to other Social Media or Specifically-designed Online Dating Platforms?

A wealth of scholarly literature has focused with the psychological and social attri butes of adult-aged online dating users. As hinted at earlier, my research conflicted with these initial findings, observing that most young people on Tumblr cited socio-economic pressures as their motivator for going online.

A young heteronormative man explained:

I live in the deep South of the US, around rednecks and country folk. Most people my age here don't appreciate my love for musicals, art, or films. They like football and bashing "fags" like me. So it's really hard to find someone I'm interested in my town. Tumblr, on the other hand…

The 'narrative of the realness' (Gray, 2009) on Tumblr was common amongst both queer and heteronormative young people I spoke with. While the response earlier suggests that young people are seeking online spaces to negotiate particular distinc tions unappreciated amongst their typical online/offline social networks, there were responses that suggested how their physical subjectivities influenced their decision to form intimate bonds on Tumblr. This was made evident when one young woman, who self-identified as 'chubby' said:

Growing up I was always a chubby kid, and was really shy … I just find it easier to talk to people online about my body issues because you can meet a lot who have gone through or are going through the same stuff…But on Facebook people are posting inspirational fit ness stuff, and in real life your friends might not get it.

Beyond the support of non-normative subjectivities, Tumblr was noted by most partici pants as a site of emotional authenticity, that is, a space where people are perceived to portray themselves online with sincerity, from how they look to who they fundamen tally are a person. In this sense, a motivation for being intimate or connecting on Tumblr was that interaction was perceived to be more 'real' than elsewhere. This was touched upon earlier, but can be reiterated through a response from a young male, who said:

I will go on Tumblr and write about how I miss my ex-girlfriend terribly, or how I'm feel ing depressed. If I were to spill my heart out that way on Facebook then my friends would think I'm being a wimp. I feel as if I'm more open and honest on Tumblr, because everyone does it.

This response earlier illustrates how the emotional authenticity—through being open about one's vulnerabilities—is an accepted social norm of young people's intimate use of Tumblr. To borrow from Goffman (1959), it would appear that rather than investing energy into maintaining a socially acceptable front region, young people on Tumblr actively invite their online partners and friends into their own private backstage area. Their perception of Tumblr as uniquely emotionally authentic was further illustrated through a comparison many drew between it and specific dating websites.

A common thread which ran through all interviews was the shared stigma attached to online dating sites. Specifically, despite initiating their own relationships online, all participants insisted that their relationships on Tumblr happened seren dipitously, as a by-product of their everyday use of social media. As one young male participant stated, when referring to dating sites:

I feel like when you use those kind of sites, it forces the issue of finding someone, because there's

pressure, you know? Tumblr lets you be yourself, and other people be themselves, just by doing what they do…so relationships happen at their own pace, with greater emotion…

Allowing Tumblr to 'be yourself' was a common motivator, particularly when com pared with online dating websites, which the participants believed encouraged deception. One queer female respondent expanded up on this by saying:

On dating sites, people will write about themselves in a way that makes them seem really appealing, but they can really edit themselves in the best light, you know? But when you have a long term blog on Tumblr, people will notice if you aren't consistent in how you behave, the things you think, stuff like that. On Tumblr, you've got the archive, which is like a history of anything someone's posted on their profile. You can go through that and judge more accurately if they're the person they claim to be.

Another went further:

I've met girls in real life before who only liked me based on what I choose to show the world, like the cool version of me. But once my inner self came out, when they got to know me better, they would lose interest. But on tumblr, everyone's a dork or a nerd. if someone gets to know your personality by browsing your blog and archive, pimples and weird opinions and all, then they're more likely to appreciate you in the long run. I think that's why tumblr dating is better.

The literature on online dating often makes note of the impression management peo ple invest in when required to self-present on online dating sites; specifically, that people will often intentionally deceive others regarding their appearance or person ality traits in order to present a more attractive image (Bargh et al., 2002; Ellison et al., 2006; Kang and Hoffman, 2011; Parks and Floyd, 1996). However, the initial findings from the pilot study suggest that (a) a 'warts and all' approach to expressing one's self is a social norm on Tumblr and (b) through this, young people are finding their own ways to negotiate their impression management through what the earlier respondent referred to as the 'archive'. Specifically, rather than finding ways to take advantage of time-delays and disembodied interaction, these young people look for consistency in people's Tumblr blogs. If someone consistently talks about aspects of their life over a number of months or years, that could therefore be seen to be authentic. In contrast, might be avoided. This was succinctly put by one of the young men, who said:

I trust the people I've spoken with on Tumblr, due to the fact that they post stuff and pictures about themselves daily. I do the same, so the people who follow my blog know I'm legit. They know what I look like, and what I'm really into. I have a long list of embarrassing,confessional-style posts that really let people see the real me. The perception that we young people are naïve in this day and age is a bit annoying. We know what Tumblr and the internet is, and how to use it, over the mounting number of adults who assume otherwise.

In What Ways, if at all, does Tumblr Reconfigure the Nature of Contemporary Intimacy and

Sociality?

The initial findings problematize the sociological theorizations of contemporary intimacy. Physical co-presence is a privileged aspect of the contemporary sociological understandings of intimacy proposed by Giddens (1992 pp. 96–98) and Bauman (2003, p. 114). Indeed, the intimate relationships initiated by young women through their collective dating blog can be best aligned with Giddens' notion of intimacy (1992, p. 138), as trust, exclusivity and sustained emotional and physical disclosures are important for their relationship development. However, there are limitations to Giddens' framework. I share Jamieson's (1999) criticism of Giddens, because far from being the 'vanguard' of a reconfiguration of intimacy, the initial findings of the pilot study suggest that young queer women on Tumblr are simultaneously forming new dating ideals through forming relationships in their social media, while rein forcing traditional dating expectations by requiring physical co-presence if the relationship is to mature.

Bauman's pessimistic view of an atomized, commercial approach to online intimacy appears equally unfounded in the pilot study. Young people on Tumblr appear to be cognisant of the impacts marketised dating spaces have on expectations and attitudes towards intimacy. Noting the shortcomings of other online spaces, the participants instead seek to shape Tumblr to fit their intimate needs, whether they have dyadic relationships or the intimacy felt in a supportive group of people with similar subjectivities. Using the social norms and architecture of Tumblr itself, the initial findings suggest that young people are seeking ways to form and maintain emotionally meaningful and authentic connections, often entirely through sustained disembodied interaction.

The limitations of the dominant sociological approaches to intimacy in the contemporary era, noted by Jamieson (1999), Gross (2005) and Barraket and Henry-Waring (2008) are reinforced by my initial findings. As noted earlier, while the initial findings emerge from a pilot study, and are not intended to be interpreted as conclusive, they do suggest that intimacy and what it means to be intimate are being simultaneously reinforced and reinterpreted by young people. As could be expected, this suggests a need for further development of exploratory and explanatory frameworks for conceptualising and understanding online dating—and intimacy in a broader sense.

Earlier, I explained that my participants made mention of a notion of 'community' on Tumblr. During the course of interviews, many young people made references to a 'queer community', a 'fetish/kink community', for example. But what is a community on Tumblr? The communities to which the participants referred are simply abstractions. Consider Parks (2011), who argues that a number of defining characteristics of an online or virtual community are: the ability to engage in collective action; ritualized sharing of information; patterns of interaction that grow from information exchange; cohesion and positive sentiment; and attachments to one another and to the community more generally—More simply put: a sense of belonging. Applying such a framework to Tumblr, at least at this stage of the pilot study, seems problematic—the affordances and architecture of Tumblr make it difficult to observe where one group ends and another begins, for example.

To illustrate this dilemma, consider Reddit; a social network/news and media aggregate in which groups of people are identifiable and observable via their des ignated subreddit (a fixed webspace wherein user generated and created content is archived under a particular interest). If one wanted to participate in the music com munity on Reddit, for example, one could participate collectively in the 'r/music', 'r/listentothis', or 'r/radioreddit' subreddits. These are distinct from other reddit 'communities', such as r/games, r/gaming, or r/gamernews, which cater to individu als interested in

video games. In such spaces, we can observe, using Parks' (2011) definition of a virtual community: users engaging in shared rituals (discussions and content creation of a particular theme), social regulation and collective action (content on reddit is democratically voted upon by its relevant communities, repre senting a consensus on views and interests) and so on.

However, as Renninger (2014, p. 9) notes, Tumblr blogs are less tied to 'singular' identities; users 'often have multiple Tumblelogs, manage Tumblelogs collabora tively, or do not link their Tumblelogs with their identity beyond the identity created by that Tumblelog'. This raises the following question: how does one belong to a 'community' when its members, or the borders that mark one community as distinct from another are not identifiable? Another dilemma, is can you have an online 'com munity' without physical interaction? It would seem not. In spite of early accounts of the potential of the Internet to bring new forms of sociality, or the potential for imag ined communities metaphor to open up ways of understanding online groups schol ars still argue that geographically proximal offline communities are the 'foundation for virtual communities' (Gruzd et al., 2011; Parks, 2011). Gruzd et al. (2011: 1295) in particular contend that social scientists have systematically shown that when it comes to online communities, 'almost all people who interact online also see each other in person'. While very few of the young people I spoke to had reported meeting each other, each held a firm belief in a membership or belonging to something unify ing and rewarding.

The pilot study had not been anticipated to uncover such a problematic finding. However, if one were to speculate on a possible avenue that future research into this phenomenon, one might explore this through the lens of post-subcultural theory (Bennett, 1999, 2004; Muggleton, 2000; Redhead, 1990). There is promise in the concept of the scene, a conceptual framework proposed by Straw (1991). A scene often transcends 'particular localities, reflecting and actualising a particular state of relations between various populations and social groups, as these coalesce around particular coalitions of musical style' (Bennett, 2011, p. 496). This may help explain how young people might 'come together' to celebrate particular cultural distinctions (sexual, musical, literature, or otherwise), free of the limits of physical proximity via the transient, shifting mass of blogs and trends that come and pass on Tumblr.

Conclusion

I have explored some of the sociological questions raised by the emergence of new online technologies and the phenomenon of online dating. The initial findings of this pilot study suggest that young people are motivated to date online not only as a result of offline social factors, but because other online spaces are perceived to be less emotionally authentic than Tumblr. In the context of this particular cohort of young people, intimate relationships that are entered into on Tumblr are capable of both reinforcing and transforming traditional notions of what it means to be intimate.I have shown that young people are indeed using their social media to be intimate and date online, in spite of the vast empirical literature focused on the online dating habits of adults in specifically-designed online dating sites, or offline.

While traditional notions of intimacy remain central to the way some young people form intimate relationships on Tumblr, all intimate relationships on Tumblr are initially mediated, and can be sustained by most in meaningful ways without needing to be transitioned offline and into physical co-presence. The initial find ings of the pilot study also suggest that being intimate on Tumblr is beneficial to a particular cohort of young people, in terms of negotiating social isolation and finding

support for their subjectivities. While not an anticipated finding, some of the responses given suggest that most participants held a sense of community to which they identified with, though it still remains unclear whether 'community' is the most accurate term for groups and collectives on Tumblr. The paucity of research on the intersections of young people, online intimacy, and social media and the contradic tions in the empirical and theoretical literature, suggests a need for further inquiry if we are to adequately conceptualize how and why young people seek and sustain intimacy online.

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