CHAPTER 10

The Challenges of Doing Qualitative Research on Tumblr

Experience and Advice from Three Scholars of Young People's Tumblr Use

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We began doing qualitative research on Tumblr in the early-mid-2010s, when guidelines for doing digital research were rapidly evolving along with changes in social media platforms and the digital environment more generally. This chapter aims to provide readers with a sense of how we, as researchers from

different disciplines, have approached Tumblr's cultures of engagement and the particular set of ethical challenges we have encountered. It is our hope that our experiences will give readers a sense of the complex ways Tumblr may be understood through such research and the ethical concerns involved in doing so.

Tumblr is unusual because although most material shared on the platform is publicly accessible, the norms of anonymity on Tumblr mean that public material can also "feel" private for users. Thus, on Tumblr, simply because one *can* "stumble upon" a blog or easily access online material does not automatically mean that such material is "public" for researcher use and that researchers have automatic rights to it. It is important to understand that what is "private" and what is "public" is contextually determined.[1] In our own research, we have all drawn on the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) resource on ethical principles to assist in working through how to act with sensitivity and care in our research on Tumblr.[2]

Tumblr is often used by young people who are marginalized in broader society to share resources and connect with others with similar vulnerabilities. As researchers, this user base introduced additional concerns regarding self-positioning and "doing no harm" in these communities. We also found that Tumblr's specific cultural and interface norms presented difficulties when justifying our projects to university ethics boards, whose standardized applications are not suited to internet research on living subjects, much less those requiring more particularized standards of care.

Our research comes from three different disciplinary perspectives: cultural studies, anthropology, and sociology. We have, however, employed a similar ethnographic approach of immersion that requires us to develop a deep, multifaceted qualitative understanding of the spaces we study and their significance for their participants. While we are not suggesting that novice researchers need to be Tumblr "experts," we feel it is vital to understand the dynamics of one's chosen space from a first-person experiential perspective. For this reason, we all either already possessed or developed a basic understanding Tumblr before embarking on our projects.

In our three brief case studies, we discuss ethical and methodological challenges at different stages of collecting our data, which explores, respectively, how young people navigate "relatability," body image, and dating and intimacy on Tumblr. Akane Kanai discusses the question of permission in a Tumblr group of blogs based on young women's everyday experiences; Crystal Abidin considers the importance of care in undertaking sensitive research among "thinspo" posters on Tumblr; and finally, Matthew Hart addresses

managing verifiability and sensitivity for participants on Tumblr dating blogs, as well as discussing the institutional challenges of such work.

Permission by Akane Kanai
Research Stage: Completed and Published.

One central ethical consideration in my Tumblr research revolves around the subject of permission. In early 2012, I found a post from a Tumblr blog called "WhatShouldWeCallMe" (WSWCM)[3] that I thought was witty and smart and that I connected with on a "relatable" level as a young woman. It was a reaction-GIF blog that detailed funny, embarrassing, or annoying scenarios, with a GIF as punchline/comment. For example, the GIF post below is intended to show how users might feel "when a really skinny person is talking about how much junk food she eats" (figure 10.1).

WSWCM attracted coverage in news media like *Forbes* for the way it seemed to speak to young women's "collective subconscious," inspiring many similarly themed Tumblr blogs.[4] I was particularly interested in how these subsequent blogs, authored by young women, presented their "own" versions of WSWCM. My original research question was thus: Why was this blog so relatable to them, and what was the gendered basis on which these feelings of connection were circulating?

Fig. 10.1. A humorous reaction GIF of drag queen Bianca Del Rio slowly blinking her eyes as an indication of her frustration "when a really skinny person is talking about how much junk food they eat"

These blogs were publicly accessible and anonymous, and some had become famous beyond Tumblr, all factors that would indicate to many social media researchers that they were fair game to analyze without permission. But I was not comfortable with that position and decided to get the permission of the creators before I began my analysis. There were a number of reasons why I made this decision. The questions of whether or not and then how to seek permission are dependent on ethical approach and context. Feminist ethnographic ethics require that researchers should attempt to reduce hierarchies between researcher and participant as much as possible.[5] I wanted to explore in detail the discourses of femininity that were present, and I was going to need to examine a substantial number of posts from each blog and undertake a detailed analysis of each blog. In doing so, I was going to benefit from these young women's creative production and social critique, in that I was going to begin building my scholarly reputation on this research.

Thus, I deemed it appropriate to request the bloggers' permission to help level the balance of power by acknowledging them as authors, like me. I drew on Nissenbaum's concept of "contextual integrity," which suggests that the specific norms of a space must determine how (or whether or not) a researcher may ethically observe it and disseminate information in relation to their observations.[6] As we have noted above, negotiating what is contextually public and private space is central to research on Tumblr. In determining context, I had to know how "public" the blogs felt for their creators; some of the blogs appeared to have few followers and thus their creators may have considered them more "private" even if they were not created on Tumblr's "private" setting. To find out, I had to ask the creators' permission. In deciding to maintain contextual integrity, I had to risk not being able to carry out my research if no one agreed to allow me to analyze their blogs.

Carrying Out the Research: Permission Quandaries

I applied for my university's ethics approval before writing to the bloggers for permission. Notably, my university in Australia did not have specific digital media permission guidelines for conducting analysis of blog posts, which it deemed a "low-risk" project in terms of potential harm to either participants or me. After obtaining university ethics approval, I contacted the bloggers through a private message on Tumblr from my research account. In my recruitment message, I provided users with a link to the full explanatory project statement and the consent form required by my university. As I did not have an academic website at that point, I also provided my Twitter handle

as a way for the bloggers to verify my academic identity. (Depending on one's project and the safety considerations that your university asks you to take, it may also be appropriate to share your own Tumblr or other social media with your participants.)

I contacted sixty bloggers, and six agreed to let me analyze the posts on their blogs. The creators of these six blogs permitted me to undertake research, remained anonymous in their interactions with me, and allowed me to reproduce their posts in my thesis and other publications. This low number of respondents is typical in in-depth discursive social media analysis, but the problem I ran into was that I had originally counted on doing interviews with these participants as well. I had framed the consent process in two parts so in the first stage, the blog creators were notified that they might be asked for interviews at a later stage, but only one consented to participate. It was, of course, generous of these bloggers to provide me permission in the first place, but because I had structured my project around only sampling blogs for which I had permission, I ultimately had a very small pool of bloggers to work with. In the end, instead of conducting my own interviews, I was able to rely on data that these bloggers provided me over e-mail, as well as some publicly available interviews with some of them. In the case of this project, the data I obtained from analyzing the blogs was very rich, so I did not need to drastically rethink my project's aims and parameters.[7]

Making active permission an important part of the research process will sometimes mean that research outcomes will deviate from initial plans. Implementing feminist ethnographic principles will often require the researcher to adapt to or accommodate participants' needs rather than the other way around. In attempting to reduce power imbalances, participants may justifiably change the outcome or planned progression of one's research. Accordingly, it is important to be prepared to revise research questions, change frameworks, and adjust expectations of what one might learn and what one might be entitled to research as part of one's commitment to these principles.

Care by Crystal Abidin
Research Stage: Mid-Study

In this section, I emphasize the importance of care in understanding young people's—or any people's—engagements with Tumblr. I will begin by explaining how I came to Tumblr. In the late 2000s, I was actively mentoring a group of teenage girls as they began to navigate secondary school. During one of

our usual weekend shopping trips, one of the girls was on a mission to purchase wooden beaded bracelets. She said she needed something to cover her "scar" but wristbands were too gaudy and Band-Aids were not "prominent" enough. She then showed me a single shallow cut on her left wrist, scratched with a blunt pair of arts-and-craft scissors. She told me that she "didn't really cut herself" but made "enough of a scratch" to leave a mark so that it would still be noticeable to her friends, like a badge of honor, but not visible to her teachers; this evasive strategy she learned "from Tumblr."

My work with young people had taught me to reserve judgement and listen from a place of care, educating myself in *their* beliefs, principles, and cultural values. After that conversation, I spent a lot of time on Tumblr to understand the cultural repertoire of my mentees; that is, I wanted to learn what they were consuming on the internet, the vocabulary they shared, and their relationships with fellow users in order to "connect" with them. Almost a decade later, in the mid-2010s, this experience with young people and this ethics of care still informs my scholarship as a digital anthropologist of vernacular internet cultures. I continue to work with young women's precarious cultures, here specifically investigating the culture of "thinspiration," the practice, largely by young women, of producing, circulating, and consuming discourses that inspire "thinness" as a body ideal and overall lifestyle goal.

Web Archaeology

I adopted web archaeology and participant observation as methods for my project. Web archaeology provides tools for examining the way a platform's interface, affordances, and changing corporate policies shape user practices.[8] In this case, web archaeology helped me determine whether Tumblr's corporate policies reflected an ethics of care regarding this particular area of social concern. To illustrate, when, writing in 2016, I entered a contentious search term (i.e. "thinspo," "depression," "suicide") on Tumblr, the first item on the search results was always a prompt from Tumblr that read:

> Everything Okay? If you or someone you know is suffering from an eating disorder, self harm, or suicidal thoughts, please visit our Counseling & Prevention Resources page for a list of services that may be able to help.

"Counseling & Prevention Resources" is a hyperlink that leads to a list of "Free and Confidential Counseling" services around the world.[9] Initially, I could not remember when Tumblr institutionalized this automatic prompt,

but I recalled from my early days on the platform that contentious search terms like these had intermittently pulled out no results at all, an indication that the tags might have been censored by Tumblr at various points. To understand this history, I did an in-depth search for user-uploaded screengrabs of earlier iterations of Tumblr's platform pre-prompt and also read up on Tumblr's policies on contentious search terms. As it turned out, in March 2012 Tumblr staff posted an update on "Tumblr's New Policy Against Pro-Self-Harm Blogs."[10] After discussions with users, Tumblr staff substituted the previous blanket ban on contentious search terms for the above friendly prompt, which points users toward counseling services. Tumblr thus demonstrated a corporate ethics of care that was unusual, going above and beyond mere draconian and moralistic censorship of content.

Using web archaeology had thus provided me with crucial historical context and insight into how a contentious network such as thinspo had managed to survive and develop on the platform, and how young people's vulnerable internet cultures have thrived, resisted, or evolved alongside official dogma.

Participant Observation

Participant observation is the cornerstone of ethnographic fieldwork. In this early stage of my research, I wanted to survey the general atmosphere of thinspo networks on Tumblr—what thinspo on Tumblr looked like—rather than focus on specific Tumblr users or accounts. Therefore, instead of approaching key gatekeepers or soliciting interviews, I spent the first few months of my project "lurking," that is, reading and keeping up to date with the thinspo network without actually making my presence known via posting, commenting, or reblogging. I was relying more on the "observation" part of "participation observation" at this stage. I centered my initial observations on key tags such as #thinspiration and #thinspo, and I collated related tags on which users cross-posted by scrolling through dozens of posts every other day. There is no fixed amount of time to allot to one's immersion period, since these learning routes differ across social groups and content types; rather, the duration of lurking will depend on the nature of the Tumblr subculture you wish to study (i.e., how accessible are their practices and language?), the extent of the dataset (i.e., do users post frequently or in observable volumes?), and your ability to navigate the terrain of Tumblr (i.e., how savvy and involved are you as a Tumblr user?).

Ethics of Self-Care

In the next stage of my research, I will proceed to the "participation" aspect of my fieldwork by approaching selected Tumblr users for permission to converse with them about their thinspo practices and by engaging in selected community norms. As part of anthropological ethnographic practice, researchers attempt to experience the lifeworlds of the people they study as much as possible, in order to write about their practices from their point of view. As thinspo networks are contentious, I will not be participating in the full scale of subcultural activities (e.g., cutting), but I will select practices that I feel confident and ethical about engaging in, such as those that will not cause harm to others or myself (e.g., providing recovery encouragement). Decisions around selective participation are highly contextual and are best centered on an ethics of care.

In anthropological fieldwork, researchers need to adapt to their ethnographic settings in order to practice empathy and build relationships with their informants. Yet it takes time and effort, and there is no shame in scheduling down time or taking a break from your provocative work. Just as you practice empathy and care toward your informants, practice care toward yourself, especially since the depth and terrain of content enabled by Tumblr's affordances and open search settings can be alluringly indulgent and emotionally draining to navigate.

Sensitivity by Matthew Hart
Research Stage: Complete and Published

In this section, I will discuss issues of verifiability and sensitivity that I had to negotiate in my research. My research question was sparked in 2011, when a close friend happened to tell me how she met her girlfriend on Tumblr. She explained how they had been dating online for months and told of their impending plan to travel across the world to meet each other. I found it curious that young people were choosing to forge intimate relationships from within social networking sites (SNSs), rather than through specifically designed dating websites. And why were young people choosing to be intimate on Tumblr in particular?

Studies involving young people present researchers with challenges. Young people use Tumblr to discuss deeply personal thoughts or feelings, which they believe they cannot do anywhere else online.[11] Consequently, I

take the position that sensitivity should be exercised when dealing with anything that would typically be kept private and personal, result in offense, lead to social censure or disapproval if publicized, or cause the respondent discomfort to express. Because of the consequences that conducting research with vulnerable people can have on not only the researcher, but more importantly on the participants themselves, sensitive research also necessitates extra care be taken when collecting, storing, and analyzing data.

Girls Who Like Girls and the Chubby Hearts Club

In my research, I focused on two prominent dating blogs: *Girls Who Love Girls* (GWLG), which later became *Girls Who Like Girls*, and *The Chubby Hearts Club* (TCHC). The former was made known to me through the friend I had spoken with about her dating experiences on Tumblr. I found the latter by searching the hashtags "#online" and "#dating" on Tumblr. TCHC was, in its own words, for "chubby people" and "chubby-chasers."

As specific findings from this research can be viewed elsewhere, I focus here on my methodology, the rationale for my research choices, and ethical issues I identified in relation to conducting research on Tumblr.[12] Finally, I will make some recommendations for those about to embark on their own Tumblr studies.

Methodological Approach

As a straight white male researcher, I needed to be especially cognizant of how my recruitment strategy (direct messaging) could be interpreted, particularly given the predominantly female population of the two dating blogs I was researching. Consequently, I designed a recruitment approach that was as transparent and verifiable as possible. I made explicitly clear who I was and which university I worked for, and I gave a brief overview of my research aims, my university Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) approval number, and contact details of both my supervisors and the HREC itself (should someone wish to make a complaint). I also provided links to my scholarly profiles at the university where I worked. One research participant commented to me in an interview that they would have ignored my request altogether had I not provided my "digital research footprint," as it were, for validation.

In both cases, I initially approached the gatekeepers (moderators) of each dating blog by sending a private message from my Tumblr research account. The message introduced me and provided information on the study I was hoping to conduct, as well as the participant information sheet. My intention

Fig. 10.2. An example of a recruitment flyer, 2012

was to gain permission from each gatekeeper to upload a recruitment flyer to their dating blogs in the same fashion the users themselves had uploaded their selfies and biographies. I wanted interested individuals to read my flyer and self-select to participate; the only stipulations were that they had used the dating blog in question, had formed an online relationship through this participation, and were between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five. The gatekeeper of GWLG was extremely supportive and instructed me how to submit my research flyer to their dating blog (figure 10.2). In contrast, the first TCHC gatekeeper I approached was not as supportive. Despite showing the institutional approval of my study, the gatekeeper believed that I wanted to conduct market research on his community and would not allow me to post a research flyer on TCHC. Another gatekeeper at TCHC, however, permitted me to interview her, and I was able to use "snowball sampling" (the process by which a participant refers you to another potential participant, in a cascading fashion) to recruit the remaining participants.

Managing the Research Process

I ultimately conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews online with a sample of ten young people between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five to understand participants' intimate experiences through dating on Tumblr. Each of the ten interviewees nominated Skype as the locus of their interview, and they chose whether they wanted a video, audio, or text interview. By removing the need to be "visible" in the interview, and enabling the interviewee to control the location, timing, and nature of the research, online interviewing can prove to be an empowering experience for the participant. This was made clear when, upon conclusion of the interviews, many of the participants expressed joy or satisfaction for being able to reflect upon their intimate and social practices in an encouraging, safe space.

Online methods are known to raise questions of legitimacy regarding the verifiability of research institutions as well as participant identities. Indeed, my university HREC was concerned about the verifiability of my participants, that is, my ability to verify *their* identity. For example, HREC members suggested that participants scan their personal identifications (such as a driver's license) and turn their webcam on so that I could verify their identities. I explained that this approach was not appropriate given that Tumblr is favored by young people *because* of its pseudonymity. If I wanted to create a comfortable environment for them, it was imperative that I respect this cultural attitude and maintain their right to privacy. I also suggested how internet data can be verified through other means, such as scrolling through and conducting a trace ethnography on a user's archive. More simply, the researcher can make a judgment call on a user's honesty and sincerity by looking for consistency in their online presentation of self: the content that is shared, the selfies that routinely depict the same person, or the distinctions that are consistently upheld. These can all be measured against the interview data in a way that is non-invasive and does not compromise the user's privacy.

CONCLUSION

Analysing Tumblr can yield rich data, but attention must be paid to constructing an appropriate methodology for conducting this research. Public access is not the same as public property, and we should take care when shar-

ing Tumblr data outside of the platform, making sure to provide adequate context and accurate framing. In this essay, we focused on issues that seem to us particularly pertinent regarding Tumblr and its youthful user base: permission, care, and sensitivity. Through its pseudonymity, visuality, and lack of technical barriers mediating access to most material, Tumblr can provide a space for emotional connection and the articulation of awkward desires and dark or unsayable feelings for vulnerable young people in particular. We hope that in outlining some of our own experiences, readers are able to take away some insights into both the wonderful and challenging elements of approaching Tumblr as a researcher.

NOTES

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