‘It’s all good as long as you can avoid THE DISCOURSE!!’: Tumblr as a space for social justice activism for the asexual community

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Introduction

The proliferation of digital activism by marginalised groups on platforms such as Facebook and Twitter has been widely documented (Rambukkana, 2015; Lewis, Sharp, Remnant et al., 2015), however despite being the second largest microblogging platform after Twitter in the Western world (Chang et al., 2014), scholarly attention to activism on Tumblr has been sparse. This thesis aims to address this gap and query the efficacy of Tumblr as a platform for counterpublic activism through a case study of asexual users on the site. It will utilise Fraser's (1990:68) framework of subaltern counterpublics to evaluate Tumblr, particularly her notion of their dual character as both a space for marginalised identities to congregate and as a site to organise contestation against dominant oppressive forces. It will argue that Tumblr's platform design, protocols and algorithms result in a paradoxical relationship between the site being perceived as a 'safe space' to perform identity and build community by asexual users, and its efficacy as a space for counterpublic activism for the group. The affordances that initially drew asexual users to Tumblr were the ease of anonymity on the site, the loose knit community where participation was primarily achieved through liking and sharing existing content, a customisable interface that allowed users to cultivate a feed of material suited to their individual interests and a culture of playful content. However, all of these aspects simultaneously placed limitations as to how activism could effectively be put into action on the platform and whether linear, rational debate could take place.

The case study of the asexual community was chosen for several reasons; firstly, the asexual movement's roots are firmly tied to the digital as prior to the first asexual-specific online forum, AVEN (Asexual Visibility and Education Network) being set up there was no identifiable offline asexual movement – not even a consensus as to what language should be utilised to discuss the experiences of sexual non-attraction. This means that, unlike many counterpublics for whom new media was simply an alternative channel for activism, for the asexual community the digital has been central in both its construction and its maintenance. Secondly, whilst AVEN still remains a focal point for the community, a large asexual user base has notably opted to congregate on Tumblr rather than more widely utilised sites for digital activism such as Twitter and Facebook, therefore the case study provides an opportunity to interrogate what may have impacted this choice – what affordances did Tumblr hold over larger platforms for the asexual users, and what potential could it hold for other counterpublic communities?

This thesis will be structured across three chapters. The first chapter will give a background of literature surrounding identity politics, particularly the potential that the Internet may hold for counterpublic groups as well as a brief overview of the formation of the asexual community. The second chapter will detail the methodology and findings of this dissertation. It will begin with a platform analysis of Tumblr's technology, content, user base and governance in line with Van Dijcks (2013) framework to analyse social media sites, before turning to give an overview of the findings of an online questionnaire circulated to asexual users and a content analysis of a sample of Tumblr posts. The final chapter will be a discussion of the results centring around how Tumblr as a platform aids in constructing a 'safe space'

for community building, but simultaneously places limitations on where subsequent activism could take place.

Chapter 1: Literature Review

Subaltern Counterpublic Framework

In the late 20th century there was a distinct turn in social justice movements that saw a shift in the scope of activism which previously centred around oppression of rights to broader questions of identity, particularly evident in 2nd wave feminism, the black civil rights movement and gay and lesbian liberation (Nicholson, 2008:1). This rise of what was termed 'identity politics' rested on the belief that 'oppressed groups need to be at the forefront of their own liberation' (Alcoff and Mohanty, 2006:2) by examining their own experiences in order to identify their own unique needs beyond issues of the politics of redistribution and access to address how certain norms, values and practices in society functioned to sustain their continued subordination (Fraser, 1996:3; Nicholson, 2008:1-3). However, if these groups are continually silenced by dominant discourse and in the wider publics, then this raises questions about what space is available for deliberation. Fraser puts forward the framework of subaltern counterpublics, 'parallel discursive areas' that form as a result of this silencing in which 'subordinated social groups [can] invent and circulate counter discourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identity, interests and needs' (Fraser, 1992:123). In contemporary society, these counterpublic activists are increasingly turning to the digital to provide these alternative areas, especially with the rhetoric of democracy and equal participation surrounding Web 2.0 and social networking platforms such as Twitter and Facebook where the boundaries between public and private are the most undefined and contested.

Fraser coined the term ‘counterpublics’ as a critique to refer to the non-bourgeois public spheres that Habermas disregarded in his original conceptualisation of the democratic public sphere (Fraser, 1990:61). Although critical of Habermas’s model, Fraser argues that it provides a tool to examine the ways in which ‘culture is embedded in social structure’ and how this leads to the subordination of certain groups and individuals (Fraser, 1995:388). Habermas theorised the public sphere as a deliberative arena that could mediate between state and society and in which status distinctions between participants were bracketed and neutralised (Fraser, 1990:60). Therefore, in his work the ‘public sphere’ was inhabited by the emergent class of bourgeois men who would bracket their own privileges in order to make objective moral decisions that would benefit the most people. The absence of anyone outside this group of bourgeois men who were expected to speak on behalf of everyone functioned to silence both the working class and women.

Habermas’s public sphere also drew a distinction between the issues that should be deliberated in the public sphere and what should be relegated to the private (Benhabib, 1992:74). The public then, was where ‘private persons’ deliberated about ‘public matters’, however this relies on a consensus of what is of concern to everyone, and what is relegated to the private. Public and private are not straight forward designated terms, they are ‘cultural classifications and rhetorical labels’ (Fraser, 1992:131) and so delimiting the scope of the debate through their use is a powerful tool to push issues pertaining to disadvantaged groups to the margins. Therefore, from the outset the concept of the public sphere rested heavily on exclusion, highlighting the irony of the notion that the public sphere was to be an accessible deliberative space, free of social hierarchies (Fraser, 1992:115).

Since then however, feminist revisionist history has called into question the assumption central to Habermas's theory – an existence of a *single* masculinist public sphere – and argues it was never *the* public sphere but instead has always been a plurality of competing publics which rose out of the biases of what the bourgeois claimed was the public, and as a result of exclusion found it 'advantageous to constitute alternative publics' (Fraser, 1992:123). Barbara Ryan (1992:265-270) points to evidence of this as she documented how 19th Century North American women who, despite being formally excluded from public political life, formed a counter civil society of women-only associations and moral reform societies in order to publicly protest women's suffrage. Whilst this feminist counterpublic predominantly focused on the politics of redistribution, 'of socioeconomic transformation and reform' to counter formal exclusion (Fraser, 1996:6), the rise of identity politics saw a shift in focus of feminist counterpublics to the language of deliberation to address socio-political and cultural concerns such as discrimination, harassment and violence (Melucci, 1996). Alongside this emerged the concept of 'safe spaces' for marginalised groups, a term which will be returned to and unpacked shortly due to its prevalence and the contestation of its use in contemporary digital activism, especially on Tumblr.

Habermas saw the public sphere as a discursive arena for the deliberation of the common good of all. As such, it presumes a 'standpoint of a single, all-encompassing "we" and thereby ruling claims of self-interest and groups out of order' (Fraser, 1992:130). This functions, then, to circumscribe certain topics – particularly that of the domestic, personal or sexual – to the private arena and to

shield them from widespread debate, usually to the advantage of dominant groups (Fraser, 1992:132). Language then became the central battleground for 20th century feminist activists who recognised the insidious ways it was used as a way to maintain hegemony in that subordinate groups are often left not only without a voice but without even the language needed to articulate their thoughts.

Feminist activists utilised the safe spaces of counterpublic arenas to deliberate over their wants and needs, invent and circulate a counter discourse to address these, and as a 'training ground for agitational activities directed toward wider publics' (Fraser, 1992:124) and so resulted in the creation of terms such as 'sexism' and 'sexual harassment' in order to better communicate their social realities (Fraser, 1995:291). Whilst not eliminating the disadvantage, issues previously denoted as private, such as domestic violence, were wrestled into the realm of public concern leading to a burgeoning understanding that domestic violence was a systemic feature of a male dominated society, not an issue only pertaining to those (women) who had experienced it (Fraser, 1992:130). However, making public what was once private is not sufficient to change or challenge oppressive institutions. Backlash occurs as the opposition often will develop its own rhetoric to discredit those who challenge it. Antifeminist movements stated harassment claims were as a result of an overreaching political correctness, and those that sought to change misogynistic language were impending on free speech (Fraser, 1995:307). This feminist critique of the public sphere serves to highlight the ways in which both formal exclusion from political institutions and informal exclusion through language and culture can function to maintain the subordination based on gender, but can equally be applied

to marginalised communities of class, race or sexuality as will be evident in the case study of the asexual community on Tumblr.

Safe Spaces

In Fraser's framework counterpublics dually provide a space to withdraw from dominant oppressive discourse and a space to train and plan for contestation in the wider publics, so in this sense they function similarly to what Duncan (1996:129) terms a 'safe base'. Duncan defined this as a site for organising resistance through solidarity and common understanding to enable 'participants to form a culturally and politically independent identity, foregrounding the characteristics that are marginalised in mainstream society' (Duncan cited in Roestone Collective, 2014:1353). Whilst Duncan opted for the term 'base', the definition could very well be in reference to the more popular rhetoric today, a 'safe space'.

The notion of 'safe spaces' emerged in the late twentieth century in correlation with the rise of identity politics in particular feminist, queer and race related activist movements, and was associated with the need for these marginalised groups to find a site free from violence and harassment, and thus ties in well with Fraser's conceptualisation of subaltern counterpublics. However, the term has exponentially gained popularity in recent years and the rhetoric of 'safe spaces' is now utilised in a variety of contexts, and its definition is not unanimously agreed upon. For instances, whether 'safe spaces' are a necessity in educational situations has become a prevalent but contentious issue, especially in the Unites States regarding fire arms, but also globally in regards to free speech. Several high profile speakers have

received a backlash after being invited to speak at UK universities as students circulated petitions to ban them as a result of controversial, in some cases racist or transphobic, statements they have previously made, arguing they should not be given a platform for these views at educational institutions (Packman, 2016). Critics of safe space policies argue that we need spaces to deliberate opposing ideas, for instance Dunne (2017), talking of the aforementioned petitions to no-platform certain speakers at UK universities, points out how excluding certain voices is a form of political control in and of itself and limits students' opportunities to engage with diverse views. Additionally, critics argue the classroom is not a zero-culture zone; the same issues of privilege and power in the larger socio-political realm are replicated. What may constitute as a safe space for one student does not necessarily translate to another and to presume it does risks imposing a culturally hegemonic position (Montero, 1995:37-38), which raises significant questions over the feasibility of a safe space being implemented in education without perhaps unintentionally marginalising certain individuals.

The term 'safe space' is also employed in the marketing of objects such a bicycles, cars and mobile phones and for care of non-humans such as dogs and cats (Roestone Collective, 2014:1358) and it appears frequently in literature on environmental illness especially in relation to chemical sensitivity and allergies (Coyle, 2004:64), as well as in reference to physical spaces, particularly in feminist geography scholarship (Roestone Collective, 2014) or in activist protests such the feminist march Reclaim the Night. Evidently, from the varying use of 'safe space' just discussed, the criticism the term is an 'overused but undertheorized metaphor' holds a certain merit (Barrett, 2010:1).

As a response The Roestone Collective worked to retheorize the term by 'examining the work that goes into producing sites referred to as 'safe spaces'. They suggest to treat the notion of 'safe space' not as a contextual singularity, but instead to recognize it as a 'living concept' with variations in use over a multiplicity of circumstances. This dissertation will borrow from their framework theory that posits that the production of a 'safe space' is a process of continuous relational work, using it as a starting point for considering how the asexual community initially formed online and in what spaces they chose to do so, and in how they have since negotiated differences and boundaries both in and out of the community. Using the term 'safe space' without clarification can invoke a utopian image for marginalised groups, but evidently this risks disregarding the importance of the 'normative messiness' and the power relations of the oppositional work required to rectify boundaries of the 'safe space' – in particular the action of defining in-group and out-group borders (Roestone Collective, 2014).

The production of safe spaces is by definition a response to something perceived as 'unsafe', that is the potential of violence (in all senses) which functions as a powerful social imaginary that demands, encourages or influences certain people to avoid certain spaces. A single space - not necessarily referring to the physical - may vary in its 'safety' based on locality, temporality, and depending who is using it. What constitutes as safe for one person may be perceived as unsafe for those in a different identity group as the categories are socially produced and reliant on context. 'Safe spaces' then are not a singular, tangible location but rather 'imaginary construction[s]' of safety (Stengel, 2010:524) in response to institutionalised

patriarchal, heteronormative, racist and classist threats. However, the challenge of the production of these safe spaces is that they rely on the creation of boundaries, of defining who is and who isn't part of a community, and therefore rest on the act of exclusion to create unity and solidarity within.

Furthermore, whilst in theory these 'safe spaces' may strive to be democratic and egalitarian, axes of exclusion and marginalization still exist within them (Fraser:1995). Counterpublic communities can still suffer from internal division and hierarchal structures that pose a challenge to the site's safety. Hooks, (1990:47) in her work on the "homeplace" as a site for African American "political solidarity" and mobilizing resistance maintained by women, highlights how it has also became "a site of patriarchal domination of black women by black men" which conversely functioned to undermine part of its political potential by serving the interest of white male supremacy (hooks, 1990). For some groups, such as those in Valentine's and Skelton's study of rural feminist lesbian separatist communities in the 1970s, the cultivation of a safe space rests explicitly on exclusion of others. Whilst their goal was to create women-only spaces apart from heteronormative patriarchal values, Valentine and Skelton (2003:863) note that there was an 'inherent whiteness' to them as a result of valorising the (white) lesbian feminist identity over others, which often led to a dismissal or ignorance over other intersections of oppression, particularly of race. Both of these examples highlight the paradox of safe spaces, in that they are 'simultaneously safe and unsafe, inclusive and exclusive, separatist and integrated' depending on one's identities (Roestone Collective, 2014:1352).

Whilst the aforementioned has given examples of safe spaces for marginalised identities in the physical sense, the rhetoric of 'safe spaces' has become increasingly important for counterpublic activists as they turn to the Internet as a space to congregate where boundaries are less defined – particularly cultural and geographic ones. The Internet offered new possibilities for activists, but at the same time new complications have arisen specifically relating to the move to the digital such as the right to privacy and anonymity, trolling and backlash, and pertaining to the architecture of the platforms themselves on which counterpublic activists are communicating.

Digital Democracy

As the above has highlighted, central to the formation of a counterpublic is the ability to create a safe discursive area in which counter-discourse can be deliberated and a coherent group cultural identity formed (Dahlberg, 2007, p837), however an absence of language to articulate issues alongside geographic boundaries and cultural differences evidently complicate this. The rapid rise of the Internet was heralded as a solution, offering a new potential for democratic participation that extended the dialogue beyond face-to-face and offered novel new ways of many-to-many communication rather than one-to-one and new modes of interactivity (Bohman, 2004:131-134).

Research into the Internet's potential for communicative innovation initially focused on how groups formed around shared interests in popular culture on forums and email lists (Baym, 1999, Bury, 2005), and emphasised how these spaces formed

shared, unified communities across the globe (Grey, Sandvoss and Harrington, 2007, Jenkins, 2006). This resulted in a consideration of how this potential for digital communication could translate to the public sphere (Gauntlett, 2004). Using technology for democracy is by no means a novel idea; in the past 'teledemocracy' experiments which allowed people to use push-button keypads to vote on televised questions have grappled with this notion (Arterton, 1987; Elshtain, 1982). Nonetheless, examples such as this are unidirectional and did not open up a space for participatory debate – a feature critical to Habermas's theorisation of a democratic public sphere (Calhoun, 1992). Email discussion groups and platforms such as Usenet (considered the predecessor to online forums), however, were not a one-way street and were consequently cited as examples of a 'new public sphere' where all citizens could participate in deliberation on equal footing (Schneider, 1996). Ideally, if following a Habermasian model, these spaces should be able to facilitate a rational critical debate that results in a consensus reached over political issues for the common good.

Whilst some emphasised this emancipatory potential of early online spaces for the socially disadvantaged and for those whose voices were not otherwise heard (Tsagarousianou et al., 1998:6), critics pointed out that forums and e-mail groups tend to replicate the real world inequalities, in so much as voices that dominate offline will continue to be heard the loudest online (Dahlberg, 2007). Papacharissi more broadly critiqued the 'mystical connection' between technology and democracy in that 'not all technologies are democratizing or democracy related' (2010:10), noting that new media evokes narratives (fantasies) of emancipation through technological empowerment, which holds a particular appeal in the

powerlessness of contemporary democracy (Papacharasissi, 2010:147). Gitelman avoids taking a fully anti technological-determinist standpoint as she notes that whilst technologies do determine *some* of the conditions for communication, this does not occur independently of wider social and economic relations (2006:10). Ergo under this line of thought, new media, and in this case the Internet, does not in itself possess a specific ethos nor an assured step forward toward an egalitarian public sphere (Papacharissi, 2010:9). Instead, it provides the potential of space and/or affordances for the opportunity of increased participation but this is not structured independently from existing social hierarchies and patterns of subordination.

Papacharissi calls to assess the democratising potential of the Internet, and whether it can indeed contribute to a more participatory contemporary public sphere, through a lens of the effect of both social and political capital (2010:120). Firstly, she argues that the assumption that a greater access to information will result in rational, structured arguments between informed citizens, neglects to consider issues such as the digital divide caused by the disadvantage experienced by those without access to the Internet, or how local or regional publics (not a worldwide one) continue to exist even though they are online, and how online media simultaneously produces the same class, gender and race inequalities that exist offline. The notion of a democratic Internet also presumes that, if given greater access to information, citizens will utilise this knowledge to expand political understanding through diverse content, which ignores how the internet has become a site of play and entertainment, and how content production is still dominated by the elite (Papacharissi, 2010:121). The concept of a democratic public sphere as a discursive

arena relies on deliberation and a reciprocity of communication (Dahlberg, 2007), however digital spaces do not necessarily provide this and users do not have to abide by these rules. Online communities may be able to cross geographic borders, but this risks both magnifying and/or reproducing cultural disparities if both parties do not wish to engage in mutual conversation, or exhibit compromise and understanding over differences and inequalities. As a result, Papacharassi (2010:124) calls for the Internet to be considered 'as a public space, but not inevitably a public sphere'.

Despite these criticisms, there has been well documented evidence of the increasing use of new media, in particular social networking sites (SNSs) by counterpublic movements (Dahlgren, 2009; Castells, 2015; Landale and Meinrath, 2017). This may be in part due to the rhetoric that posits Web 2.0 as an inherently participatory and collaborative space which presumably could allow for more voices to be heard in political advocacy, and as a result of the ubiquity of social media in our everyday lives in so much as mediated sociality is now a routine cultural practice. Additionally, it may also be a result of how the networked non hierarchal structure of the internet parallels the structure of social movements. Social media has collapsed the boundaries between public and private speech both through the way in which casual utterances become formalised inscriptions that have the potential to reach far beyond the original speaker through likes and shares globally (Van Dijck, 2013:7), and the way in which they have become 'the default context where not only politics, but life in general takes place' (Fotopolou, 2016:999). This functions to problematize where the delineation between matters of private and public concern lie which for counterpublic activists, especially in the realms of identity politics,

could potentially be beneficial to bring to the centre what was once assigned to the margins.

Over the last decade, literature from the subfield of digital activism studies has predominantly been concerned with large scale political events and mobilization (Pickard and Yang, 2017), alternate computing and hacktism (Sorrell, 2015), surveillance and law across borders (Gerbaudo, 2012; Van Dijck, 2013), and the construction of networked publics which refers to the 'imagined collective that emerges as a result of the intersection of people, technology, and practice' (boyd, 2011: 39). However, Kaun and Uldamn (2017:2-3) criticise the ambiguity of the term 'digital activism' and the field itself for overemphasising newness of technologies, universalising the ways in which activists employ the digital and the efficacy of it to bring about offline change (Gerbaudo, 2017). Raymond Williams (1985) proposed that technologies do not exist independently from larger societal and political structures and that the two are intrinsically linked. Williams's statement is just as applicable to new media today as it was to the technologies of the time of his writing. Networked grassroots and DIY culture shuns traditional media outlets and propagates an environment in which users feel they have control over their self-representation (Ratto and Boler, 2014; Jenkins, Ito and boyd, 2015), however this utopian rhetoric ignores how existing power hierarchies are masked behind narratives of emancipatory potential.

Fotopoulou (2016:995), when interviewing feminist activists, found that many perceived the Web 2.0 as providing a non-hierarchical, decentralised network that allowed them to connect in a more inclusive way than traditional methods. This

perspective however neglects to consider what Gillespie (2010) terms the 'politics of platforms' which often remain invisible to users. As a result, whilst the gatekeeping tactics of the mass media have been acknowledged – increasingly so by the general public - to have silence marginalised voices in the past (Vivienne and Burgess, 2012:373), on the surface at least SNSs are considered by ordinary users as both neutral and autonomous. The 'politics of platforms' refers to how platforms are mediators, not intermediaries; they are a combination of techno-cultural constructs and socioeconomic structures that 'shape the performance of the social act instead of merely facilitating them' (Van Dijck, 2013:29).

In her book 'The Culture of Connectivity', Van Dijck (2013:22) argues that social media platforms should be analysed as individual microsystems that each have their own ideological underpinnings, norms and values constructed from a combination of their technologies, usage, content, ownership and models of governance. Evidently, this raises questions about the ways in which digital counterpublic activism is impacted by the specific platform on which it takes place. Van Dijck's (2013) own analysis, as well as consequent research, which has taken ideas from Van Dijck's approach, have both predominantly focused on Facebook and Twitter (Taylor, Falconer and Snowdon, 2014; Fotopoulou, 2016) - possibly due to their ubiquitous nature – 'to friend' someone is now part of global lexicon (Van Dijck, 2013: 51) and the impact Twitter has had on the meaning and functionality of the hashtag cannot be understated (Chang, 2011). However, if scholarship is primarily limited to addressing either Twitter and Facebook, this risks making generalised conclusions about the impact of social media for counterpublics activism that ignores how platform specificity has the potential to shape and alter communication through

unique affordances and social and cultural norms. In light of this and as the central focus of this thesis, this chapter will now give an overview of Tumblr which, despite being the second largest microblogging platform to Twitter in the Western world, has lacked similar scholarly attention (Vasquez and Creel, 2017:61).

Tumblr

Attu and Terras (2017) conducted a bibliometric study and located just 61 academic papers that were about or made reference to Tumblr, noting that in a similar study of Twitter publications numbered over 1000, which suggests there is a significant gap in current interrogation of Tumblr. However, across this limited literature, the connection between Tumblr and various counterpublic movements, social justice orientated content and an overall ethos of acceptance and inclusivity was emphasised by numerous scholars (Renninger, 2014; Vasquez and Creel, 2017; Fink and Miller, 2014). This demonstrates the necessity for further exploration in order to identify how Tumblr has acquired this reputation, and how the platform's technological affordances shape on-site activism and impact user experiences and motivations.

Tumblr was launched in 2007 by David Karp and as of 1st November 2017 has over 381.4 million blogs & 155.6 billion posts in 18 languages, although it is arguably US-centric as 42% of overall traffic is domestic US (Statista, 2017). Over half of users are under 25, therefore it attracts a significantly more youthful market than Facebook or Twitter (Chang et al., 2014). Tumblr, like Facebook and Twitter, can be categorised as an SNS, however it also shares characteristics with user-generated

content sites (UGCs) such as YouTube in that it relies on its user production for content exchange (van Dijck, 2013:8). Tumblr users do not have individual profiles, but rather each user creates their own blog(s) and, like Twitter, follow or are followed by other users. The primary interface on Tumblr is referred to as the 'dashboard' which is a feed of all the posts made by blogs that a user follows. The default for desktop computers has the posts appear in reverse chronological order, however as of November 2017, on the mobile app the default dashboard setting has posts in ordered by 'most popular' as delineated by an algorithm Tumblr has not disclosed - although users can opt out of this if they wish. Users scroll through their dashboard and interact predominantly through 'liking' and 'reblogging' posts. Any 'liked' posts are saved to a user's personal archive, and if a post is 'reblogged' it is posted onto a user's personal blog and consequently will appear on all their followers' dashboards, therefore garnering a larger audience for the post. All interactions, whether 'liking' or 'reblogging', contribute a 'note' to the post, therefore the number of notes a post accumulates functions as an indicator of its popularity.

In a large scale study of Tumblr users posting behaviours, Xu, Compton, Lu et al. (2014:6) argued the site is predominantly 'centered around user hobbies and interests' such as music, film, and photography. Fan studies scholars have likewise noted the prevalence of taste communities and fandoms congregating on the site. They argue that the platform offers of a range of multimedia post types and places emphasis on user generated content – which particularly lends itself to the hosting of transformative works – and consequently appeals to these fannish communities (Petersen, 2014; Deller, 2015; Freeman and Taylor-Ashfield, 2017). Tumblr itself

appears to support this particular platform usage as evidenced by their weekly publication of the 'Tumblr Fandometrics' in which they utilise their own data (which remains inaccessible for users and researchers) to curate lists of the most tagged, searched for, reblogged and liked fandoms.

Several studies have also explored health related content on Tumblr, particularly mental illness (Cavazos-Rehg, Krauss and Sowles et al., 2017). Seko and Lewis (2018) noted how the frequent use of humorous media memes on Tumblr had been appropriated by young adults who used meme material to provide a narrative to 'hopeless moods' and self-injury. Kelleher and Moreno (2016) conducted a small scale study to consider whether Tumblr could be used as a platform to distribute mental health resources to users they had identified as frequently posting about depression. Despite Tumblr banning blogs that 'actively promote self-harm' and controversial material such as pro-anorexia images in 2012 (Gabbatt, 2012), Wick and Harriger (2018) found that 'thinspiraton' posts advocating for extreme weight loss are still commonly circulated on the site, which raised questions about the implications of this for vulnerable users, but also of the definition of 'safe spaces' on the platform. More promisingly, however, Gonzalez-Polledo and Tarr (2016) explored how Tumblr bought together chronic-pain suffers and provided a space of solidarity to articulate pain 'reimagined through and against mainstream biomedical frameworks'. Although initially these user subsections may appear drastically different from those that use Tumblr to bond over their favourite fictional television shows, they are all evident of the platform's normative use as a site on which to curate and explore different facets of one's identity.

This focus on identity formation may in part explain the sites popularity with LGBT users. Oakley (2016) argues that Tumblr's decision not to ask its users to disclose their real name, sex/gender and location is part of its appeal for those who do not identify themselves under binary gender or sexual orientation labels. Fink and Miller (2014) flagged up the way in which transgender users employed Tumblr as a platform for self-representation through visual aesthetics that provided space to challenge gender binaries. Dame (2016) documented transgender users' normative behavioural practice on the platform such as 'tagging' – a Tumblr convention that has diverged somewhat from the more widely recognised hashtag practices used on Twitter that will be explored fully in chapter 2 – to self-identify and build community. This scholarship on Tumblr usage for identity exploration by LGBT users may posit one reason as to why the platform also appealed to the asexual community.

Briefly, before this chapter turns to document a short history of the formation of the asexual counterpublic movement, I wish to preface at this point how I will employ the term LGBT for the remainder of this thesis. LGBT is the most widely recognised initialism used by a majority of sexuality and gender-identity related communities since the 1980s, and whilst the letters may nominally stand for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender, the term *can* and *is* generally employed to include all non-heterosexual and non-cisgender individuals. Whilst LGBT (or LGBT+) has become the accepted shorthand both institutionally and in the media, there is still some disputation over the boundaries of inclusion/exclusion under the initialism, especially for the asexual community. Not all individuals who identify as asexual want to be part of the LGBT community, and, as will be explored further in chapter

3, a minority within the LGBT movement are vehemently against asexuality falling under the LGBT umbrella. Therefore, whilst this thesis does situate asexuality as part of the LGBT movement on the basis of its subversion from heteronormativity, it simultaneously acknowledges that this action may be disputed by some.

Forming an Asexual Counterpublic

Asexuality as a named identity and a political movement emerged in the early 2000s, however the experience of lacking sexual attraction is not a modern development (Bogaert, 2012:38; Milks and Cerankowski, 2014:25). Bogaert (2012:34) notes the difficulty in pinning down historical asexuality, arguing that if a record shows a man to have shunned marriage and children, and there is little evidence of sexual liaisons, it is more likely to infer he was attracted to men as he would have been trying to conceal this behaviour, which works to erase any potential of past asexuality. More often than not, historically asexuality has been implicitly linked to celibacy and religious abstinence (Bogaert, 2012:18), and due to asexuality being a 'lack' of something rather than a definable act or action it becomes hard to identify. This lack of a distinct act to aid in forging an identity mirrors the early struggles over defining bisexuality, as both are considered absent in historical writing as a result of presumed monosexuality (Angelides, 2001:7)

Studies of asexuality in academia have also fallen to the wayside as queer theory has concentrated on challenging compulsory heterosexuality, yet has showed little interest considering the implication of compulsory sexuality and/or eroticism (Chu, 2014:172). Radical queer anti-assimilationist literature can have the unintended

effect of rendering asexuality invisible, invalid or abnormal by associating the identity with a 'suppression of eroticism' and 'involuntary entrance into the closet', concluding it is both conservative and in support of assimilation into the heteronormative (Chu, 2014:178). Aside from this, literature on asexuality has focused on psychological and physiological explanations using medical tools and methodology that serve to perpetuate the notion that no sexual desire is a pathological condition, a dysfunction that needs treating (Flore, 2014:66) and has led to asexuality being listed, albeit not by name, in the DSM thus making it a 'disorder' (Kahn, 2014:134)[1]. Recently, discourse on asexuality has begun to expand into literary studies, disability studies and legal studies, however it still lacks significant scholarly attention in the humanities (Milks and Cerankowski, 2010; Milks and Cerankowski, 2014).

As well as language pathologizing asexuality, the lack of a shared lexicon to articulate the lived asexual experiences has prevented a cohesive identity from being established. In the 1990s terms such as antisexuality, asexuality, non-sexuality and celibacy were all used interchangeably, rendering it difficult for individuals to find one another without a focal point for the community. Whilst other facets of the LGBT community formed identities to fight to legitimize their sexual behaviour and confront oppression of these actions (Adam, 1995:18; Bogaert, 2012:89), asexuality

[1] The DSM, or the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, has a history of medicalising and pathologising sexualities that sit outside the heteronormative. Whilst it does not explicitly list asexuality as a disorder, 'persistent or recurrently deficient (or absent) sexual fantasies and desire for sexual activity' is the first criteria for Hypoactive Sexual Desire Disorder (HSDD). Kahn (2014) argues it forces asexual identifying people to adopt the language of the DSM to articulate their experiences which results in clinicians falsely diagnosing a sexual orientation as a 'problem' that needs 'fixing'.

faced a challenge in that it by definition revolves around the absence of something and in that sense is not visibly oppressed, which raises the question as to why it was so vital for an identity to be forged. Scholars suggest the following reasons; to defend against the medicalisation of the identity (Bogaert, 2012:85), to stop individuals feeling alone and isolated in society which 'presumes sexual desire to be a universal experience' (Milks and Cerankowski, 2014:46), to challenge stereotypes which see asexuality as synonymous with repression, anti-sociality, repulsiveness and inhumanness (Milks and Cerankowski, 2014:46) and to explore new possibilities of intimate relationships and kinship structures that pose an alternative to the overwhelming value placed on the traditional nuclear family and sexual relations (Przybolo, 2014). If language 'usually favours one way of seeing things and discourages others' (Fraser, 1992:119), it does posit one reason the asexual movement struggled to find a cohesive form.

However, an asexual movement did emerge – and it was predominantly web based (Cerankowski, 2014:287), suggesting that online spaces were essential for the formation and organisation of this counterpublic, unlike other existing social movements for whom the internet was just an additional platform for activism. The emergence of a counterpublic was not instantaneous, nor was it always unified and some early online spaces did not initially facilitate a move towards a cohesive community or productive discourse, which suggests that the type of platform on which debate and deliberation take place and its affordances, factor into determining how – and if - a community is formed. The following section will give a brief chronological overview of the emergence of an asexual counterpublic which can be loosely understood to have occurred over three online platforms; the first was in the

comments section of a local Arizona newspaper, the second was an e-mail group centred around abstinence and finally the third, which today is widely cited by scholars such as Milks and Cerankowski (2014:25) as the focal point of the asexual community, is the Asexual Visibility and Education Network, more widely known as AVEN.

The first evidence of online discussion pertaining to asexuality was in 1997 in the comments section of an article entitled 'My Life as an Amoeba' for a local newspaper in Arizona (O'Reilly, 1997). The article detailed author Zoe O'Reilly's acceptance of her own asexuality, linking her pride in her identity to the recent trend of celebrities 'coming out' as part of the LGBT community therefore making an early tentative association between an asexual identity and the LGBT politics. The site allowed users to comment semi-anonymously as it required users to complete a 'name' field but most opted for pseudonyms. There was no function for replying to specific posts, although some users attempted to circumvent this by citing pseudonyms in their subsequent comments, yet no mutual conversation appeared to occur. This is evident of what Pappacharissi notes as one of the potential drawbacks of online communication; it often lacks reciprocity (2010:123), and therefore results in little deliberation or community.

Whilst intra-discursive contestation is important in order to help articulate issues and positions of a counterpublic, it is necessary to reach a certain level of consensus for stability of identity and this by necessity involves a process of exclusion/inclusion (Dahlberg, 2007:836-837). For the fledging asexual community, it was important to define the boundaries of what asexuality actually was. In the comments section of

‘My Life as an Amoeba’ three distinct views existed alongside one another. The first were those who saw ‘sexual desire as mandatory’ (Flore, 2014:54) therefore refuting O’Reilly’s word and posing a threat for marginalised voices. The second two groups both identified with O’Reilly, albeit in different ways, which presented a challenge to the future direction of asexual discourse. These two groups were split into those who recognised O’Reilly’s experience of never having felt sexual attraction as similar to their own, whilst the others utilised terminology such as celibacy and anti-sex which are associated with the choice of not partaking in sex, thus pertaining to the *act* itself not *attraction*. These perspectives whilst both overlapping to a certain extent are in fact fundamentally different in lived experience, and without a suitable platform for deliberation, this difference in language deterred any cohesive community from forming.

Following this, on 11th October 2000 a Yahoo Group entitled ‘Haven for Human Amoeba’ was created (Haven for Human Amoeba, 2017). This marked the first time asexual discourse would take place in an insular setting – users had to sign up and join the group in order to view and contribute, suggesting this was a push to create a ‘safe space’ in which to construct counter-discourse which Dahlberg notes is vital for group identity formation (2007:837). The Yahoo group functioned as a mailing list with each new comment dispersed to members in a separate email, the design of this platform made organised discussion near impossible as membership grew in numbers. Unlike the comments on ‘My Life as an Amoeba’, some intra-discursive contestation over the definition of asexuality as a lived experience and political project began to occur as users engaged in conversation - although reciprocity was limited by the platform itself. Furthermore, many users still talked past one another

or ignored comments from those whose views disputed their own. As discussed previously, the creation of 'safe spaces' does not necessarily mean egalitarian for all as their production relies on exclusion to create boundaries which was evident in the group (Fraser, 1992:124). The group was created and listed under the category 'abstinence' which led to a bias in the direction of discourse, privileging some conceptualisation of asexuality over others and resulting in three distinct subgroups forming.

The first and most prominent, was the 'antisex' group who posited that a life without sex is morally superior and who did not draw the distinction between asexuality and celibacy; this group went on to form the website 'Antisexual Stronghold'. The second were 'hard-line asexuals' who held a rigid definition of asexuality that stated one must have *never* experienced sexual or romantic attraction/arousal and sought to verify this through an online survey. These gatekeeping practices functioned to draw strict boundaries of inclusion/exclusion and left no room for deliberation over the fledging asexual identity. The remaining group aligned strongly with queer politics and advocated for a flexibility of the asexual label and encouraged the mimicking of the LGBT activist strategies of visibility and education. Despite the lack of consensus, the Yahoo Group played a vital role in the formation of today's asexual community as it was the first focal point in which deliberation began to occur over what issues warranted prominence, and what terminology and definitions should become widespread. As noted however, as membership grew, the platform's structure no longer provided an adequate space for further conversation. This coupled with the privileging of 'anti-sex' discourse resulted in a fragmentation of the group. Those who advocated a flexible definition of asexuality centring around a

lack of sexual attraction migrated to seek out an alternative online space – AVEN - with a structure that could facilitate community discussion.

Both the article 'My Life as a Human Amoeba' and 'Haven for Human Amoeba' provide context by which to understand why AVEN (Asexual Visibility and Education Network) was created. AVEN, which is now widely cited as the focal point that solidified the asexual movement (Milks and Cerankowski, 2014), was founded in 2001 'with two distinct goals: creating public acceptance and discussion of asexuality and facilitating the growth of an asexual community' (AVEN, 2018). These aims closely link to Fraser's understandings of the dual character of a counterpublic (1992:124); in that it is both a space to withdraw from dominant oppressive discourse, in this case a space away from compulsory eroticism or 'sexusociety' (Przybylo, 2011), as well as a place in which to train and plan for visibility projects and engagement with wider publics.

Whilst Dahlberg emphasises the importance of safe spaces in which counter-discourse can be explored and nurtured prior to challenging "mainstream" communication areas (2007:837), this runs the risks of creating 'deliberative enclaves' (Sunstein, 2001) in which group ideology and practices are consistently reinforced by 'like-minded' individuals rather than challenged or critiqued. Online, users can seek out interaction that aligns with their own beliefs, filter and 'self-select' the content they are exposed to by returning to specific websites and/or communities (Dahlberg, 2007:830), therefore insulating them from engaging with any opposing views or communicating their own opinions with the mainstream.

However, this is problematised by the need for a developing counterpublic to engage in a certain level of exclusion/inclusion in order create a safe space for deliberation.

For instance, if using Sunstein's framework, one may consider a platform such as AVEN as a deliberative enclave based on its need to differentiate itself and disengage from Haven for Human Amoeba and the dominant anti-sex discourse there over opposing views. Conversely, other scholars have noted how AVEN functioned by 'developing [asexual] vocabulary…[and] a model of identity that is individually negotiated rather than monolithically accepted' (Chu, 2014:185), and which emphasises a plurality in the variance of experiences of arousal, masturbation, sexual and romantic relationships (p.187). These contradictory attitudes exemplify the challenge faced as that in order for an asexual counterpublic to exist, discursive boundaries had to be drawn and stabilised by a process of inclusion/exclusion, however this then risks enclavement (Dahlberg, 2007:836). Defining asexuality then rested in part on differentiating it from the anti-sex movement and advocating for a position of inclusion based on 'sex neutrality'. Consensus of meaning of the term asexuality most commonly used on AVEN was then tentatively reached through the exclusion of the anti-sex community and their rhetoric, and thus asexuality became widely regarded to refer to a lack of sexual attraction rather than a lack of the act itself.

Furthering this line of thought on how counterpublics inevitably enact certain barriers of exclusion in order to delineate who is in a community and define who is out, Fraser asserts that because there is no place of zero-degree culture, no counterpublic discourse can occur free of other social inequalities (1992:120); on

AVEN this is evident in the community's troublesome relationship with race. Owen argues that 'discussions of asexuality are inextricably linked to the concept of hyper sexuality and the consolidation of its discursive attachment to blackness' (2014:120), and when reviewing AVEN visibility advocacy in 2006 and 2007, Owen observed all but one of the interviewees from AVEN were white. Whilst the interviewees rhetoric called for a broader understanding of the spectrum of human sexuality and inclusion of asexuality, it did so through a lens of white acceptability (Owen, 2014:121). Warner claims that in identity politics, there is a 'tendency to present movements in terms oriented to dominant culture' (2000:67); for AVEN this resulted in privileging certain asexual voices who fit within other axis of social privilege in order to present as close as possible to the normative (Cerankowski, 2014:296).

To complicate this further, whilst Internet democracy theorists laud the potential for digital counterpublics to connect individuals from a wide variety of cultural backgrounds (Gauntlett, 2004), AVEN has been critiqued for its Western-centric discourse which is in part steered by the site's architecture that separates English-speaking AVEN from forums dedicated to other languages. Non-English language forums are significantly smaller in size in comparison to that of AVEN's central message boards, and by setting them apart on separate websites firm geographic boundaries in the digital have been created. Whilst these separate forums help allow for linguistic diversity they limit intra-discursive contestation such as debate over cultural differences and how this intersects with asexual identities, and therefore due to its size and scale, leave English-speaking AVEN as a focal point and the front for the asexual community. Prominent asexual theorist Przybylo is particularly critical

of this, stating AVEN's politics that champion 'fantasies of unity and of stability of asexual identity' do not accommodate the pluralism of culture and lived asexual experience and instead place too much emphasis on an imagined cohesive community which suppresses any challenge asexuality can pose to sexusociety, as well as limit how it could contribute theoretically to feminist and queer politics (2014:234). This therefore poses the question – could a move to an alternative platform or space such as Tumblr with its ethos of acceptance and inclusivity rectify this?

This chapter has outlined literature relating to Fraser's counterpublic framework and explored the necessity for marginalised groups to find a safe discursive arena in which to formulate identity and language, and how increasingly this space is online. For the asexual counterpublic, AVEN was created to provide this function and as a result the asexual movement was able to gain momentum and a level of coherency. In recent years the community has spread further onto other platforms that are not insular and self-contained, most prominently that of Tumblr. The following two chapters will now address the broader question of the potential of Tumblr as a site for social justice activism by considering how its affordances both provide limitation and aid in firstly, the formation of a community and secondly, in hosting activism and debate.

Chapter 2: Methodology and Findings

According to Google Trends, in 2012 searches for the term 'social justice Tumblr' grew exponentially (Google Trends, 2018a)[2], whilst there has also been controversy over the term being appropriated by the alt-right who mocked 'social justice warriors' on Tumblr claiming the site is 'ground zero for wacky identity politics' (Bokhari, 2015). What these both exemplify is a recognisable link between social activism content and Tumblr across the political spectrum. Concurrently in 2012, searches for both 'asexual Tumblr' and 'asexuality Tumblr' gained traction (Google Trends, 2018b)[3] suggesting that Tumblr's reputation for hosting counterpublic social movements and their content had begun to spread to those who were looking for a space to connect with other marginalised identities. Although platform technologies themselves (such as Tumblr) have no innate ethos (Papacharissi, 2010:9), they are more than just computational, in that they shape the way in which sociality on site takes place rather than simply facilitating it (Gillespie, 2010).

This dissertation uses a combination of three methodologies to explore Tumblr as a site for social justice activism and this chapter will elaborate on each of these in turn. First it will discuss the platform analysis of Tumblr that was conducted in order to understand how the technology and structure of the site may influence digital activism. This chapter will then go on to provide details of the online survey

[2] Google Trends lists that the earliest search for 'social justice Tumblr' was in August 2010 and that interest peaked in August 2014, however in terms of pace of growth searches in October 2012 were six times that of October the previous year.
[3] The earliest documented search on Google Trends for 'asexual Tumblr' was in May 2010, whilst 'asexuality Tumblr' was slightly later in January 2011. Searches for 'asexual Tumblr' (the more popular term) more than doubled between May 2011 and May 2012 and peaked in January 2015.

circulated to asexual Tumblr users that functioned to provide details of how users interacted with the platform, and their individual experiences and perspectives of the site. Finally, it will discuss the findings of a content analysis conducted on a sample of posts on Tumblr which looked for evidence of debate and reciprocal communication between users.

Platform Analysis: Methodology and Findings

This chapter will begin by deconstructing Tumblr and conducting a platform analysis using Van Dijck's (2013) framework which analyses social media sites as microsystems that are both technocultural constructs and socioeconomic structures. It will consider how these interlinked components help propagate or diminish the use of Tumblr for social movements, influence site cultural norms and values, and affect Tumblr's reputation, especially in relation to competitors such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube.

Technology

This following section will explore how the technological elements influence the conditions for interaction and participation on Tumblr, particularly for counterpublics convening on the site. Broadly speaking, platform technologies Van Dijck (2013:30) argues can be understood as being constructed from the following; (meta)data, algorithms, protocols, interfaces and defaults, and each of these will be unpacked in turn to consider both technological and sociocultural implications.

(Meta)data

Data most simply refers to the basic codes used by computers; for instance, those which denote text, images or sounds, or additionally data may refer to the personal information inputted onto the site by users during registration such as name, age or gender (Van Djick, 2013:30). Metadata contains information implemented to aid in retrieving, organising or managing content. Metadata may be entered manually but is often automatically derived by means such as timestamps, geospatial information or from cookies that can mine behavioural data[4]. Issues arise over rights to privacy and who exactly owns and controls digital data, and these controversial questions are increasingly posed by the mainstream media, thus raising public awareness over the disputes and dangers related to data management and misuse. For example, before it had its access revoked, intelligence and analytics firm Geofeedia used geospatial data harvested from Facebook and Twitter to provide information to law enforcement about real-time protests and the locations of individuals who were involved (Brandom, 2016). Similarly, in April 2018 Facebook co-founder Mark Zukerberg sat in front of US congress accused of data misuse on the platform after Facebook had allowed apps to harvest personal data which was then used for targeting political messages in Donald Trump's presidency campaign (Gartenberg, 2018). Twitter has been criticised for not sufficiently protecting user data in what was termed 'Gamergate', after female game developers were issued with threats of rape and death and had their personal details and whereabouts leaked online – a practice known as 'doxxing' by hackers (Auerback, 2014).

[4] At the time of research for this thesis, cookies could be implanted without explicit user consent, however recent EU legislation has resulted in changes to the law which require sites to inform users of cookie policies.

In comparison then, what Attu and Terras note as one of Tumblr's core limitations (particularly for researchers) namely a 'lack of demographic, geospatial and temporal metadata' (2017:528), may in fact be perceived as a benefit to users who value anonymity and privacy which are increasingly being impeached on other SNSs. When registering for Tumblr, users are only required to input an email, username, password and confirm they are over 13[5]. This minimal data collection alongside limited ties to offline personas aids in the perceived safety of Tumblr not just from misuse of data by the platform, but from being identified by other users if one wishes to remain anonymous. Furthermore, posts on Tumblr are not attributed to individual identities in the same way as other SNSs such as Facebook (Renninger, 2014:11), so although certain data from posts is automatically recorded and archived, individual user identities on the platform play less of a central role. This is advantageous to those who wish to partake in activism, particularly in LGBT counterpublics, whilst remaining obscured or closeted.

Algorithms

Algorithms are the means by which data is processed and control the flow of information. Algorithms function as a form of power; they impact what is visible online and by whom, however, they rely on assumptions initially made about what is

[5] At the time of conducting this research Tumblr was available to anyone over the age of 13 globally, however as of 25th May 2018 new Terms of Service came into effect for users residing in the European Union and the European Economic Area which required users to be over 16 to access Tumblr in line with new European regulation regarding the processing of personal data (Tumblr, 2018a)

relevant and should be circulated or seen. In his research Gillespie (2014:177) found that search engines possessed structural bias towards English-language sites, commercial providers and that which is already popular, which evidently counters the suggestion that the Internet could provide a space for equal democratic participation for all. Consequently, whilst algorithms then are vital to process, locate and aggregate information, the logic by which they are structured by functions as a form of power through patterns of inclusion/exclusion and criteria over relevancy embedded by site owners, and therefore not all content and/or users may be treated equally. Twitter initially marketed itself as a 'neutral platform' for all users and content, however in 2008 it established 'trending topics' which allowed posts to be grouped together articulated with a hashtag with the most popular of these featured in a side bar (Van Dijck. 2013:71). Since then Twitter has also introduced 'top tweets' which featured what the algorithm deemed most relevant at the top of users streams thus creating a hierarchy of content (Bruns and Burgess, 2015). On the other hand, users are not necessarily passive, and they may reshape practices in an attempt to nudge algorithms – for instance the use of certain hashtags by activists on Twitter that function as calculated collectivity to allow marginalised voices to be heard.

Like Twitter, when Tumblr launched it initially displayed all posts in reverse chronological order on its main interface, however in November 2017 Tumblr introduced the algorithm 'best content first' as the default display option. Posts began to circulate amassing thousands of notes that instructed users how to turn the new feature off, suggesting that users opposed Tumblr dictating the order in which they should view content. Contention also arose in relation to another algorithm that processes the search results on Tumblr and orders them by 'most popular'. The

criteria of 'most popular' remains unknown, which prevents users from circumventing the algorithm for post visibility through hashtags, a practice that is widespread on Instagram resulting in many guides detailing how to garner more visibility for your photos through specific hashtags and sharing practices (Helene, 2018). However, Tumblr's lack of transparency raises questions as to how each posts relevancy is determined as the posts with the most notes do not necessarily appear first. The algorithm also only takes into account the first five tags of each post which has shaped the practice of putting key words first in the tags in order for a post to be searchable.[6] This allows for users to find one another and build communities around key identifier terms, as Dame observed happening when studying transgender users communicative and identification practices (2016). Conversely, omitting keywords or listing them as a later hashtag functions as a way to retain privacy which may be advantageous to certain counterpublic communities and users who wish to remain hidden from search results.

The most controversial algorithm however was the introduction of what Tumblr coined 'Safe Mode'. Safe Mode was promoted as a feature that would block any explicit or 'Not Safe For Work' (NSFW) content and was to be automatically initiated for all users under 18, visitors who were not signed in, and as the default option for new users. However, the algorithm was criticised for blocking LGBT-related posts regardless of their actual content, and in some cases entire blogs. Although Tumblr later claimed this was 'accidental' (Tumblr, 2017a), the exclusion feeds into the stigmatisation – particularly the hypersexualisation – of LGBT

[6] Users may choose to use more than 5 tags for personal tagging systems on their individual blogs, as well as the practice of 'commenting in the tags' which will be elaborated on further in this thesis.

identities. This was complicated further when users attributed Safe Mode's introduction to the impending sale of Yahoo (Tumblr's parent company) to Verizon and an imperative to 'clean up' the platform before the acquisition took place (Bell, 2017). Safe Mode poses questions as to how both users and site owners negotiate the boundaries between safe/unsafe, particularly as to what underlying assumptions are encoded in the algorithm and in this case if they are representative of a wider silencing of LGBT communities online. In the same year as Safe Mode was introduced, YouTube faced similar allegations over the launch of 'restricted mode' which blocked and demonetised LGBT content (Hunt, 2017), and Twitter was criticised for flagging words such as 'queer' as 'offensive content' which may have been intended to protect users from what some consider to be an abusive term, but simultaneously functioned to erase an identifier that many users claimed within the LGBT community itself (Castello, 2017). These all exemplify ways in which site architecture can exclude already marginalised communities, however, to presume this entirely deters users from utilising the platform neglects to consider user agency and the ability to subvert, hack and challenge site norms and values

Protocols

Protocols are technical sets of rules that suggest preferred pathways to users (Van Dijck, 2013:310), which are rarely transparent, and users are often not aware of the conditions and constraints they may inscribe. Protocols can range from the order in which buttons are displayed to the actions they suggest, and whilst their intentions may not always be clear, they are usually designed with platform owners needs in mind. For instance, Facebook suggests people you may know, groups to join and

pages to like. This may appear to be designed to aid the users seamless social experience, however, for Facebook it encourages users to share further information – thus profit-generating data - with them. Many of Tumblr's protocols function to encourage users to remain on the site for longer; the main interface is set to endlessly scroll, posts do not contain timestamps and so do not signify how far a user has scrolled back on their dashboard and therefore the amount of time they may have been on site, and the use of hyperlinks that could direct users offsite are blocked in 'asks' between users.[7]

However, it is Tumblr's communicative protocols that most visibly impact counterpublics on the site as they set the conditions for community building and guide the ways in which deliberation and debate can take place. Tumblr did introduce a one-to-one messenger, but this came significantly later than on Facebook, where communication is predominantly centred on 'mutual friendship'. Instead, protocols direct communication between two preferred means: through 'asks' (one-to-one communication that is usually 'published' on the receiving users blog) or by reblogging and adding a comment. Both of these result in forms of public communication, and thus value is added through new content. This relationship between platform owners, users and the value of content creation will be explored in further detail later in the chapter.

These protocols set the norm of communication as public rather than private on Tumblr, as messages to the masses rather than one-to-one, which influence the

[7] Users can send hyperlinks on Tumblr Messenger but these remain in a private conversation between two users. 'Asks' are often published onto a user's blog, therefore if they contained links it could direct many subsequent users offsite.

formation and structure of counterpublic communities on the platform. On first glance this precedent may seem to pose a challenge to Tumblr as a place of safety and anonymity, however, practices such a reblogging, although aimed to reach a wide audience, often result in the content of the post becoming disconnected from its original creator and circulated ephemerally. The final chapter of this thesis will detail how central many asexual users perceived this separation to be to the security they felt on Tumblr, in that they could test out labels and interact with other asexual users without threat of 'outing' or widespread identification.

The above has detailed exactly how protocols can shape certain user practices, but users may also find ways to subvert protocols that they perceive as limiting or detracting from their experiences on a platform, and on Tumblr one such way is through the additional use of software such as Xkit. Xkit is open source software hosted on Github with a linked community-run Tumblr blog that invites all developers to join in and contribute to coding if they so wish and for users to submit suggestions of alterations and improvements to Tumblr's functionality that they would like to see. Xkit offers extensions which can alter certain features on Tumblr, for instance 'Anti-capitalism' which 'removes sponsored posts, vendor buttons, and other nonsense that wants your money', thus eliminating visible adverts on Tumblr and reinstating Tumblr's anti-commercialism ethos associated with its early days and founder David Karp. Another popular Xkit extension is 'Blacklist' which allows users to block certain words, not just if they appear in the tag system, but if they are featured anywhere in the post. This aids counterpublic communities to block oppressive or offensive material and phrases from their dashboards even if others users have not opted to include them in the tags of a post. Individual users are

enabled to denote the boundaries between safe/unsafe based on individual need rather than relying on other users perceptions of what may require a warning, or Tumblrs enforced Safe Mode. The idea that perceptions of safety vary from person to person is central to considering how some asexual individuals (particularly those who are sex repulsed) navigate the pervasiveness of sexuality within media, art and even humour, and how extensions such as Xkit can function to improve their experiences online.

Interface

Interfaces can be both invisible or visible technologies. Invisible interfaces are utilised by platform owners to code and organise software, hardware and data sources (Fuller, 2008:149), whilst visible interfaces contain the technical features that steer the users through content such as buttons, icons and scroll bars. Scholars working on human computer interaction have emphasised the importance of interfaces in producing certain attitudes and steering user behaviour (Hassanein and Head, 2007; Hess, Fuller and Campbell, 2009; Hausmen and Siekpe, 2009). Whilst Tumblr users do have individual blogs which they can customise to an extent, most user interaction takes place upon a simple, non-customisable interface called a 'dashboard' where all posts no matter the topic are curated into one stream - although this can be impacted by algorithms, as previously discussed. A user's dashboard feed is private and, unlike Facebook's main feed, users are not notified of friends' (or in the case of Tumblr, followers, as the site does not place emphasis on reciprocal relationships) activities, which renders interacting and browsing on Tumblr a far more private experience. For counterpublic groups, particularly sexual

minorities, it allows them to safely view and like content without risk of public outing.

Whilst 'liking' allows users to interact with content privately on the platform, 'reblogging' helps circulate posts further. The dashboard collates all the posts made or reblogged by blogs a user follows into one stream, which allows for activist issues to become normalised and circulated in amongst the everyday stream of entertainment and digital socialising. The dashboard curates all content into one place leading to politics being placed alongside and in amongst pop culture, which may appeal particularly to Tumblr's youthful demographic. Jenkins (2014:73) notes a trend in politics of borrowing and remixing elements from popular culture in order to 'frame the issues in language that makes sense to younger participants'. Furthermore, as chapter 3 will demonstrate, the intersection of identity politics and fandom on Tumblr provides a fruitful site for asexual users to deliberate real world issues through the use of transformative works to critique the distinct absence of asexuality from mainstream media. The curation of all posts into a single feed can result in content reaching new unintended audiences as it is reblogged by users from the different communities (be it interest or identity related) on the site, spreading it beyond simply the original poster's followers, aiding counterpublic activists to raise awareness and educate others about their issues. This slippage however does not always have positive outcomes, posts can reach antagonistic audiences causing backlash and trolling both to individual users and counterpublic communities as a whole, and Tumblr's arguably negligent approach to online abuse only helps propagate this further. The backlash faced by the asexual community on Tumblr had a significant impact on how users participated on the platform, and subsequently

impacted the direction this dissertation took – this will all be fully explored later in this chapter.

Defaults

Alongside the aforementioned concepts, a platform's default options also function to steer users' attitudes and behaviour and so are 'not just sites of technical but ideological manoeuvrings: [as] if changing a default takes effort users are more likely to conform to the sites architecture' (Van Dijck, 2013:32). Certain Tumblr defaults that have been introduced over time have been met with user backlash, particularly the following settings switched on as default; Safe Mode, on blog advertising and the 'best content first' algorithm which as discussed earlier changed the order in which posts on a user's dashboard appeared. These changes are seen as detracting from the anti-commercial, non-hierarchical original settings of the platform, and as a result when these new 'features' are introduced posts detailing how to change the default option rapidly circulate – particularly if it increases the number of adverts displayed, is perceived to exploit users or influences the type and/or order of posts. This practice in itself can be considered a type of onsite activism as users work together to keep the platform 'open' and 'free'. Furthermore, this response to Tumblr's introduction of new defaults serves to perpetuate an 'us' vs 'them' (the platform owners) attitude on the site. This was particularly true following the introduction of Safe Mode which appeared to target LGBT users. Instead of deterring users from the platform it helps to cultivate Tumblr's reputation as a site for activism, particularly intersectional advocacy, as other marginalised

groups helped ‘signal boost’ the issue through reblogging information about the consequences it was having in an attempt to get Tumblr to address the issue.

Users/Usage

As the above has demonstrated, platform technologies can shape and steer user experiences, but do not necessarily dictate them. When considering the contribution of users to platforms, Van Dijck highlights a key debate by asking ‘to what extent are users empowered or constrained by platforms?’ (2013:33). For counterpublics, Tumblr’s architecture certainly appears to offer potential benefits, but simultaneously places limitations upon certain usages. The following section will explore the interlinking subtopics of users/usage and content in order to consider the ways in which Tumblr could appeal to a social-justice oriented audience, and in particular asexual users.

Whilst it is difficult to pinpoint exactly what platform owners and developers initially intended for Tumblr’s user demographic and usage to be, both the platform’s structure, alongside responses to some user activities, suggest that certain types of users are valued over others. One way in which an ‘ideal user’ can be signified is through the types of information prompted during the initial sign up. For instance, if male is listed as the default gender it exemplifies a bias towards male identifying users (White, 2006), or if male/female are the only options to choose from it excludes users outside of the gender binary (Brookey and Cannon, 2009), and requiring a ZIP code to join places geographic restrictions that could deter those outside the US.

SNSs such as Facebook are driven by personal data for profit, their 'ideal users' will part with the most information, Tumblr, on the other hand, is content driven. What information is requested during sign up, and more importantly required to join a platform can influence the user demographic and in turn the usage of the platform. Facebook's real name policy which was implemented, according to the site, to deter bullying, fake spam accounts and terrorists, resulted in the deletion of the accounts of many transgender users, drag queens and others in the LGBT community as well certain ethnic groups, in particular, Native Americans, as Facebook's software doubted the authenticity of their names (Ennis,2015; Holpuch, 2015). Facebook's policy functions to firmly link online activity to offline identities. Tumblr in contrast only requires a pseudonym, password and to confirm the user is over 13[8], therefore Tumblr functions as an 'example of privacy in the public' (Austin, 2012:209), as users can participate without linking their accounts to offline lives – a benefit to a wide range of subcultural communities from fandoms that have been historically mocked in the mainstream (Gray et al., 2007:2), to NSFW and fetish groups (Tiindenberg, 2015), and of course LGBT activist communities.

Whether or not drawing in subcultural movements was the intended usage of Tumblr remains unclear, however the different ways in which Tumblr responded to these often shunned communities is telling. Usage on a platform can be both implicitly inscribed through design or explicitly shaped by users. Van Dijick notes that the contestation between the two 'embodies part of a negotiation process

[8] As of May 2018, users in the EU must confirm they are over 16.

between platform owners and users to control the conditions for information exchange; [and] such struggle also bares disputed norms and values' (2013:34). Tumblr's implicit use is for content production and circulation, however not all content is valued equally as evident in the earlier discussions regarding the assumptions that helped code the algorithms such as Safe Mode and 'most popular'. Oakley (2016) argues that it is unlikely that Tumblr's tagline 'express yourself' was intended to refer to expression of marginalised sexual identities, NSFW communities or transformative fandoms – the latter of which may bring with them issues over copyright as well as explicit material (Roth and Flegel, 2014). On the other hand, Tumblr's value lies in content production therefore it would be unwise to shun potential user demographics entirely, but as noted not all content is valued equally and this is noticeable when considering Tumblr's interaction with the aforementioned groups.

The proliferation of fan communities has been encouraged on Tumblr especially in recent years evident through the introduction of features such as 'Fandometrics: Week in Review' run by library scientist Amanda Brennan. Fandometrics curates weekly lists that recognises the most influential fandoms on the platforms by 'track[ing] the shifts in our users' collective affection' (Fandometrics, 2018) and so rewarding the top fan communities with platform sanctioned exposure. Explicit NSFW communities were initially left alone to produce and circulate their content, however in time commercial interests, in particular following the sale of Yahoo to Verizon, saw attitudes change and Safe Mode placed constraints that meant content could no longer be viewed by site visitors - only those with an account listed as over 18 years old could access material. This alteration was particularly challenging for

sex workers on the platform who saw their livelihood jeopardised as their content was hidden from potential new customers.

For LGBT counterpublic communities on site, Tumblr has shown mixed reactions. In June 2017, Tumblr posted about 'Pride Month' and encouraged users to adopt the hashtag #TumblrPride and selected notable individuals in the LGBT community to participate in their daily 'Answer Time' which can be viewed site wide (Tumblr, 2017b). However simultaneously Safe Mode was being rolled out and functioned to exclude, even if cited as accidental, many LGBT users and certain content they posted from the site. Furthermore, Tumblr's 'Community Guidelines' make it difficult to report abuse due to the ambiguity of the language used as they state:

'If you encounter negative speech that doesn't rise to the level of violence or threats of violence, we encourage you to dismantle negative speech through argument rather than censorship. That said, if you encounter anything especially heinous, tell us about it' (Tumblr, 2018b)

This then puts the onus on individual users and communities to self-police, which although could potentially lead to fruitful debate, also leaves individual users at risk from antagonistic attacks and trolls, particularly vulnerable and marginalised users. Additionally, the lack of clarity in the term 'especially heinous' is left to the interpretation of both users and Tumblr staff moderating it, leaving scope for internal personal biases to come into play.

Content

So far this thesis has made both parallels and distinctions between Tumblr and SNSs such as Facebook. As noted previously, whilst Facebook garners its value through the collection of personal data, Tumblr however, gains value from content circulation and so arguably straddles the line between being a SNS and a platform to host UGC (user-generated content). Early UGC sites such as YouTube, Flickr and Myspace changed the way in which digital media such as videos, photos and music were produced and accessed. Van Dijck demonstrates how UGC platforms established a precedent of sharing cultural content to connect on a (perceived) global stage, challenged the boundaries between work/play and (supposedly) lessened the divide between amateur/professional content (2013:35). However, not all UGC platforms remained as egalitarian in their values; by 2007 YouTube had rolled out the YouTube Partner Program which allowed top content creators a share in the sites revenue (Robertson, 2007). Over time eligibility requirements for the programme have risen and it has become extremely competitive resulting in a professionalization of the 'YouTuber' role, which has led to creators striving for a higher quality and quantity of material – benefitting YouTube greatly. However, for content producers on the platform the lack of transparency of AdSense revenue streams, as well as the privileging of certain creators even in the face of controversial behaviour (Alexander, 2018), maintains an evidently unbalanced power dynamic between these users and their 'employer'.

Tumblr has not introduced any formal monetisation scheme for users, and as the majority of user activity takes place on dashboards, embedding adverts on individual blogs is not particularly lucrative and so the practice has not spread widely. For

activists that value Tumblr's anti-commercial, non-hierarchical principles, this overall ethos may suggest why they opt to congregate on the platform. On the other hand, monetisation has helped YouTube to develop a reputation for aiding amateurs to professionalise (Van Dijck, 2013:116), whilst SNS such as Twitter's use of 'verified' accounts have made it popular for media figures, politicians and so forth to disseminate important information. Tumblr in comparison has developed a reputation for hosting frivolous and youthful content which can ultimately undermine activism on the platform, as mainstream media cite Tumblr as a central – but non-profitable - hub for 'internet culture', humour and memes (Feldman, 2017).

Ownership and Governance

Whilst popular SNS are predominantly commercially and/or corporately owned, many initially began as small start-ups that were later sold to established companies with their value articulated by a combination of their user numbers, demographic and type of content (Van Dijck, 2013:36). In the past the cultural industry earned revenue from the sale of physical goods, viewing experiences such as cinema trips, pay-per-view and advertising, but digital culture required a new model. SNS and UGC platforms have faced challenges in developing new tactics for monetization including experimenting with subscription models and differentiating between free and premium content. These endeavours have often been complicated by the fact that users were accustomed to free content and were not willing to tolerate commercial activity (Van Dijck, 2013:40). Clemons (2009) points out that the balance between users' trust and owners' intentions to monetize is delicate; if users believe that they are being exploited or unfairly manipulated, they will quit the site,

which in turn means owners lose their most valuable asset – their user base. Therefore, platforms have to be careful to negotiate this line and practices such as targeted ads for user taste profiles, and the use of 'influencers' who have an extensive follower base, have become popular as they are less conspicuous. Slowly new commercial tactics such as these have become normalised into our everyday digital routines, however users are not 'dupes' and will often make calculated decisions over the obtrusiveness of monetizing strategies versus the benefit that may be reaped from using the site.

When exploring the extent to which Tumblr can be utilised as a site of social justice activism the impact of monetising strategies alongside platform ownership are central considerations. Tumblr's history is too extensive to document fully here and many points are unnecessary for the central questions of this thesis, therefore the following section will briefly highlight the key individuals and instances that have affected the conditions for social activism on the site.

Tumblr was founded in 2007 by David Karp who helped propagate the early social justice oriented ethos and anti-commercialism on the platform through his public anti-advertisement stance and his own activism, particularly in relation to net neutrality and planned parenthood (Setoodeh, 2017). In 2013 Tumblr was sold to Yahoo who wanted to tap into the millennial audience, CEO Merissa Meyer in a post on Tumblr promised 'not to fuck it up' (Meyer, 2013).

This pledge was short lived after Yahoo failed to integrate their own advertising team which led to the mass exodus of original Tumblr staff (Fiegerman, 2016). Yahoo introduced on site adverts in an attempt to monetize the platform - something Karp had been vehemently against. Initially this angered users, however Yahoo, unlike rivals such as Facebook, failed to target adverts or find compatible brands for their audience. The adverts they opted for were so glaringly unsuitable and often contained seemingly unrelated images and copy (Figure 1) – retirement homes, clickbait lists, PPI claim checks, and random stock photo images– and so for their youthful audience these adverts quickly became popular as a source of humour leading to the hashtag '#weird ads' where users posted the strangest combinations they had seen onsite. This low-stakes, mismatched copy was strikingly different from the targeted ads based on the harvesting of personal data that users were bombarded with on other platforms like Facebook, so they actually helped to retain Tumblr's grassroots activist spirit as Yahoo's attempt at monetization of Tumblr provided a visible – and laughable - example of commercialism failing. Users were right about the failure too - in 2016 Yahoo wrote down Tumblr by $482 billion, the loss of value was claimed to be as a result of lower projections for the platform's future performance.



Figure 1. Tumblr advert.

In 2017 prior to the sale of Yahoo to Verizon, users speculated that the 'Safe Mode' rollout was an attempt to 'clean up' the site and draw in marketers by removing

'NSFW' and adult content, particularly as Tumblr has a younger demographic than other SNSs (Chaffey, 2018). The sale to Verizon was controversial for users as Tumblr, headed by Karp, had always been in the centre of the fight for net neutrality whilst Verizon had been one of the most notoriously vocal opponents, having asked the Federal Communications Commission to scrap laws that require Internet providers to treat all content and customers equally. As it stands in March 2018, Verizon appear to have made few changes to the platform and in February 2018 Tumblr aligned itself in opposition to its parent company, as it joined in the #OneMoreVote campaign to save net neutrality (Tumblr, 2018c). To all intents and purposes, it appears Tumblr is continuing to propagate itself as a proponent of the left social movement - at least publicly – which raises interesting questions about the platform's future, especially for the counterpublics who convene on the site should Verizon take a more hands on approach as a stakeholder.

Survey and Content Analysis: Methodology and Findings

The first half of this chapter conducted a platform analysis utilising Van Djick's framework to lay out how Tumblr's technocultural and socioeconomic structures helped to construct Tumblr's reputation as a site for social activism content, what benefits Tumblr *could* potentially provide for counterpublic communities and what ways the platform *could* aid or hinder the them. However, as this thesis is interested in user experience, particularly users who identified as asexual, and the actuality of activist communities on the platform, the second part of this chapter will now turn to explain the methodology used to ascertain how asexual users employ Tumblr to find community and if they perceive this platform does in fact facilitate a space for activism and/or debate.

Survey

In my investigation I placed equal weight on the importance of the construction of community and of a safe space to test out ideas and deliberate, alongside the ability to partake in interdiscursive rational debate that could function to further a movement in evaluating Tumblr as a platform for counterpublic activism. Based upon this understanding this thesis aims to explore user's perception of community and activism on Tumblr to consider how counterpublics congregated and communicated on the platform. I utilised the findings from the platform analysis to inform the questions of an online anonymous survey that I disseminated on Tumblr to users who self-identified as asexual. The questions were phrased in order keep the definitions of both community and activism loose to avoid bias as to what

community and/or activism is or isn't to individual users. Finally, key to why I chose asexual users as my case study was the fact that outside of AVEN asexual users appeared to favour Tumblr over other popular SNS[9]; I wanted to find out what specifically drew users to Tumblr over platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, which in recent years have been widely utilised as public spaces for digital activism and debate.

I conducted an open ended, anonymous questionnaire as the topic of sexuality can be sensitive, and participants may not always be comfortable openly discussing certain issues if they can be identified – especially if they are not yet 'out' or have had negative experiences online in relation to their sexuality.

I hosted the questionnaire on Survey Monkey and used 10 participants to pilot the survey to test for both design and language to ensure all questions were articulated clearly and were non-biased. I then disseminated the survey on Tumblr alongside my contact details and a paragraph explaining the nature of the study (Appendix A), although I avoided any academic terminology that might deter potential participants. I opted to post the survey from my personal Tumblr account as marginalised communities are often wary of researcher's intentions and of being portrayed in a negative light especially by outsiders. My personal account with an extensive post history established that I was also a user on the platform who identified as asexual, which may have encouraged a perception of authenticity and trustworthiness. I

[9] This is not to imply there are not many asexual users across other SNS, but that these are not hubs for posting/discussing asexuality related content which leaves Tumblr as the only SNS mentioned on AVEN's 'Asexual History' Wikipedia page. (AVENWiki, 2018).

utilised Tumblr's tagging algorithm to ensure my survey appeared in search results by using language such as 'asexual' and 'asexuality' within the first five tags, alongside this I messaged several popular asexuality themed blogs to ask them to reblog the post in order to reach a larger audience. The survey was online for 3 days and garnered 573 responses - however not all participants responded to all questions (See Appendix B for full text).

The following section will now go on to discuss the findings of the online questionnaire and consider how participants' answers can inform understanding about Tumblr as a space for counterpublic community and/or activism. When asked about how they utilised Tumblr to interact with asexual content/users, the most frequent answers were through 'reblogging' or 'liking' content (See Appendix C). Only 28% of participants had posted original content and whilst this is higher than Xu et al.'s (2014) findings of 7%, it also exemplifies the fact that for a majority of users Tumblr is a space for circulating existing content through curation on individual blogs (through reblogging) or in private lists (through liking). In terms of communicating with other users or participating in conversations, the most popular answer was through the practice of 'commenting in the tags' (See figure 2 for an example of this). These comments are primarily seen by a user's followers, and when a post is reblogged further the comments in the tags do not spread alongside it; its ephemeral nature functions to allow users to speak to a small audience and retain a sense of privacy and safety. When asked to elaborate on how they interacted with asexuality related content a majority stated they used Tumblr to share information and raise awareness and visibility.

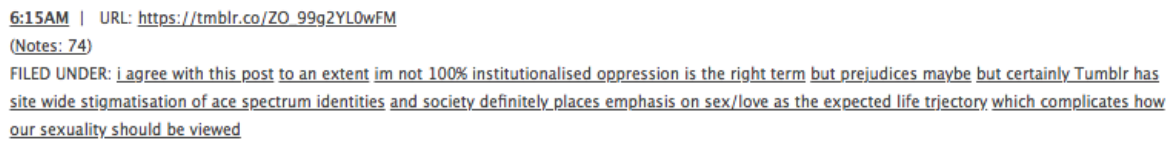


Figure 2. Example of 'tagging in the commentary'

When asked about what they liked about the platform, particularly in relation to other SNSs and the existing focal point for the asexual community AVEN, many emphasised that interacting with asexuality-related content was only one part of their use of Tumblr and that they enjoyed the way in which the dashboard functioned as a space to curate all facets of one's identity and interests alongside one other. Other benefits participants listed were the perceived 'inclusive' and 'intersectional' nature of the platform, how users felt they could participate simply 'reblogging' with no imperative to add original content, and that Tumblr was (mostly) anonymous and that it had no links to other SNS especially Facebook. Interestingly, participants listed Tumblr's lack of moderation as both a benefit and limitation to the platform. The most prevalent criticism that participants reported however was the prevalence of 'ace discourse' on the platform (ace being an abbreviation of asexuality); this phrasing appeared throughout the survey in response to several different questions. 'Ace discourse' and the contestation surrounding it will be expanded upon fully later in this project, but briefly the phrase does not allude to all debate and deliberation around the topic of asexuality as one might think, instead on Tumblr it specifically refers to the argument as to whether asexual individuals belong in the LGBT community.

Definitions of 'community' itself also varied from participant to participant, whilst overall 229 users were positive and perceived there to be some sort of asexual community on Tumblr, 27 stated there was not one at all. When asked to elaborate 55 of the 299 responded with similar sentiments to 'yes, but I'm not in it', 26 also pointed out that whilst a community existed it was loosely connected and not well defined, and 25 emphasised how community on Tumblr revolves around a few 'big blogs/Tumblr users', which suggests some type of informal hierarchy exists. Once again, 25 users bought up 'ace discourse', however this time noting how it unsettled the asexual community.

Following on from this, the questionnaire enquired about activism; I wanted to know whether users participated in any activist practices, and what they understood digital activism to entail. Participants were divided in their answers, 87 stated that they did use Tumblr for activism, 92 did not, and 69 answered "not really" or similar corresponding phrases[10]. In terms of what constituted as activism, reblogging content was the most common response, however, 79 users also stated that whilst they did partake by reblogging it is "not really activism". Other frequent answers included how Tumblr was a space for intersectional activism – which perhaps links to the way in which content becomes interspersed on dashboards thus breaking

[10] As noted, all questions were optional and a number of survey participants opted not to answer this question. Feedback received during the pilot sample suggested that users may not feel comfortable in discussing activism due to negative experiences of 'ace discourse' on Tumblr. Questions were therefore optional so as to not deter users from sharing their views about other aspects of the platform. This also highlighted an area for further investigation addressed shortly in this thesis; what exactly was this 'ace discourse', and what implications did it have for both individual users and the asexual community on Tumblr?

down barriers between issue-related politics. Others used Tumblr for education and/or awareness of asexuality and related issues as well as activism through content creation such as transformative works, poetry or art. Only 10 users stated that they also partook in any offline activism. Once again 'ace discourse' was mentioned with several users stating it deterred them from participating in any activism on Tumblr. In light of this comment and prevalence of this phrasing, the need to investigate 'ace discourse' further went on to inform the structure of the next stage of analysis for this thesis.

Content Analysis

The qualitative survey data in which users detailed their individual experiences on the platform suggested that the majority of asexual users did consider Tumblr as a 'safe space' in which community could form; however, if scholars are correct in their suggestion of Tumblr's social justice ethos (Renniger, 2014; Fink and Miller, 2014), arguably this insinuates some form of advocacy, deliberation and debate must be occurring on the platform too. Participants were divided as to whether or not activism – particularly any effective activism - did take place on Tumblr, therefore the next step was to investigate whether or not there was evidence to support either perspective. The final section of this thesis was conducted in two parts; first was a content analysis of a sample of popular asexuality related Tumblr posts gathered from two tags, and secondly an examination of the 15 posts in these tags that were identified as containing elements of critical thinking to look for evidence of debate, deliberation and reciprocal communication.

For the first part I located the top 100 posts displayed on the 'search' function of Tumblr for two tags: the first was 'asexuality' which was the tag I initially circulated my survey on to recruit participants, and the second was 'ace discourse'. As noted in the survey findings above, despite no questions making direct reference to any specific debates or issues faced by asexual Tumblr users, the phrases 'ace discourse', 'asexual discourse', or simply 'The Discourse' were mentioned frequently across all answers. The widely cited term initially suggested that participants saw evidence of a discursive arena on Tumblr, in which issues surrounding asexuality were being deliberated, however, when interrogating this further it was not exactly the case. Whilst the term discourse refers to any 'written or spoken communication or debate' (Oxford Dictionary, 2018), 'ace discourse' on Tumblr has been appropriated as shorthand to refer to a single specific issue that one survey respondent clarified as the 'argument regarding whether asexual people are LGBT or not', with those opposing asexual people's admittance into LGBT spaces termed 'exclusionists' and those for their addition known as 'inclusionists'. The recurrent use of the phrasing throughout the survey without prompting, exemplifies how prevalent this particular issue is perceived to be by the asexual users on Tumblr, and why I opted to analyse content from this tag as a comparison to the main 'asexuality' one. I was also interested in the fact that whilst many respondents highlighted the existence of a contestation on Tumblr as to whether LGBT spaces should be inclusive of asexual individuals, simultaneously they also reiterated comments similar to the following; 'I don't usually contribute to the discourse', 'It's all good as long as you can avoid THE DISCOURSE', and went as far as to say they avoided certain tags and blocked other users in order to circumvent encountering content relating to the dispute. This then raised the question of *who* exactly was

participating in this debate, and whether considering Habermas's emphasis on rational, reciprocal communication being needed for fruitful debate in the public sphere as explored in Chapter 1, posts deliberating 'ace discourse' on Tumblr could be perceived as a debate if no/limited asexual users were participating in mutual discussion.

Briefly, it must be noted that although the posts collected here were described on Tumblr as the 'most popular' according to the platforms search algorithms, they were not necessarily those with the most 'notes' or user interactions. Scholars have noted the difficulty in gathering reliable data from Tumblr, unless purchased through commercial social network data sellers such as GNIP (Xu et al*.,* 2014, Attu and Terras, 2017), as data mining APIs often used on other social media sites such as Twitter and Facebook are not compatible (Thirumuruganathan *et al*., 2014), and Tumblr's lack of transparency over the assumptions that inform its algorithms provide a further challenge. However, as these are also the 'most popular' posts that would be displayed to any Tumblr user searching the tags, this thesis will consider this a representative sample of the types of content circulating from the perspective of a Tumblr user.

Once I had gathered the sample, I coded the posts for the following; firstly, by the type of post in line with Tumblr's categorisations (text, photo, quote, links etc.), then I noted whether the post made a positive, negative or neutral judgement about asexuality/asexual people as a whole, then for the 'asexuality' tag I noted whether or not the post was concurrently tagged with 'ace discourse', and finally I conducted a thematic analysis of the posts content. I began by noting some initial themes that I anticipated to be present based on the platform analysis and survey data. These were

‘fandom’, ‘personal posts’, ‘ace discourse’, ‘humorous’, ‘creative work (fiction, art, poetry etc)’ and ‘critical thinking/debates’. When coding for ‘critical thinking/debates’, I looked for evidence based not on what opinions these posts held or what specific issues they were addressing, but rather whether or not they provided elements of a structured, reasoned argument to back up the judgement being made.

Whilst sifting through posts I noted emergent codes, primarily related to popular Tumblr memes or post types that were influenced by Tumblr’s technology and protocols e.g. ‘mood boards’, ‘tag yourself’, reaction gifs or ‘text posts’. I utilise the term ‘meme’ in line with Shifman’s definition that ‘the internet meme [can be understood] as (a) group of digital items sharing common characteristics, content, form and/or stance; (b) created with an awareness of one another; and (c) were circulated, imitated and/or transformed via the Internet by many users’ (2014:8). Tumblr’s protocols are designed in a way that propagates a proliferation of memes as reblogging provides the ideal way by which to disseminate them. Furthermore, memes can play an ‘important role in the construction of group identity and social boundaries’ as ‘socially recognised types of communicative action’ (Shifman 2014:99-100). On Tumblr text posts such as ‘[insert group] are valid’ (Figure 3) and ‘2018 will be the year… [insert action]’ (Figure 4) both function as memes in this latter way, and when used to discuss sexual identities function as a way for the user to either identify as part of the group or as an ally.



Figure 3. Tumblr 'Valid' meme.

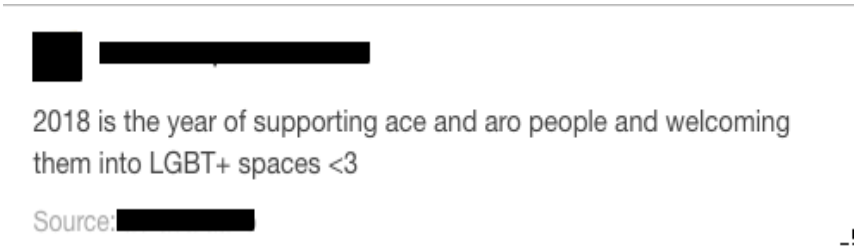


Figure 4. Tumblr '2018' meme.

Another common post type was 'reaction gifs' which refers 'short clips of movies and televisions shows [and increasingly other visual formats] that communicate emotions ("feels"), reactions, and everyday events. (Bourlai and Herring, 2014). In Kanai's scholarship studying reaction gifs on Tumblr, she notes how they function to create 'an intimate public in which likeminded readers are invited to participate, relate, and belong', and how their circulation through reblogging creates 'a sense of commonality and likeness' (2017a:915). Both 'mood boards' and 'tag yourself' play similar roles in identification, both make use of the way in which Tumblr's interface displays uploads of 9 images in resized squares and contain sets of images that function to represent a type of user/person. Mood boards tend to combine 1 or more

identifying factors with colour palettes or themes (Figure 5), whilst 'tag yourself' posts allow a user to reblog and note in the tags which of the 9 options they most identify with; the pictures usually depict characters/celebrities or cartoons (or several versions of a single character/celebrity/cartoon) with text underneath (Figure 6).

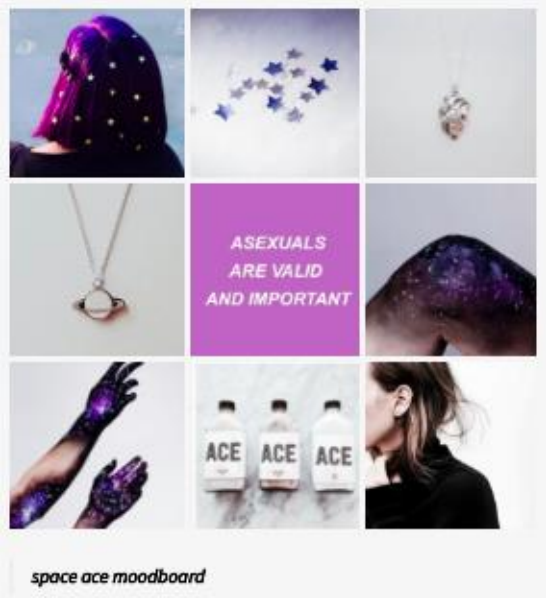


Figure 5. Asexuality mood board using colours from the asexuality flag



Figure 6. Original 'tag yourself' meme that circulated on Tumblr.

Finally, I differentiated what I noted as 'informative posts' from critical thinking, as these posts contained definitions of asexuality or other sexual/gender identities but distinctly showed no opinions. The coding for the 'ace discourse' sample was the same apart from one emerging code which I defined as posts containing 'aggressive language' with no coinciding elements of critical deliberation.

Upon initial observations the fact that the ace discourse tag was predominantly made up of text based posts in comparison to the fairly even text/photo split of the asexuality tag, suggested that the discourse tag *could* in fact provide a space for debate and deliberation. The highest number of notes on a post on the asexuality tag was 17018 in comparison to the lower number of 10935 on the ace discourse tag but this still suggested there was a significant number of users discussing discourse on the platform. There were only three posts in the asexuality tag that contained negative sentiments about asexuality and only eight incorporated instances of critical thinking, whilst 40 posts contained some type of memetic humour or Tumblr conventions, which supported survey findings that suggested Tumblr was primarily viewed as a site of 'play' and leisure for users. On the ace discourse tag, only 15 of the posts contained any type of humour or Tumblr conventions, and nearly double the amount of posts involving critical thinking were circulating. 22 of the posts on the ace discourse tag included aggressive or abusive language, and one of those was directed towards a single identified user. Of all the posts across both tags only one contained any information that identified the user outside of Tumblr (a photo), which is starkly different from SNS such as Facebook.

Returning to the initial query set out in this chapter; ‘to what extent can productive deliberation occur on Tumblr?’ The final part of this analysis took the 15 posts from the ace discourse sample which had been identified as containing elements of critical thinking and analysed how other users responded to them. As noted previously, it is particularly difficult for researchers to acquire data from Tumblr, making it impractical to look at a larger sample size at this stage of close analysis,

although consequently I acknowledge this does limit the overarching generalisability of the data.

Utilising Xkit, the open source software discussed earlier in this chapter which provides additional features including a function called 'reply viewer', I established how many users had interacted with the post through the number of notes and the number of users who responded with additional content, either through posting a 'reply' or reblogging and adding their own material. I then identified the number of 'conversations' which occurred across these – conversations here referred to any instance in which three or more posts were in response to one another, including the original post, for instance, 'original post', 'comment A', 'reply to comment A'. After identifying instances of conversations, I isolated the material and analysed it for the following: rational and objective as well as abusive and abrasive language, number of unique participants, the content of the discourse, as well as how the conversation concluded.

Out of the 15 posts, three were 'exclusionists' arguing that asexual people do not belong in LGBT spaces, the rest either agreed that asexual people should be of the LGBT community, or it was up to individual people to decide whether or not they considered themselves part of it. Responses to posts came in two forms: replies and reblogs. When posting a 'reply', the original poster is notified and as well as anyone that is '@' tagged; for other users when scrolling through their dashboard interface, unless they proactively seek out the replies they will not be visible. As a result, responses made through 'replies' tended to remain solely between a user and the original poster. Responding through reblog, whilst fully visible on other user's

dashboard, had different complications. Each time a user responds via reblog, a new version of the post is now circulating on Tumblr. This new post, the original post and other additional reblogs with different comments may all be circulating simultaneously on the platform and can result in vastly diverging posts and conversations. Evidently this poses a distinct barrier to reciprocal deliberation both when using 'reply' or reblogging, as conversations when they occur often remained isolated or become disjointed.

Out of the posts, eight contained no instances of conversation within their replies at all, and there were 25 conversations across the remaining seven posts. Only five of these discussions contained more than five parts, and only two had more than two participants. The average length of a conversation was 2.1 replies, and any responses in agreement with the original post did not incite any conversations at all. In terms of the content of these conversations, swearing and sarcasm were present in most - and in one case individual bullying that was a personal attack on another user. Users dismissed others' perspectives through a variety of tactics; opening their statements with sarcastic language such as 'Buddy, you're wrong' and 'Wow aren't you just a bundle of joy', whist others employed capitalisation mid-sentence for emphasis 'what you're DOING is oppression. YOU'RE wrong' and many utilised internet slang such as LOL (laugh out loud) or LMAO (laughing my ass off) to belittle the previous participant in the conversation.

Two users ended with responses that effectively shutting down any future reciprocal communication: 'Anyways, I'm done with you' and 'why would I take ANYTHING you say seriously when you say this shit', effectively shutting down any futher

reciprocal communication – although in one case users did (to an extent) mutually end the conversation stating, 'it's pretty obvious neither of us are going to change our opinions so bye !!' to which the other user responded 'lmao ok bye'. When asked questions at several points users appeared to refuse to elaborate on the original statement thus limiting future debate. For instance, when asked about why they stated in their original post that corrective rape only happens to lesbians, the user helpfully replied simply with 'corrective rape only happens to lesbians' in 3 different comments.

From these examples it is hard to conceive a way in which Tumblr could provide a space for progressive deliberation. Reciprocal conversation is made challenging due to the sites protocols of public communication through replies or reblogs, and furthermore the content of the discussions that were identified suggests that the culture on Tumblr may also play a role in propagating a damaging form of social justice deliberation that relies on aggressive attacks and/or call-out culture.

These findings suggest that whilst Tumblr may provide a space for building counterpublic community, its technical affordances and culture challenge those same communities from utilising it for productive advocacy. The following chapter will consider this statement in further detail, particularly as to whether for the fledgling asexual community still struggling to form a cohesive group identity, Tumblr's benefit may lie in connecting like-minded users, and functioning as an enclave rather than a base for activism.

Chapter 3: Discussion

This chapter will return then to the overarching question and consider the overall efficacy of digital counterpublic activism on Tumblr. It will argue that this rests on a combination of two conditions. First, that marginalised groups are able to find a 'safe space' to withdraw from oppressive discourse and to deliberate and plan activist strategies, and secondly that they can find a way of effectively contesting interdiscursively in public spaces. The exploration of asexual users on Tumblr has found that not all these conditions were met on the site and whilst users primarily agree that there is a loose knit community of sorts that congregates on the platform, a majority consider the site not to be a space for activism and the analysis of 'ace discourse' content found little evidence of effective debate and deliberation. Findings from the user questionnaire also illuminated how the same features and technical affordances that users perceived to help propagate counterpublic community formation on Tumblr simultaneously function to limit any effective activism from taking place on the site. However, this thesis will argue that these conclusions do not negate Tumblr's use for counterpublic communities entirely. Instead of being a site for direct social activism, Tumblr functions to provide marginalised groups a space to convene in which their identity does not necessarily have to be politicised, and anonymity and privacy on the platform - especially in comparison to other SNSs - allows individuals to test out identity labels in a perceived 'safe space' without fear of their participation on Tumblr being correlated with their offline self. Therefore, this thesis will conclude that Tumblrs value for the asexual counterpublic community lies not in its ability to help mobilize and protest, but instead in how it aids identity formation; as one participant elaborated

‘Tumblr is basically where I learned everything about my sexuality and it’s helped connect me to people all over the world…it’s been a huge help in making me feel less alone and helping me to understand myself and who I am’.

For marginalised groups, collective identity building is the first step in forming an organised digital counterpublic, and the architectures and norms of different platforms can influence how users convey their identity and their group affinity. For asexual users on Tumblr this project identified three main practices that shaped community on the platform. Firstly, users expressed both individual and collective identity primarily through the actions of liking and reblogging existing asexual-related content rather than posting original content or communicating one-to-on. Secondly, users valued the anonymity that Tumblr allowed, particularly through the aforementioned liking and reblogging as the main form of participation, but also through the use of pseudonyms, the lack of connection to other SNSs and the option to send anonymous ‘asks’ between users rather than identify oneself. Finally, users utilised the Tumblr tagging feature to build a searchable community through widespread use of tags such as ‘asexuality’ or ‘actually ace’, but they also appropriated the tags as a way to communicate discreetly and ‘safely’ away from discourse by leaving long-form, non-rebloggable commentary in them. The following section will now explore these intertwined practices in more detail, and then the next subsections will go on to consider the types of content posted, activist strategies employed and any backlash received.

'I see, I like, I reblog': Building Community

Unlike AVEN's tailor-made insular forum or Facebooks 'closed groups' which can 'cultivat[e] closed-off, separatist, safe spaces' (Clark-Parsons, 2017:5), Tumblr has no features that implement defined community boundaries. Instead community on Tumblr is better viewed as a loose collective where group affiliation is expressed through a combination of liking and reblogging over the obligation to post original or personal content. Miller, however argues that the culture of participation by 'liking' on contemporary social media platforms is 'phatic' and leaves interactions void of meaningful communication as the 'exchange of words becomes superfluous' (2008:395), which evidently raises questions about how productive debate and digital activism surrounding specific issues can take place under these conditions. Whilst to an extent Miller's work does hold some merit as this study found evidence of reciprocal debate on Tumblr scarce, Miller does trivialise the value of these so called 'phatic' actions which Varis and Bloomaert (2015:35) argue lies in their ability to act as 'identity statements expressing, pragmatically and metapragmatically, membership of some group'. Through liking or reblogging a post, a user is then connected to the collective of others who have also liked and reblogged that post, and as on Tumblr posts are primarily reblogged on the 'basis of recognition of the feelings or experiences articulated in the post' (Kanai, 2017b:297), or as one respondent explained 'I mainly reblog content that I might find relatable as an asexual', then this translates to aiding in collective identity building centred around shared commonalities.

Miller's work also neglects to consider the benefits that low-stakes participation holds for new and/or potential community members, as one participant summed up well when stating 'I found my niche on Tumblr because you can start with reblogging random posts, rather than needing questions or thoughts on ace things to get started'. Participation through reblogging does not require the user to have mastered all terminology or be familiar with all of the current community debates. Several respondents stated that they often were hesitant to post original content due to a 'fear of attracting hate from ace exclusionists' (those on the opposing side of the 'ace discourse'), whilst others 'worr[ied] about being qualified to make posts', especially those who had recently begun using the asexual label, or were unsure of where they fell on the 'asexual spectrum'. This latter point suggests one way that community through reblogging can help to counter gatekeeping practices in the asexual community which have reoccurred over the years across platforms such as Yahoo group HAVEN, and the forums of AVEN, during struggles to delineate the boundaries and definitions of asexuality in terms of who was *allowed* to claim the identity as laid out in chapter one.

Furthermore, Miller's dismissal of phatic actions serves to ignores the members of the community whose participation is even more passive and primarily consists of observation. For some this was because they were closeted, whilst others simply did not like online communication. However, despite not interacting directly with asexual content in any visible way (that is liking or reblogging, and thus increasing the notes of a post) they still garnered personal value from it, as one noted 'I'm a lurker. I get all the peer support I need from reading other people's posts and discussions, and for now I prefer not to actively participate'. Whilst it is impossible

to estimate how many lurkers there are, it does suggest that participation even at its most passive cannot be discounted in terms of its value for individual identity formation, but admittedly it has little visible impact on community.

On Tumblr then these phatic actions of liking and reblogging express group affinity, but also form the basis for self-presentation on the platform. Online self-presentation has been widely discussed by theorists (Chen and Marcus, 2012; Lee, Ahn and Kim, 2014), who overall agree that the process is situational, and influenced by context such as who a user perceives their audience to be and what impressions they wish to make. For instance, on Facebook a user's network tends to be made up of real life connections such as friends, family and work colleagues, and they present the 'same general identity they express to offline contacts' (Hillman, Procyk and Neustaedter 2014:2). Additionally, Facebook's architecture is designed to encourage sharing – whether that be through inputting profile information, RSVPing to an event, liking a friend's status or joining a 'group'. Participation is therefore often public (unless the group is 'closed) and readily available to one's real world network to view. It can be challenging then for marginalised groups to convene on Facebook, particularly so for LGBT+ communities where not all members may be out to all their offline contacts, and for some there is still a real danger of violence or harassment. For others, however, it may be that they seek a safe online space in which to test out labels in the process of identity formation before claiming them in a public space more closely entwined with their offline identity such as Facebook.

Considering then the context for self-presentation on Tumblr, one participant noted how 'it's nice to just reblog stuff so *the others* see who you are' [my emphasis]. This

statement raises the question of who exactly these '*others'* are perceived to be on the platform. Whilst Facebook places the emphasis on reciprocal 'friendship' between users, Tumblr like Twitter is based on 'followers' where you can follow someone without the precondition that they reciprocate. Following on Tumblr is also primarily interest driven rather than reliant on real life connection suggesting the imaginary audience or '*the others'* are not offline friends or family. Tunnell argues that this allows users to curate 'a self-image which bears little or no relation to how they physically present themselves offline' (2016:22) if they so wish, whilst Hill et al., (2014:6) found users 'felt more 'themselves' on Tumblr' than other social media sites and even in the 'real world', and Oakley's (2016:9) research noted that gender non-conforming users perceived Tumblr to be a safe space in which they could utilise labels outside of the gender binary.

Findings from this study's survey reached similar conclusions which suggests there are certain aspects of Tumblr's architecture and cultural norms that result in users feeling safe to express themselves. These all tie into aspects of anonymity on site whether it be from real life acquaintances, the use of pseudonyms, speaking to users through 'anon' asks, or the ephemerality of authorship and communication on the platform. To unpack this last statement more fully in terms of authorship on Tumblr, posts are only briefly accredited to their original author before they are reblogged multiple times and that creators' identity is obsolete to the extent that if a user opts to deactivate their account their posts will continue to circulate independently.[11]

[11] The original source of a post is listed in a lighter font whilst viewing a post on the dashboard, but it is not necessarily visible when viewing a post on another users blog. The previous blog a post has been reblogged from however is visible on both.

In terms of communication, ephemerality here refers to the practice of 'commenting in the tags'[12], which was by far the most common way asexual users did contribute content on Tumblr. This type of discursive long form commentary in the tags will be primarily viewed by one's 'followers' and is not searchable subverting the function of hashtags as either a form of information organization or as 'vehicles for…mobilizing social protest' as used by activisms on platforms such as Twitter (Sikarskie, 2015).

Whilst this thesis did initially suggest that the movement of a digital asexual counterpublic from an insular site such as AVEN could allow activists to partake in interdiscursive contestation, participation predominantly through reblogging, liking and ephemeral forms of communication significantly limits the chance of this taking place. Additionally, whilst some users did use the tagging system in the intended way to create searchable talk and to find one another, there was an overwhelming proportion of survey respondents who deliberately avoided the tags (referring to tags such as 'asexuality' and similar phrases) as they perceived them to be 'invaded with anti-asexual views' and 'abused by others'. The rhetoric of Tumblr being a 'safe space' was a recurrent theme throughout participant's answers, although evidently this does not refer to the platform as a whole but to the experiences users curate for themselves.

[12] When a user comments in the tags (which do not have a character limit and allow both spaces and punctuation) this additional commentary to a post will be visible on the user's blog, but when the post is reblogged – even directly from that user – this tag commentary will not travel with it

If we return to earlier theorisations of what constitutes a 'safe space' in that what may be perceived as safe for some is unsafe for others, we can see how Tumblr's affordances have allowed asexual users to personalise their time on the platform and participants of this study exemplified how various practices can function to create a (loosely connected) counterpublic enclave in which safety is characterised by discretion, anonymity and circumventing interaction with those with oppositional views. For asexual users then the ability to construct an individualised safe space may draw them to Tumblr whilst simultaneously placing limitations on activism on the site - if activism is to include some forms of interdiscursive debate and deliberation.

Now that this first section has explored the specific practices asexual Tumblr users partake in in order to construct a loose knit community through sharing and the actions they take to maintain a 'safe space' on the site, the following section will turn to exactly what types of content they are circulating in their counterpublic arena, whether it constitutes as a type of activism and what value it holds for collective identity formation.

'It's all about pretty things, fandom and randomness': Situating Asexuality within Tumblr culture

On Tumblr, the main way in which users browse through content is via the dashboard interface which displays a feed of all the posts made by Tumblr blogs a user follows. The dashboard becomes a curated experience for each user where they can customise their time on Tumblr in line with their interests which will all then

appear interspersed on their feed. For some, the advantage of Tumblr's dashboard was due to the way 'it fits seamlessly into [their] schedule and way of interacting online' and many survey respondents noted that they were already regular users of Tumblr before identifying as asexual and so visiting either the website or Tumblr app was already a routine part of their daily digital consumption. This also benefited closeted members of the community as visiting an asexual-specific platform such as AVEN risked the danger of outing, as one user stated 'it's easier for me to hide than AVEN since I use the Tumblr app'. Although Tumblr appealed to these users for different reasons either due to its convenience or safety, they are linked by a common thread – a motivation to find a space in which to consume asexuality-related content alongside other facets of one's identity rather than in isolation. This is evident in the answer given by one participant when asked about the advantages of Tumblr, 'What I like about Tumblr is how it's a more casual sense of community, as I use it mostly for the content I enjoy watching on TV and the internet, but I'm able to also just be myself and share this part of myself alongside it'. Borrowing language from several survey answers then, one key advantage to Tumblr appears to be the ability to interact with asexuality-related content in a 'natural' way, where 'not everything has to be focused on the fact you are ace'. This suggests that if users were to use Tumblr to circulate activist content, it would not be their sole pursuit on the platform, but rather one in a myriad of activities.

The following section will consider the type of asexual content that is found to be circulating on Tumblr in the most commonly used community tag 'asexuality', and that survey participants most commonly spoke of. Overall this content consisted of humorous memes, intertextual media references and fandom related material over

any evidence of text-based critical debates about community issues. This segment is interested in how sharing these posts influence collective counterpublic formation, and if it is (or it is perceived to be) a form of activism by users.

Humour and Memes

When discussing memes, this thesis employs Gal, Shifman and Kampf's (2016:1700) definition of memes as 'groups of items that share common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance, which were created, transformed, and circulated by any participants through digital participatory platforms'. Tumblr's architecture and emphasis on reblogging as the main form of participation result in the site being an apt vehicle for the dissemination and circulation of memes. Whilst it is easy to shun memes as simply a form of Internet humour, this neglects the value they have in collective identity formation as memes can be appropriated and personalised in order to express particular affinities or ideas.

Understanding these particular memes and their intertextual references functions as social capital to situate oneself as part of the in-group, so for



Figure 7. Despicable Me meme

Tumblr users 'scroll[ing] tags about aceness for jokes/memes about asexuality' becomes a practice that situates them as part of the asexual community. For instance, one post in the content analysis was an adaption of 'Gru's Plan' (Figure 7) a four panel meme based on the film Despicable Me (2010) that first circulated on Reddit. A Tumblr user had altered the meme to comment on the issue in the asexual community of being misunderstood when coming out, due to others being ill-informed about the identity label. The meme takes this stance to a humorous extreme by wrongly associating asexuality with asexual plant reproduction. This post at the time of writing has received a combination of 4,300 likes and reblogs, each interaction signifies that user as part of a wider collective who have understood the memes references and the circumstances depicted. Whilst misunderstandings over defining asexuality has been a very real and prevalent community dilemma, this meme allows users to acknowledge this in a light hearted way.

In chapter two, this thesis noted how Tumblr's reputation for youthful, frivolous content may pose a challenge to counterpublic activism on the platform, however, participants emphasised that humorous content was central to their experience and enjoyment of Tumblr which was backed up by the content of the posts analysed. Whilst there has been evidence of memes being utilised as political commentary, for instance the 2012 'Binders Full of Women Meme' which was studied by Rentschler and Thrift (2015:329)[13], those on the asexuality tag provided less of a direct

[13] The meme 'Binders full of women' was a response to a phrase said by Mitt Romney during the 2012 presidential debate as he stated he had looked over many female applicants for his senior staff when asked about the gender pay gap. The parody meme went viral and was reported by mainstream news outlets such as The Wall Street Journal. Beyond just an internet parody, the phrase sparked protest in Ohio and BinderCon a symposium run by a gender equality advocacy group in New York for 'women and gender-non conforming writers'.

statement on particular issues or events and in the eyes of users did not constitute directly as activism. Instead, the 'less formal and more jokey' atmosphere of Tumblr was valuable to the fledgling asexual counterpublic in providing a space to 'be themselves' and articulate their identity without a necessity for debate or politicising it.



Figure 8. 'is valid' meme

Alongside content constituted as more 'traditional' memes, like the example above, were what this thesis designates as Tumblr-specific memes. One of the most common text based memes – employing the term meme here to refer to how the post's format was replicated and spread as described by Gal et al., above – was the 'is/are valid' text post. Posts initially were structured to name a marginalised identity label (or the name of an individual who identified as such) followed by 'is/are valid', users could reblog both if they identified with the same label or to express their alliance with those who did (Figure 8). The 'is/are valid' post format has spread beyond its original content and is now widely used to express fannish affinity e.g. 'your ship is valid' and other interests e.g. 'girls who skateboard are valid'. However, the prevalence of the original 'is/are valid' posts, as well as others that express similar sentiments but with alternate wording, for example, 'Shout out to [name of marginalised group]', all do function as a low-stakes form of

social-justice orientated participation. They can promote awareness and support which propagates the notion that Tumblr is certainly a space where such content has an audience to circulate around, but the extent to which it can be considered activism is unclear. As one participant noted the problem with these types of posts is that they 'preach to the choir' as users control what they are exposed to on their dashboard so this 'activism in the form of raising awareness is pretty useless', and the posts structure allows no nuanced argument or explanations to take place past the surface level.

Fandom

Alongside humorous content and Tumblr specific memes, posts that related to various fandoms were also common - although this was unsurprising considering how Tumblr is now widely regarded as one of the central hubs for contemporary online fandoms (Bury, 2017). Fannish content may be presumed to be primarily for entertainment, however, it can sometimes unintentionally function as social commentary and this was the case for some of the content that sat at the intersection of asexuality and fandom, particularly for transformative works that addressed asexuality. Fanfiction can play an important role in providing representation where there is none or where existing material is problematic. There are very few instances where characters have self-identified as asexual in mainstream fictional media, and others coded as asexual 'conflate a lack of sexual desirability with a lack of sexual desire' (Sinwell, 2014:334), inhumanness or repression (Flore, 2014:46). Therefore, in the case of asexuality, participatory media – in particular transformative works -

may be one of the only places in which the narrative has started moving beyond pathology or dysfunction.

A number of survey participants noted that they both read and wrote fanfiction (or similar content such as 'imagines' and 'head canons'[14]) that addressed asexuality. However, users who elaborated on their intentions behind doing so, particularly those that authored stories, did not appear to be motivated by a want to provide direct social commentary or consider their actions a form of activism. Instead, participants spoke of personal need to explore narratives similar to their own that were lacking in the mainstream. However, these stories did have a wider impact beyond the writers themselves, one author wrote of their surprise after the 'overwhelming number of asks, comments, reblogs and private messages' they received after posting, particularly the 'numerable messages from people who hadn't realised they were asexual before reading [their] fic on Tumblr'.

This latter statement illuminates one of the problems that has caused the invisibility of asexuality in society in that in order to identify as asexual, individuals must first stumble across the term. Responses from those who read fanfiction indicate similarly, as one spoke of how 'reading histories that were similar to mine were essential for me to get myself', and of how 'validating' the experience was. These types of comments are supported by Hilton-Morrows and Battles's explanation of the importance of representation for non-normative sexual identities in that it

[14] 'Imagines' are short passages written in the second person popularised on Tumblr where the narrative often involves the reader (written as YN, an acronym for 'your name') and a fictional character or celebrity (Fanlore, 2018). 'Head canons' refer to a fan's personal interpretation of a character's backstory or subtext; on Tumblr they are often formatted in bullet points rather than long form prose (Fanlore, 2014).

provides a 'vital source for self-recognition and identity formation', especially in providing examples outside the heteronormative life trajectory (2015:77).

Although users producing transformative works on Tumblr did not consider it a deliberate activist strategy, the stories circulating did aid in collective identity building as users were able to recognise similarities in their own life experiences, and even provide education for those outside of the group. One author explained how they had received many messages 'from people who do not identify as ace saying they learned lots from my writing and my Tumblr blog that helped them to understand ace people they knew in real life'. Fanfiction on Tumblr then is circulated through reblogging and can function as a way to introduce people to new understandings and nuances of identities different to their own which they might not have sought out or read if it was not framed in relation to their favourite media text or 'ship'. [15]

Safety

For some in the asexual community, however, they were not searching solely for direct media representation of identities similar to their own, but rather they wanted 'safe' media to consume whether that be fanfiction, original writing, videos or even

[15] Fanfiction on Tumblr is usually tagged with the both fandom and relationship it depicts as fans are motivated to read stories if they contain their favourite 'ship'. For instance, one survey participant wrote fanfiction about YouTubers Dan Howell and Phil Lester in which one character identified as asexual but tagged the fanfiction with 'phan' (a portmanteau of the YouTubers names) rather than a tag pertaining to 'asexuality'. This resulted in the fanfiction being circulating around the 'phan' community - which was the fourth most popular 'ship' on Tumblr in 2017 (Fandometrics, 2017) - rather than those specifically seeking out asexual representation.

gif sets compiled from another media text. To elaborate further, for some asexual people who identify as 'sex-repulsed', navigating media can be challenging due to how sexuality pervades all aspects of society especially in Western culture – which Przybylo (2011) refers to as 'sexusociety', and so much of art, film and especially humour is sexuality orientated (Bogaert, 2012:9). In lieu of this, a subsection of the asexual community on Tumblr have created ways in which to indicate to others that their blogs are 'safe spaces' by including phrases such as 'smut-free' or 'no nsfw content please' in their layouts, blog taglines and in the tags of their posts, and some produce creative works that pointedly do not include sexual content/references. Tumblr's structure that allows for the curating of individualised dashboards and features such as 'Safe Mode' and software such as Xkit all help these particular users retaining a sense of individual 'safety' on the platform, but in terms of a community wide agreement over what these boundaries of safe/unsafe constitute as – there is no unanimous agreement as the next example will show.

Although asexuality is defined as a 'lack of sexual attraction', nuances over sexual and romantic boundaries are constantly deliberated, which therefore raises questions of how, in group spaces such as the widely used 'asexuality' tag, content can assuredly be safe for all who utilise it. For instance, the post below (Figure, 9) is a humorous gif response that exemplifies another subsection on of the community's perspective on sexual media content that problematizes the presumption that shared community spaces such as the 'asexuality' tag will be a non-sexualised environment.

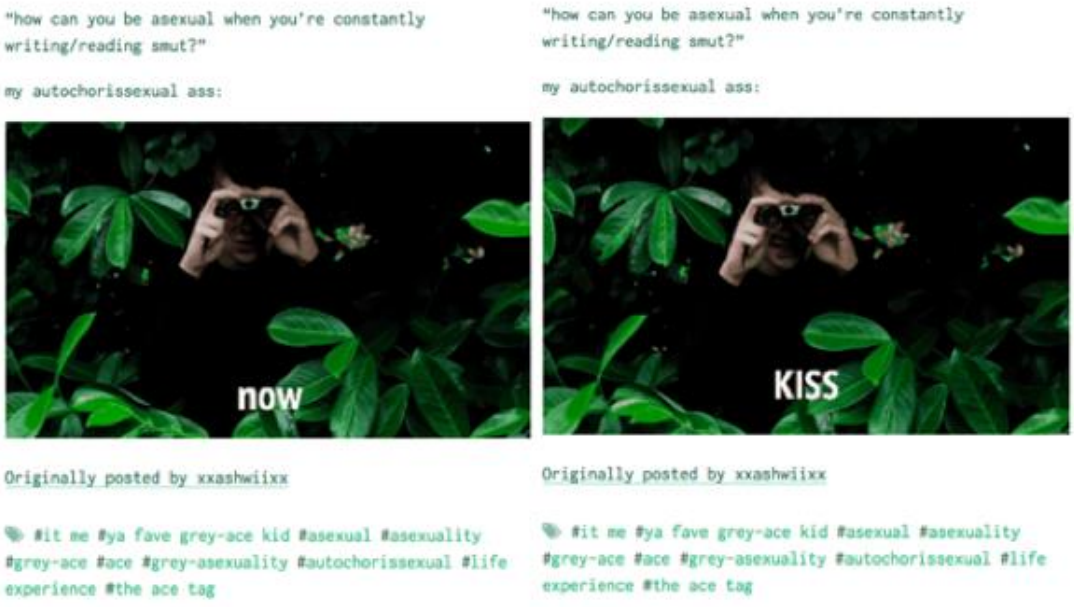


Figure 9. Stills from a Gif about 'autochorisexuality'

The gif refers to those that identify as autochorisexual which is defined as 'a person who can be aroused by sexual material and may masturbate, fantasize and/or watch porn but has no desire to seek a partner or have sexual interactions themselves' (AVEN, wiki), and the post refers to how a person's interest in erotic fanfiction appears oppositional to their asexual identity – at least to outsiders. What this example shows is how diversity of experiences and feelings within the asexual community on Tumblr problematize how boundaries of safe/unsafe can be negotiated for the community as a whole, and further reiterates how important it is to understand the construction of safe space as context dependent processes for each individual user on the platform.

Throughout this first section the emphasis on a need for a safe space (in whatever way users deem this) in which to participate has been pervasive, but how can the asexual community as a whole accommodate everyone? This thesis argues that

Tumblr's technological architecture and cultural values have enabled an asexual counterpublic to flourish on the site which differs from previous digital asexual spaces such as AVEN and HAVEN in that it has no formal group boundaries, consequently allowing for diversity in perspectives and experiences. However, with such a diversity of experiences and opinions within the community, how can users come together to mobilise and develop activist and educational strategies on the platform? The following section will explore the findings of the 'ace discourse' tag, alongside the self-reported activism on Tumblr by survey participants, to consider Tumblr's potential as a platform for social justice activism and debate, paying particular attention to what kind of activities users perceive to be activism, instances of interdiscursive discourse and any backlash received.

'It's all good as long as you avoid THE DISCOURSE!!!': Contestation and Debate on Tumblr

In Fraser's work she writes of a need to find space to regroup and come together away from oppressive forces which, as demonstrated in this thesis, Tumblr has the potential to be (at least to an extent). Following on from this, counterpublic communities need to plan action, develop language to articulate their needs, and finally push their issues into the public sphere to be interdiscursively deliberated to lead to movement in wider discourse. There was little evidence in asexual-orientated spaces on Tumblr of reciprocal discussion, and many participants noted that if they sought this then they would turn instead to AVEN. Tumblr's architecture propagates communication to the masses, rather than one to one conversation and thus makes debating both within the asexual community and with oppositional groups

challenging, as one user noted ‘debate on Tumblr is an absolute mess that I don’t want to get into’, referring not just to the content of such debates but the difficulty in finding a suitable space to exchange ideas. The same features that made Tumblr ‘safe’ and drew asexual users to the platform – particularly anonymity, participation predominantly through reblogging and commenting in the tags, alongside an emphasis on light hearted content - simultaneously place limits on where exactly reciprocal conversation could occur.

The term ‘ace discourse’ was a recurring phrase throughout participants’ answers, interestingly it was rarely to do with participating in such debate or the issues it pertained to (although there were a few who did), but instead ‘ace discourse’ was mentioned in the context of how to avoid and evade it whether this be by ‘staying out of [it]’ or ‘just lurking [in the tags]’, avoiding ‘controversial views’, ‘only lik[ing] stuff’, or unfollowing and/or blocking any blogs who engaged with it. These statements raised an important question; if this ‘ace discourse’ was so prevalent on site that it required avoidance strategies but few of the survey respondents actively were participating in it, then who exactly was? Before this question can be answered, the issue of what exactly ‘ace discourse’ specifically refers to will be outlined.

As briefly mentioned in Chapter 2, the phrase ‘ace discourse’, often referred to as ‘The Discourse’, concerns the question of whether or not asexual individuals are part of the LGBT community with opposing sides termed ‘inclusionists’ and ‘exclusionists’ respectively. Whilst this thesis has recognised the queer potential of asexuality and the parallels to other LGBT identities, it is not interested at this point

in arguing for or against either side of 'The Discourse'. Instead it is interested in how users are framing their arguments, their uses of both negative and abusive language, or of persuasive reasoning, as well as instances when both sides engage with one another to debate the issues disputed.

To contextualise this analysis, particularly in relation to the private/public sphere, the main points of each side will briefly be summed up. Inclusionists posit asexuality as part of the LGBT community as it rejects dominant heteronormative culture. They acknowledge asexual people may be in queer relationships depending on their romantic orientation and argue that asexual people often experience stigmatisation and feelings of not belonging from their peers growing up, similar to other LGBT youth. Those who oppose the inclusion of asexuality in LGBT spaces argue that asexual people take away LGBT resources from those who need it and make their spaces unsafe by including their 'oppressors' as asexual people do not experience the same types of institutionalised discrimination[16]. Finally, they argue that asexuality is a preference, or as it pertains directly to a sex act itself (or lack of) it is a private matter thus does not warrant deliberation in public spaces, because as one post stated 'it's just TMI' (Too Much Information).

Briefly, to draw attention to this final point, it mirrors rhetoric used against other marginalised groups discussed in chapter one. For example, when women's

[16] Or that asexual people are 'cishet' (an abbreviation of cisgender heterosexual) and thus have no place in an LGBT environment. Throughout the post analysis this word was utilised outside of its meaning, and functioned as an insult - often prefaced with a swear word. Whether or not the term is even correct for any in the asexual community causes controversy as whilst some asexual people may indeed be cisgender they are hetero*romantic* rather than hetero*sexual* if they experience opposite gender attraction, therefore the nuances of language come under fire.

concerns were shunted to the margins because they were not perceived to be of 'public concern'; and ironically, of language parallels which have been used to oppress the LGBT movement for decades, even to this day some continue to argue that they are not homophobic, they just don't want 'LGBT issues shoved down their throat' in respect of LGBT visibility in mainstream media (Sizer, 2017). However, the most important aspect to recognise about this 'ace discourse' is that it appears to be taking place solely on Tumblr rather than in offline space, which makes it an interesting point of exploration when considering how productive debate and efficient activism can take place on site, and raises questions about the safety of Tumblr as a space for counterpublic identity politics due to this platform's specific backlash.

'You have to deal with exclusionist buttholes': Trolls and Antagonists

As noted in chapter 2, Tumblr's architecture favours anonymity; it allows users to keep their identity apart from their offline lives, encourages the use of pseudonyms, allows for posts to circulate with little emphasis on the identity of the original poster, as well as only requiring minimal sign up information. These all aided in the construction of a perceived 'safe space' for an asexual counterpublic to congregate. The same conditions, however, also create an environment in which trolls are rampant, often using 'sock puppet' accounts to antagonise users with abusive and negative language. This kind of behaviour is in no way unique to Tumblr, scholars having written widely on the prevalence of online trolls, particularly on Reddit and 4chan (Coleman, 2014), and nor are trolls on Tumblr specifically targeting asexual users – Hillman et al., (2014:5) found that trolls were the 'largest negative aspect to

Tumblr fandoms' where they would deliberately start arguments for the purpose of their entertainment.

When analysing the posts containing elements of critical debate, apparent trolls and derogatory language were prevalent throughout. Several of the accounts that consistently replied to posts were made by users who had no icon or blog posts on their individual Tumblrs. These users tended to comment once and not engage in reciprocal conversation and thus functioned predominantly to antagonise the original poster. There were also active Tumblr users who interacted in a similar manner, leaving replies such as 'dumb post op [original poster]', 'wow this is some next level oppressing fantasy bullshit, plz kill urself now' and 'adieu fuckface'. Interestingly, survey respondents emphasised that they did not participate in this 'ace discourse', and most avoided it and went so far as to block any mention of it, suggesting that these aforementioned derogatory comments often do not reach their intended audiences. Furthermore, this type of backlash which in this case was a response to a post trying to explain the differences and similarities of the stigmatization and discrimination of asexual people to the wider LGBT community, then prevented both sides from engaging in any productive conversation. Admittedly in some cases this was not solely a fault of the users in question but rather a result of limitations in Tumblr's architecture. Thus an exploration of these constraints is central to the question as to whether Tumblr can be a space for digital activism.

'You can't even have a decent conversation!': Technical Limitations

The aforementioned responses were ‘replies’ to a post, not ‘reblogs’ or ‘comments in the tags’. Replies differ from these as they do not show up on the Tumblr dashboard unless a user clicks on the number of notes (See figure 10 for an example of the interface in which they can be viewed). If someone replies to a post, the user whose post or reblog they directly replied to will get a notification – which means the original poster will not necessarily be informed. Users can also ‘@’ mention another user within the reply, similar to Twitter and Facebook, in order to ensure they are notified, but this practice is not as prevalent on Tumblr.

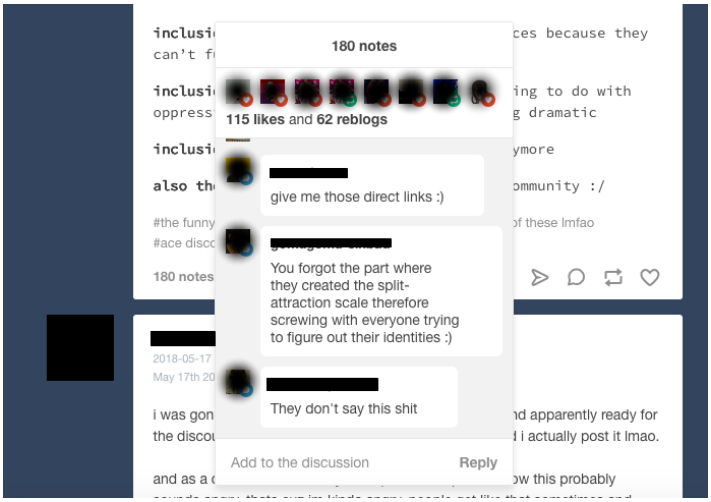


Figure 10. Viewing replies to a post on Tumblr

As a result, replies on Tumblr provide a challenge to reciprocal conversation. Whilst for trolls they provide an ideal space for low stakes hostility where the original poster is unlikely to reply, for those trying to engage in debate with the content of the initial post, replying rarely results in a conversation– only 10% of the replies in the posts analysed resulted in a back and forth of opinions. As one respondent also stated ‘most of the interactions involving replies end in the blocking of the other users due to the aphobic rhetoric they preach’ (aphopic referring to prejudice against asexual people). Evidently Tumblr’s ‘reply’ function is not apt for reciprocal communication between two users, therefore this thesis will now turn to the use of reblogging, which has a dual function. Firstly, it could be perceived as a mode of

activism which users correlate with ‘raising awareness’ and ‘visibility’. Secondly reblogging functions as a way to add commentary to posts pertaining to the ‘ace discourse’ debate which could in theory result in communication between the two opposing sides.

‘I just reblog *shrugs*’: Activism or Slacktivism?

Whilst the earlier half of this chapter laid out the strategies that asexual users employ to construct a space to retreat and regroup in line with Fraser’s counterpublic framework, what was not evident was instances of planning for activism in the wider publics past a rhetoric of ‘awareness’ and ‘visibility’. Furthermore, the same tactics utilised to keep the counterpublic space safe and consequently insular, despite being on a global multi-function platform, meant that posts designed to contribute to this rhetoric – to spread education – ended up ‘preaching to the choir’.

When asked about their activism on Tumblr survey participants most commonly mentioned ‘reblogging’. Reblogging as a form of activism was explained by participants as a way of ‘spread[ing] positivity’, ‘signal boosting’ important issues, and ‘mak[ing] more people aware of asexuality’, but how effective are these actions? Earlier, this thesis explored Miller's critique that contemporary social media participation constituted purely phatic actions such as liking and reblogging. Considering these practices as a form of activism may evoke the negative rhetoric surrounding online activism as a whole in that it is simply ‘slacktivism’ and/or ‘clicktivism’ (Jones, 2016) and so raises questions over how impactful reblogging activist material actually is. Interestingly the Tumblr users surveyed thought

similarly, many qualified their answers of activism through reblogging with phrases such as ‘activism is a strong word for what I do’ or ‘my activism is more passive’. One user explained the issues with Tumblr activism well in that it is ‘generally incredibly ineffective and performative as it primarily revolves around reblogging the “right kind” of posts from the “right kind” of people for the purpose of showing how much you care about stuff’. Therefore, reblogging ‘positivity’ posts functioned predominantly as a form of identity construction – which has its own value to users as discussed previously, rather than as an activist strategy of deliberating issues or moving forward. Reblogging also, as several users highlighted, risked spreading false information, as one noted, ‘Sometimes misinformation runs wild. I dislike that about Tumblr. I think education posts are good, but should have sources and taken with a grain of salt if they don’t’; this point conversely applies to posts made by those on the oppositional side of the ‘ace discourse’ too.

In the analysis of the critical posts in the ace discourse tag, this thesis found evidence of users deploying the reblog function in order to add their own commentary onto the debate publically rather than discreetly through replies. On initial observation, this may appear to illuminate a way in which Tumblr could also provide a space for productive debate between oppositional parties. However, the platform's architecture once again presented a constraint to this occurring. A survey participant explained this dilemma well; ‘Tumblr is not good for serious discussion; you don’t necessarily see all the additions to posts. While someone may have added brilliant points to a Tumblr post [by reblogging], you may be stuck seeing a version of that post without said additions or with others that are not so good and miss out simply due to how the site operates’. This user is referring to the way in which

several versions of a post may simultaneously be circulating with different additions to each one which can take the debate in alternate directions, be repetitive, and result in no users being privy to the entire discussion. Several users compared this to the linear forum style discussion of AVEN, noting how this was a better space for 'actually talking to one another', and others noted similar sentiments to 'If it's something worth discussing I go to AVEN, Tumblr is better for fun and memes'. As demonstrated, Tumblr's architecture places constraints on certain communicative practices which shape the type (and lack) of debate and discussion that can take place on the site. The final point the latter participant made above about fun and memes, however, refers to the content and the culture of the platform itself, and so the following section will turn to explore how activism and debate is influenced by the platform's governance and the behaviours it promotes as well as the values users have ascribed to the site and their time on it.

'Tumblr is evil and angry, mostly': Aggression as a Cultural Norm

The culture and content that circulates on Tumblr is directly influenced by the governance of the platform. Tumblr's 'Community Guidelines' over what they term 'malicious speech' is central to this which states:

'Malicious Speech. Don't encourage violence or hatred. Don't make violent threats or statements that incite violence, including threatening or promoting terrorism. Especially don't do so on the basis of things like race, ethnic origin, religion, disability, gender, gender identity, age, veteran status, or sexual orientation. If you encounter negative speech that doesn't rise to the level of violence or threats of

violence, we encourage you to dismantle negative speech through argument rather than censorship. That said, if you encounter anything especially heinous, tell us about it.' (Tumblr, 2018b)

This statement encourages users to self-police language and behaviour on the site which may have part led to the proliferation of what Brown terms the 'call out' (2018), referring to the notion that to be a good activist you must confront anyone who says something that could be perceived as racist, sexist, homophobic etc., including other activists in the social justice community. Whilst Tumblr may have intended for these rules to encourage users to engage in debate, the sites lack of moderation coupled with an inability to easily report other users meant that these 'arguments' in the social justice community could easily become sites of hostility. Furthermore, activists often utilised aggressive and dismissive language, or resorted to personal attacks on other users when they came across statements that they didn't agree with. The consequence however was a precedent for public aggression regarding social justice issues on Tumblr which can be mimicked and turned against groups during oppositional backlash. This all ties into the widespread mocking of 'social justice warriors', which whilst not site-specific to Tumblr has seen a proliferation in coverage in the wake of controversies such as Gamergate and functions to turn potential sites of online social debate into sites of mockery.

The content analysis of the 'ace discourse' tag found strong evidence for this as there was little back or forth debate over the issues at hand, instead posts scoffed at the concept of asexuality existing and attacked other users individually by undermining the legitimacy or credibility of their statement, often due to their age or

previous statements. One post opened with ‘No. you’re just a ‘teen’ as per your handle what would you know? I’ve been around since the early 1990s’. Retorts across the analysis were framed with sarcasm to belittle the other user and excessive use of swearing which detracted from the point being made by both inclusionists and exclusionists. One survey participant observed how ‘they’ve [referring to both sides of the ‘ace discourse’ debate] turned it into a joke, and are purposefully and maliciously being obtuse’. Again not taking sides, another noted ‘whether these are legitimate issues or not, the anger, hostility and ridicule of the commentary leaves an impact’. Tumblr’s governance evidently favours free speech over censorship and encourages users to deliberate these issues among themselves. Despite what their original intentions in the community regulations may have been in reality they have aided in fostering an environment, particularly in social justice circles, of aggression even between minority groups in which publicly shaming or attacking other viewpoints has become the cultural site norm. Overall, this all undermines the platforms effectiveness as a site for productive activism and interdiscursive deliberation between groups.

‘It’s just for memes and fun, not serious things!’: A Culture of Frivolity

The culture and governance of Tumblr has influenced what is acceptable rhetoric to use in discussion of social and identity politics, but the structure and form of the debate is also influenced by other content simultaneously circulating on the

platform. The fact that the most popular content on Tumblr tends to be light-hearted and humorous, and regularly employs memes, further contributes to the way in which social issues are framed. Whilst humour and politics are not incompatible, the prevalence of the appropriation of memes in order to antagonise marginalised groups on Tumblr is troublesome. A popular post structure is a 'mood board' which takes advantage of Tumblr's automatic formatting of images into nine equal squares and underneath each mood board a caption will identify the theme (or multiple themes) that links the images together. Mood boards are popular in counterpublic communities as an expression of identity, but have been co-opted by oppositional groups as a way to mock them. For instance, figure 10 is a mood board found in the content analysis of the 'asexuality' tag, whilst figure 11 was circulated using 'ace discourse'.

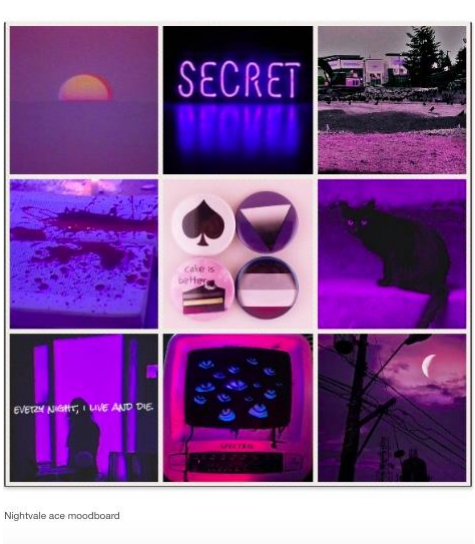




Figure 10 (left). Asexual/ Welcome to Nightvale Mood Board

Figure 11 (right). Asexual/ Donald Trump Board Mood Board

Figure 10 combines the colours of the asexual flag (purple, grey, black and white) with images associated to the popular podcast 'Welcome to Nightvale', therefore allowing users to express their affinity both to the asexual community and the Nightvale fandom through reblogging the post. Figure 11 also uses the imagery and colours of the asexual community, on this occasion alongside pictures of the controversial, right-wing politician Donald Trump. Trump has no association with asexuality, instead images of him function to mock the left-wing social justice community. The post was circulated without further comment from its original creator, although it did rile some in the asexual community who reblogged the post with additional commentary such as 'wtf why do you all love comparing aces and aros to Trump and other horrible people so much. Like this is not funny? Vile'. These angry additions through reblogging essentially resulted in further proliferation and visibility of the main body of image - which may be exactly the outcome the original author hoped for and actually be to detriment of the wider asexual community.

If posts made on the 'ace discourse' tag then overly rely on the appropriation of Tumblr conventions and humour, it creates an environment where ridiculing minority groups becomes the norm and in which debate is sparse. Posts on both the 'asexuality' and 'ace discourse' tag received significantly more notes and thus visibility if they relied on images or humour and were not solely text based. This once again places further limitations on where interdiscursive deliberation can occur on Tumblr, particularly if such debates need to be circulated and seen in order to garner interaction for multiple perspectives.

This chapter's discussion of the findings of a combination of the platform analysis, user questionnaire and content analysis have demonstrated the dilemma of Tumblr for counterpublic communities; whilst its structure and normative values do aid in creating a perceived 'safe space' which is evidentially valuable to marginalised individuals, these same features place limitations to locating a public space in which issues can be deliberated and conversations moved forward. Activism cannot exist within a bubble and set apart from oppositional groups; in order to achieve progress there needs to be a space for those usually shunned to the margins to challenge and deliberate with the dominant voices. Tumblr, however, does not appear to provide such space.

Conclusion

This thesis set out to query the efficiency of Tumblr as a site for social justice activism, particularly for those in the asexual community. It has argued through evidence collected from analysing the structure of the platform itself, surveying users on the site as well as posts on asexuality related tags, that Tumblr can provide a space for counterpublic community formation, but its functionality and cultural norms hinder any subsequent productive activism.

The thesis focused on the experiences of asexual users on the platform as a case study, therefore further investigation is needed to query whether these same limitations for activism exist for other marginalised identity groups using Tumblr. The platform analysis of Tumblr in chapter 2 could function as a good basis for this line of enquiry. Furthermore, this study was limited by Tumblr's architecture itself, which makes it challenging to acquire big data sets thus the content analysis was limited to just 100 posts per tag, which restricts the generalisability of the findings.

Overall however, this thesis found that Tumblr exemplifies the work discussed in chapter 1 by the Roestone Collective on safe spaces, which are by definition a response to the perceived threat of danger and thus are constantly adapting and dependent on individual and context. Safe spaces on Tumblr for the asexual community are for some a refuge from the constant barrage of sexuality in mainstream media, whilst for others a safe space refers to a site in which they are not at risk of outing, and for many safe spaces were constructed in response to the backlash of the exclusionists in the 'ace discourse'. This latter point highlights that

Tumblr as a platform is not inherently safe, yet users understood it to be so due to the practices they employed, particularly that of anonymity, participation primarily through reblogging, and adding commentary in the tags.

Thus, Tumblr can function as a 'safe space' for counterpublic communities to withdraw from dominant discourse, although findings show that their community is primarily based on humour and play rather than serious debate and planning to mobilise. This lack of deliberation then was not simply due to Tumblr architecture which functioned to make reciprocal conversation challenging in many ways, but also due to the culture of the platform which emphasised light-hearted material, memes, and humour, allowing this to translate into the mocking of any serious attempts to deliberate identity issues.

Opposition to the ace discourse used Tumblr's culture of frivolity to push issues raised by asexual users back into the margins, citing they were issues for the private and not for circulation in a public space 'meant for fun'. This strongly mirrors the critique Fraser made of Habermas's public sphere, of the silencing of marginalised voices through the delineation of what is or isn't suitable for public debate.

Fraser argues the designations of public and private are 'cultural classifications and rhetorical labels' (1992:131), so on Tumblr the proliferation of 'ace discourse', and with it the contention that asexuality is not welcome in LGBT spaces, but more worryingly, not welcome in public spaces at all, then impacts how asexual users on the platform utilise the site. Findings suggest that this rhetoric contributes to asexual users disregarding Tumblr as a site for public debate and instead using its

affordances to construct a perceived safe space. However this does result in Tumblr replicating the silencing of subordinate groups that can occur in public spaces as whilst the asexual community was able to employ Tumblr to withdraw and create a safe space for themselves, this involved using tools to hide, remain discrete and refrain from sharing opinions where there was risk of them being publicly circulated. Overall, this environment limits asexual users' motivation to use Tumblr for activism due to backlash and inefficiency, and therefore their motive for using the site appears to lie elsewhere.

Online spaces were central to the formation of the asexual movement, and their importance remains; however, findings from this thesis suggest that perhaps now there is not just a need for a space to deliberate definitions and identity issues which AVEN has historically provided, nor just a space for activism, but also a need for a space where identity does not necessarily have to be politicised or constantly debated. As one participant put it, 'On Tumblr I can just be asexual, it's just one part of me I don't want to be defined by it. I like how on Tumblr I can share this part of myself alongside all the other things that make up me. It doesn't have to be serious all the time'. This response exemplifies the role Tumblr can play in identity formation and the motivation asexual users may have for congregating on the platform. The value it holds is not necessarily as a place for politics and activism due to its culture of frivolity, but as a space in which users could 'be themselves' without a necessity to 'fight' to legitimatise their identity, and as a space to interact – albeit often indirectly through reblogging – with others like them.

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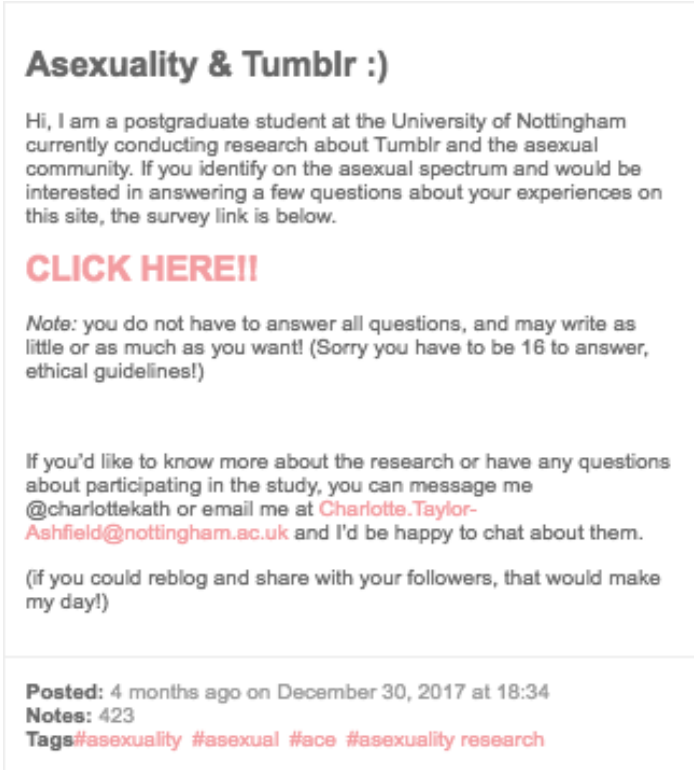
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Appendices

Appendix A



Asexuality & Tumblr :)

Hi, I am a postgraduate student at the University of Nottingham currently conducting research about Tumblr and the asexual community. If you identify on the asexual spectrum and would be interested in answering a few questions about your experiences on this site, the survey link is below.

CLICK HERE!!

Note: you do not have to answer all questions, and may write as little or as much as you want! (Sorry you have to be 16 to answer, ethical guidelines!)

If you'd like to know more about the research or have any questions about participating in the study, you can message me @charlottekath or email me at Charlotte.Taylor-Ashfield@nottingham.ac.uk and I'd be happy to chat about them.

(if you could reblog and share with your followers, that would make my day!)

Posted: 4 months ago on December 30, 2017 at 18:34
Notes: 423
Tags#asexuality #asexual #ace #asexuality research

Appendix B

Thank you very much for agreeing to participate in this questionnaire, I am looking for answers from anyone who identifies on the asexual spectrum.

You can answer as many or as few of the questions as you want, and write as much or little as you like! Your answer will remain anonymous.

The information provided by you in this questionnaire will be used for research into asexual communities use of online spaces in a research project at the University of Nottingham. It will not be used in a manner which would allow identification of your individual responses and data will be stored securely. If you have any further questions about the aims of this project or how your data will be utilized, please contact me on Charlotte.Taylor-Ashfield@nottingham.ac.uk or on Tumblr @charlottekath

This research project complies with the Arts Research Ethics Guidelines of the University of Nottingham.

* 1. Please can confirm you over 16 and consent to the your data being used for this research project

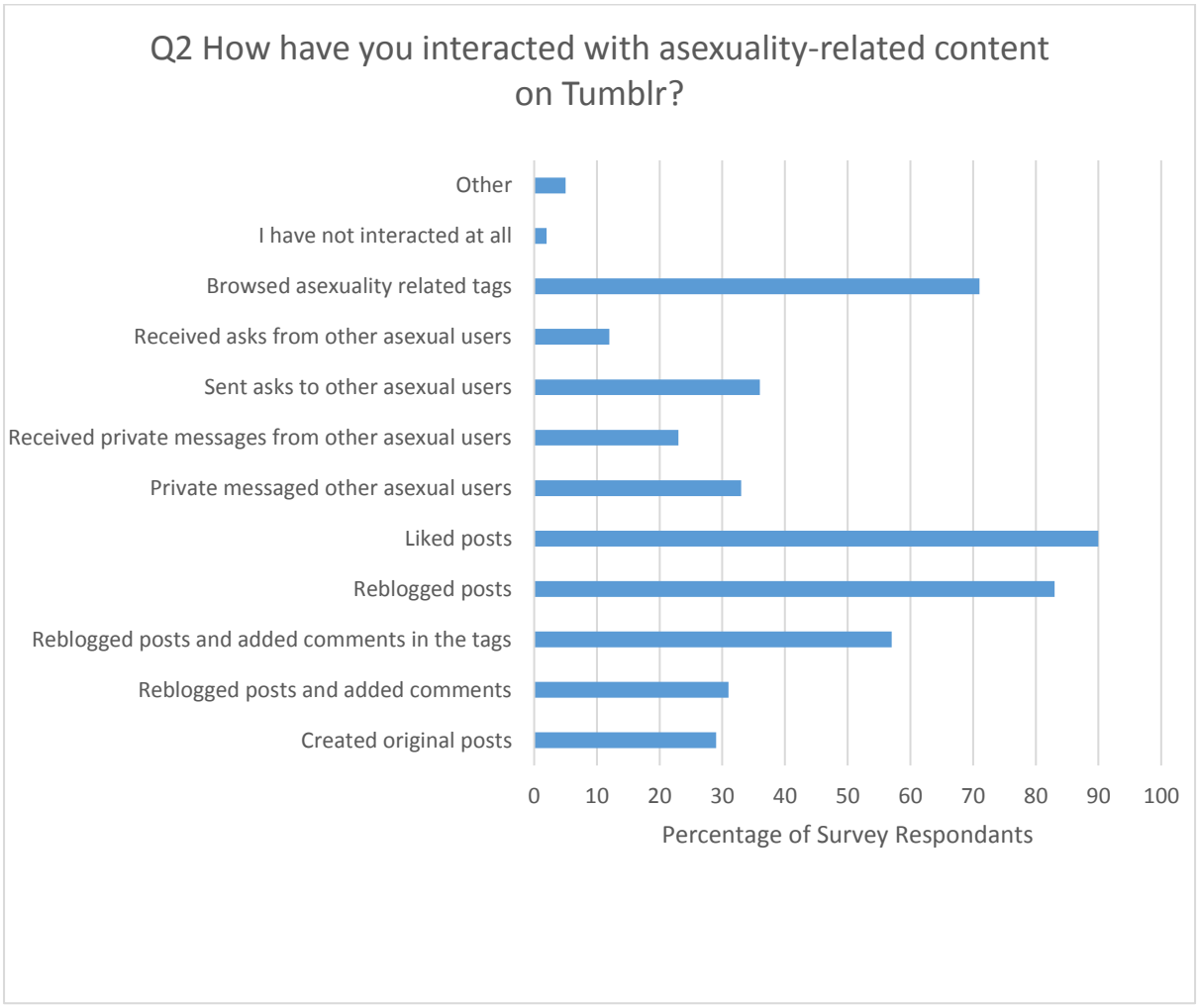
☐ I consent

Questions:

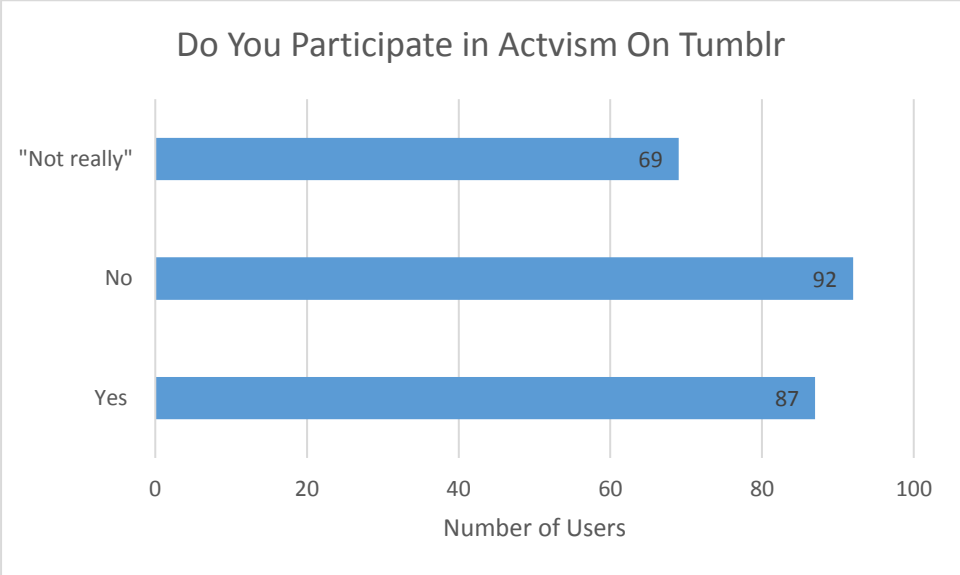
1. How have you interacted with asexuality-related content on Tumblr?
2. Please elaborate on your previous answer if you want to.
3. Do you feel there is an asexual community on Tumblr, are you part of it?
4. What do you prefer and/or dislike about Tumblr in comparison to AVEN or other social media sites that you use?
5. Do you participate in activism on Tumblr, if so, how?
6. Thank you for taking the time to participate in this survey, if you have any further comments please leave them here.

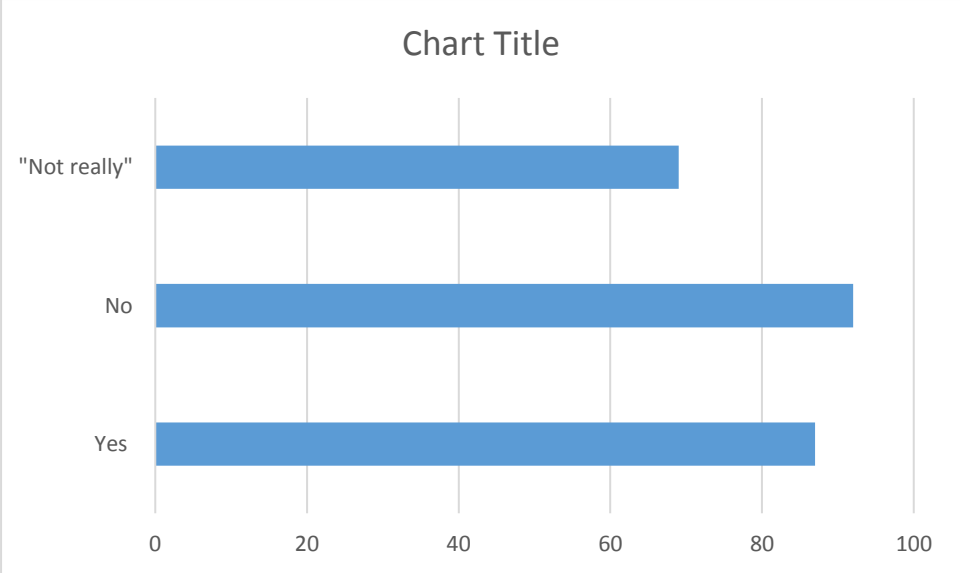
Appendix C

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Q2 How have you interacted with asexuality-related content on Tumblr?
Other
I have not interacted at all
Browsed asexuality related tags
Received asks from other asexual users
Sent asks to other asexual users
Received private messages from other asexual users
Private messaged other asexual users
Liked posts
Reblogged posts
Reblogged posts and added comments in the tags
Reblogged posts and added comments
Created original posts
0
10
20
30
40
50
60
70
80
90
100
Percentage of Survey Respondants

Appendix D


Do You Participate in Actvism On Tumblr
"Not really"
No
Yes
69
92
87
0
20
40
60
80
100
Number of Users


Chart Title
"Not really"
No
Yes
0
20
40
60
80
100