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Pictures of Women In Love:
Queer Media and The Tumblr Lesbian Scene

Introduction

The Tumblr lesbian community is an unmeasurably vast collections of users, blogs, and tags on the platform that relate to female queerness. It is fed by and comprised of thousands of young, often closeted queer female and non-binary teenagers. What brings them together on Tumblr is the fact that they are often isolated in their queerness by structures of geography or family, unable to publicly explore their queerness due to a lack of safety, acceptance, or access to other queer people. Whether they already identify as queer or are coming to terms with their queerness, they are searching for a safe and deliberately queer community to exist in. In addition to the freedom and diversity of creative expression Tumblr affords, it also provides a greater degree of privacy than other social media platforms. Communicating via notes, or comments on posts, as well as direct messages, users flock to the Tumblr lesbian scene to find community, learn about themselves and establish relationships. For many queer people, their participation in the scene has shaped their queer identity or comprised a significant part of their queer experience. The queerness that brings this community together is expressed in lesbian joke memes, photos, and intense fandoms for queer female characters in TV and movies. Apart from the micro-celebrities that can rise from the scene, its overall nature is

egalitarian, a collection of somewhat lost souls finding their identities in a world completely apart from their offline day-to-day.

The collective interests of this community encompass anything relating to queerness and queer culture, and includes politics, celebrities, and fashion. Users generally discover the community by Google-searching LGBTQ+ content or following a queer person on Instagram or YouTube, or as fans searching for content related to a film or TV character they are interested in. There is a large focus on lesbian “ships,” or couples on television series, which spawn huge and dedicated fandoms. Members of the fandom will often create fan art, write fanfiction, and make Tumblr pages entirely dedicated to these couples, some of which are not officially couples and may simply be platonic friendships with real or perceived queer subtext. Members of the community posts photos of queer couples, explore fan content, and generally interact via reposts and notes on whatever media is circulating and related to their interests. Interactions begin online, and some people meet up in person, or begin dating virtually long distance and eventually bring those relationships offline and into real life.

The content that is exchanged and posted on Tumblr helps users find a sense of belonging, as well as the freedom to ask questions, seek advice, and learn about themselves openly and without judgement in ways they cannot offline. Because this community is united by a closely related set of suppressed sexual and/or gender-variant identities, many of the close online relationships formed turn into romantic relationships, if not deep confidant friendships – for users, queer love is often scarce outside the online

Tumblr scene. Those looking for it on Tumblr are driven there out of starvation, seeking to fill a serious need.

From a scholarly perspective, the community is fascinating in terms of what it reveals not only about the lives of queer people, but the circumstances that drive them to Tumblr, and what ultimately gives them comfort. The overlapping worlds of repressed queerness and media fandom shed light on an important question: what kind of respite are young, queer women and non-binary people finding on Tumblr and in media? What is that respite predicated on? By studying the inner workings of the queer Internet, especially those that cluster around social media and media representation, I am intrigued to see what use this information can be put to, what concerns this often very young, very closeted community about the queerness they see reflected back to them, and how to improve those concerns. Mental health, for example, is often a topic of discussion in these communities, and the connections between repression, media, and mental health abound. Given that this is a marginalized, oppressed community, literacy on this culture in the right hands can translate into a remedy, a response to the negative and harmful parts of growing up queer, both in the United States and across the world, as Tumblr is an international platform. What I am most intrigued by is how the already silenced queer identity interacts with the anonymity of Tumblr and the internet at large. Is this a tool, a hindrance, or both? Social media is, in many ways, both a perfect place to break free of the closet, and the perfect place to recreate it.

Research Question

How do the constraints of greater society shape the relative freedom experienced within these digital communities, and how can reshaping them help reshape unhealthy or destructive behaviors? Tumblr users are learning from each other what they cannot learn or live offline. How do their behaviors reveal their specific needs? How can its positives be pushed further? How can a deeper understanding of what is happening in this community be helpful to improving the forces that drive users there? Can media influence or improve the lived experience of queer youth, both online and offline?

Theory & Literature

Nathan Jurgenson developed a theory around the experience of the digital world as juxtaposed with the offline world, one he refers to as digital dualism. As Jurgenson states in *Digital Dualism vs. Augmented Reality*,

“Digital dualists believe that the digital world is ‘virtual’ and the physical world ‘real.’ This bias motivates many of the critiques of sites like Facebook and the rest of the social web and I fundamentally think this digital dualism is a fallacy. Instead, I want to argue that the digital and physical are increasingly meshed, and want to call this opposite perspective that implodes atoms and bits rather than holding them conceptually separate augmented reality.”

This project engages with this theory, placing it into the realm of social media anonymity as related to queerness. While I agree that digital dualism is less precise or accurate than augmented reality, I invoke both of Jurgenson’s iterations here because of the way my interviewees spoke of their experience. Despite how “real” their offline lives and Tumblr lives equally were, they often referred to their offline lives as “real life,” describing a crucial dualism in their identities online and offline that existed to protect their closeted

queer activity. In his revision of digital dualism, Jurgenson refers to and discredits Turkle's "second self" - again, while I agree with Jurgenson's reasoning, the second self is absolutely at play with many queer Tumblr users' personas. They are existing as separate, multiple selves, exploring their budding queerness on their laptops late at night, going to school straight and uncomplicated in the morning. Many of the people I interviewed described feeling like they were leading double lives. I argue that the Tumblr lesbian community complicates Jurgenson's dismissal, and that, in particularly sensitive cases, the digital world does in fact provide space for a second, no less authentic, self, one that must be second and secret to exist.

This element of anonymity also leads to connections with James Gibson's work on affordance theory, which essentially states that the perception a person has of their surrounding environment subconsciously drives their action. I apply this theory to the Tumblr lesbian community because of how vital anonymity is to its existence. The platform of Tumblr affords users the freedom of anonymity, which directly shapes their actions. I would also like to engage Axel Bruns' theory of produsage, the notion that the line between consumer and producer is blurring through digital media, simply because of the way Tumblr lesbian users create fanfiction and other content based on the community's interests. As Bruns states,

Especially where what is produced is of an intangible, informational nature, a further shift away from such industrial, and towards post- industrial or informational economic models can be observed. In such models, the production of ideas takes place in a collaborative, participatory environment which breaks down the boundaries between producers and consumers and instead enables all participants to be users as well as producers of information and knowledge, or what I have come to call *producers* (Bruns 2).

This theory is particularly interesting in this community given the queer media desert many of them are in - they are making their own queer content because they cannot find it in the mainstream, and their engagement with that content as validation is crucial to the development of their identities as queer people. Additionally, these consumers of queer content also have the authority to be producers, given that they are queer themselves. In many ways, they practice produsage out of necessity and compulsion.

In her book *Status Update*, Alice Marwick discusses the unsteady concept of authenticity in digital spheres, and how micro-celebrities use it to connect with a niche group of fans or followers. Marwick's thinking is relevant to the Tumblr lesbian community in terms of the micro-celebrities it sometimes produces, such as Shannon Beveridge, a gay YouTube star who rose to fame through Tumblr. When a digital community is founded on something like queerness, questions of authenticity become more complicated, because queerness cannot be arguably faked in such a space and to such an intense degree, nor is there motivation to fake queerness, given the harmful, often dangerous social ramifications being gay has. Many of my interviewees were primarily concerned with finding queer content to identify with, which included scripted media as well as content created by actual lesbian couples on Tumblr, like photos and videos of them kissing and hanging out. I was curious to see how they viewed the authenticity of these two categories, given their differing origins.

Paul Byron and Brady Robards recently published a piece on the presence of queer youth on Tumblr and their investigation into the subject. They linked mental health, queerness, and Tumblr usage in ways that directly resonate with my research

question. Their study found that queer youth use Tumblr more frequently than other social media platforms, and cited other authors and users who explain that Tumblr “provides social connections that are otherwise unavailable due to geographic isolation and social anxiety,” (Robards/Byron). They also found, as I did, that issues of mental health and reclusion can arise with Tumblr and its users. While the platform can be a hugely educational, positive space for queer people, Byron and Robards found that users reported feeling a need to disconnect, as the opportunity to openly discuss mental health can result in communities that feed those concerns rather than helping them. The people I interviewed reported mixed opinions on how Tumblr impacted their mental health.

Demographics

The community is predominantly under 30, with a heavy teen base ranging from 13 - 20 years in age. Users identify as queer and lesbian women, as well as other female-identified, nonbinary and trans people. Given the anonymity of Tumblr and the further complications of anonymity presented by being closeted, user demographics are generally hard to pinpoint, but the photos of couples posted, for example, are fairly diverse in terms of race and gender expression. They either engage in some sort of queer fandom online or follow other examples of queer life, such as other users’ relationships. Offline, many of them are either completely closeted, or are out, but lack other queer people with whom to interact, often due to being in a rural area. They are spread throughout the United States and other countries around the world.

Research Methods

Given that I myself am an out queer woman, I used my own resources to find my participants. I belong to a New York City-centric Facebook group called Queer Exchange, in which queer people of all kinds can post services, sell things, organize, rent apartments, etc. Membership to the group essentially ensures out status. I posted a call in the group for participants over 18 who wanted to discuss their experience in the Tumblr scene, and responded to everyone that commented their availability. Of those, three got back to me to set up interviews, all of which I did. I also interviewed my girlfriend and a friend of mine. All five of my participants were white, out, and living in or around New York City. Four were female-identified and one was trans. Each was between the ages of 18 and 25, and explained to me their experience being in the Tumblr lesbian scene both as young teenagers and today, if they were still active. By doing this, I avoided ethical concerns, in this case closeted participants who were under 18.

Findings & Analysis

My research question for this project endeavored to understand the behaviors of the Tumblr lesbian community and the greater meaning they have in terms of improving the lives of queer youth. In terms of how users spent their time, fandom around queer TV, fanfiction, and real lesbian relationships shared equal distribution, and ultimately came down to the personal preference of the user. The pull came from a conscious or subconscious curiosity about queer female life - a desire for a visual. "Every show that had even the smallest amount of queer women subtext, I would find it and binge the

whole show,” says Rebecca, who started using Tumblr as a closeted fifteen-year-old in suburban Ohio. She found the community through YouTube, secretly watching gay users there and being led to Tumblr for even more media. “You want to know the characters and you want to feel connected, so you’re like, ‘I have to watch because I don’t want to miss one look that they give each other,’” Lauren adds. Her Tumblr discovery came from the spark of a fandom for hit TV show *Glee*, one she did not immediately realize was about Brittany and Santana, the show’s queer female couple, until she was deep into the scene. A high school sophomore, she was dating a boy at the time. “I would watch interviews of them all the time - I was so obsessed, but I didn’t understand why I was obsessed.” The compulsivity behind the fandom culture of the scene stems from a distinct lack of resources. Young queers do not see the lives they idealize, dream about, or punish themselves for envisioning as normalized in mainstream media. Sometimes, this leads to an even deeper disconnect, one Lauren experienced while in the scene. “I was so not at the point where I was like I could be gay at all. I was so just like, whatever, I’m on here because I’m a weirdo!” Once her blog had amassed a certain number of followers, anonymous questions began rolling in, as is common within a community of teenagers trying to orient themselves around the complexities of identity. Users need communication, an outlet. “People would ask me questions. I didn’t really have anything to say because I wasn’t dating a girl, so they would be like, ‘are you gay,’ and I would be like, ‘no.’ That would be the extent of what was happening.” She laughs at her former disillusionment. Rebecca experienced a similar rise - neither she nor Lauren were Tumblr famous in the slightest, but the more they reblogged and posted, the more people reached

out. “And then you get people inboxing you and make friends, or they’re trying to be Tumblr girlfriends,” she explains, citing the commonality within the community of having an intense, long distance relationship with another Tumblr girl, one who could be located as far as Canada or Brazil.

Privacy is a huge concern, especially for those in sensitive environments, ones that would not be so welcoming to their queerness. “I’m pretty sure I had a fake email account to get it, I had made a whole other email account so no one knew - it was like extra privacy,” Lauren continues. Participants described obsessively changing their blog’s URLs for fear of being discovered by friends, as well as posting but quickly deleting selfies. The platform never prompts users to share their real names, or any names at all, so friendships made on the site were anonymous until they were taken offline. However, many of the participants described deep friendships made through Tumblr, messaging relationships that led to Facebook friend requests, then cell number exchanges, confidantes across states and countries who knew things close school friends never would. “I remember being pretty gay, more gay than I was in my real life,” says Rebecca, who recalled texting Tumblr friends about her closeted queer feelings during math class.

Users would bond first over queer media, from mainstream shows like *Glee* to little-known niche shows, movies, and web series. Live-blogging during shows became crucial for some as a way of engaging with people who cared just as deeply about queer characters. Users were “constantly refreshing to see if someone five seconds later had made a gif of the kiss that just happened,” Rebecca describes. “And people were, people

did, literally five seconds after it happened there was something on my timeline.” The rabid attentiveness and personal investment around shows created a tightknit community. “When *Glee* came back around for the third season, I didn’t have people to talk about it with - my friends made it halfway through season three, and then that’s sort of where every normal straight person dropped,” says Lauren. The dedication came from a deeper need, one Rebecca puts clearly into words. “I was doing it to find content that I could identify with or like - now that I’m thinking back on it, just, like, pictures of women being in love.”

While advice posts are present in the scene, most users focused primarily on the importance of queer media. Whether fanfiction or tv and movies, media appears to be how many budding queer women discover that their lives and storylines are possible, visible, and worthy. They are then able to make real, human connections with other lesbian fans, perhaps the most rewarding part of it for some. “It definitely was a way to connect to people who were watching small shows that no one else was watching,” Rebecca says. Every person I interviewed said both of these elements undoubtedly shaped their identities and developments as queer people. Finding resources in shared experiences would not have been possible for many without Tumblr.

Discussion & Conclusion

While my findings were endlessly revealing, the main takeaways I had reinforced the notion that the Internet is crucial for the health of the queer community. It makes community across most limitations possible in ways that support and educate queer youth

about the greater queer world and themselves, from gender identity to sexuality to intersectional politics.

By responding to the needs of young, marginalized, and silenced communities, media can be a freeing force for queer teens, both closeted and otherwise. Media is a huge influencer today - by normalizing queer storylines and characters in mainstream television, queer youth may not have to resort to anonymous, niche forums to find validation. That being said, there are strengths in that niche community, a level of cohesion and safety that would perhaps be disturbed or impossible if there was no necessity for it. Ultimately, however, queer liberation is about not feeling a need for anonymity or a fear of being found out - the freedom in Tumblr's anonymity is also an arrow pointing back at the cause for it. While it leads to a positive, important online community, what could the Internet look like if queer youth felt empowered enough to be openly themselves?

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