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FORUM



Playground in memoriam: missing the pleasures of NSFW tumblr

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In 2010, I found tumblr.¹ This is exactly what it felt like, I found it. I found it like a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. Truthfully, it was not a rainbow, it was a string of ‘image from tumblr’ statements that captioned the black-and-white, hints-of-BDSM erotic photography embedded in the often-questionable fanfiction I was reading to ignore my depression. But it did feel like a pot of gold. Some digging, and then whoa-is-this-real?! Like multiple of my research participants – as I later found out – I was surprised that ‘porn (most of it was erotica) like this’ existed; that there were people who expressed their (sex) lives, fantasies, desires and anxieties so openly; that those people seemed quite charming, interesting and intelligent; that some of those people created sexual content (of) themselves, even though they were parents, students, teachers, office managers, librarians, lawyers or scientists off tumblr.

As Carl, one of my most senior and more surprising (I had not, for some reason, expected to find a retired academic) participants, quite elegantly told me in our first interview:

I found it enjoyable to share expressions of my gut feelings. And I was pleased to see that people in that piazza (an Italian piazza was Carl’s preferred metaphor for the NSFW tumblr space) were not just senseless, randy porn addicts, like I had presumed. Quite a few of them seemed to be, as me, just in search of a discreet forum where they could show freely some more intimate sides of their personality. Some managed even to be ironic about themselves, while also being sincere.

In 2011, I started my PhD programme and the official part of my extended ethnography with a loose community of people, who had NSFW (Not Safe For Work²) blogs and shared sexy selfies on tumblr. It was an exciting, eye-opening, mind-changing process, just like ethnographies are meant to be. The bloggers – self-professed kinksters, ‘perverts’ and activists – abducted³ me. Over the next seven years, I found that posting sexy selfies, writing diaristic posts, reblogging erotic or pornographic and humorous content, and regularly, continuously interacting with pseudonymous, yet intimate, others can converge into practices, relationships and localized cultures that may have all kinds of unexpected side effects. My participants shared images of their own and other people’s bodies that often fell outside the standards of thin/young/white and celebrated these as ‘sexy’ or ‘beautiful’ (Tiidenberg and Gómez-Cruz 2015; Tiidenberg 2017). They shared kinky, queer or polyamorous sexual experiences or fantasies (Tiidenberg 2014a; Tiidenberg and Paasonen 2019). They expressed their sexual desires during periods (while

breastfeeding or pregnant, while retired or menopausal) typically excluded from narratives of lust (Tiidenberg 2014b). Through this, people reworked their relationships with their own bodies, reframed and repossessed their sexualities, and reassessed their relationships. They self-reflected and became (more) self-aware. They learned first to notice, then to question and finally to push back against the narrow norms and standards of the hetero-normative status quo (Tiidenberg and Whelan 2019).

But this tumblr might be dead.

This article is based on the keynote address at the 3rd Sexual Cultures Conference, which took place in May 2019 in Turku, Finland. The article analyzes my participants' experiences and expressions of loss, betrayal and nostalgia as they reacted first to the news, then the implementation and finally the aftermath of the tumblr 'porn ban' of December 2018. I surface pleasure as the key to conceptualizing what my participants felt was special about the NSFW tumblr, and why tumblr without NSFW is a loss on a broader scale.

Betrayal

Although there were some shifts in tumblr's content moderation policies, community guidelines and terms of service as it was sold to Yahoo in 2013, and when Yahoo was sold to Verizon in 2017 tumblr continued to be a safe haven for people who wanted to post about sex or partake in various NSFW practices online. Until, that is, December 2018, when tumblr announced it would ban all 'photos, videos, or GIFs that show real-life human genitals or female-presenting nipples, and any content [...] that depicts sex acts' (tumblr 2018). Despite the loud criticism from LGBT, fandom, sex-worker, artist and academic circles, who all maintained that NSFW content and communities are educational and political, not 'just' pornographic, and despite the half a million people who signed the change.org petition, tumblr went ahead with the ban. Preliminary numbers showed that tumblr lost about 20% of its traffic in the first month (Cuthbertson 2019). From my own fieldwork, I know that people left, or promised to leave, in droves, and were desperately searching for alternatives. Some were trying Twitter, others attempted to learn to love lesser-known blogging platforms like Pillowfort or Dreamwidth, or more specific sites like Newgrounds or Bdsmblr (created specifically to host tumblr refugees with interests in BDSM). Those who had big follower bases, and had attached some form of modest monetization to their tumblr blogs, moved to Patreon or Onlyfans via Twitter. However, none of the alternatives seemed to be very good. In August 2019, tumblr – once valued at USD 1.1 billion – was sold to Automattic (who own Wordpress) for less than USD 3 million (Romano 2019). While public reactions to the sale speak of a hope that this might mean a return of NSFW content to tumblr, the CEO of Automattic, Matt Mullenweg, has gone on record saying that social media platforms today cannot survive without app stores, and app stores (both Apple and Google) are profoundly and increasingly anti sex (Patel 2019).

But people did not just leave tumblr, they had feelings.

'I was desperate for community', one of my participants wrote: 'as a queer, non-monogamous, kinky, feminist woman, I had always felt alone, and on tumblr I found a language to express myself and it made me feel more secure about my identities'. In posts reacting to the news, my participants bemoaned the loss of 'life-changing relationships' with people, who had helped them realize that there is not just one 'correct' way of doing

kink; that their ‘kink is valid and good’ just the way they want to do it. They remembered the astonishment at having found, for the first time in their lives, images that reflected the sex they were having, or wanted to have; at having found women who make sexual content on their own terms; at having found depictions of a great variety ‘of sex that had not been made for the male gaze’. I find it heartening that men too reported the significance of content made by women and queer folk. Xavier, a participant of mine in his mid-20s, said the following about tumblr:

I had a pretty religious upbringing and a lot of conflicting messages about sex and sexuality, which wasn’t necessarily helped by a lot of ... you know, my own ... like fantasy life and the politics that I was reading, so you know, there was a lot of anxiety there, and I couldn’t figure out how to reconcile it. I also read a lot of really unhelpful second-wave feminist critiques of porn in the past and internalized a bit of that criticism. So, reading posts by women, who were fantasizing about submission made it easier to accept what was going on in my own head.

Following the announcement of the ban in December 2018, people were angry, they were sad; some were kind of aggressively gleeful, posting memetic ‘RIP Tumblr’ content on various platforms. Others shared these longer, more elaborate messages, where the dominant emotion seemed to be loss, betrayal and heartbreak. Some of these carried the sentiment of, or were explicitly framed as, love letters to the tumblr lost (see Forum article by Vex Ashley in this issue).

Loss

Since the ban, I have had many text message conversations with my (former) participants. They carry this visceral, embodied, sense of loss that gets blurted out to a trusted person – someone you think will get it – at moments which would have previously culminated in taking and posting a sexy selfie, but no longer do. Walking past a mirror after a shower, trying on an outfit for a kinky party, just being graced by the Patron Saint of Nudes. Now, there is this impotent pause. Initially, after having taken the picture and realizing there is nowhere to put it; but as time passed, more and more before even taking the picture, because why take it if it cannot be shared?

Yes, of course, there is sexting. Those who used to sext keep doing it, but what they are realizing is that posting nudes on tumblr was qualitatively quite different from sharing sexy selfies with specific individual others. Sexting is personal, it is a dialogue. In the void left by the destroyed NSFW tumblr, my participants are finding that sexting can be demanding, whereas posting sexy selfies was relaxed. ‘You can’t just send someone a sexy picture and then not engage, when they respond’, one of my participants complained. I agreed; you cannot. You also cannot not expect them to respond, to respond in a particular way and to avoid being annoyed when they do not respond how you want them to respond. Sexting someone a nude means they will probably sext one back, and expect praise: ‘Fuck that’s hot. I want to do X, Y, Z to you.’ However, my participants are now realizing that they had many moments where they did not want to see someone’s private parts, or praise them or keep sending increasingly explicit and decreasingly artistic nudes until someone got off; that they had plenty of moments where they did not want a dialogue with specific others, just with the camera and their own body. Knowing, vaguely, that if the images turned out well, they had an outlet. My participants showed me that taking nudes can become a pleasurable, creative process, when the

images have a good forum. The potential to take a sexy picture becomes part of everyday life and consciousness, like an extra sense. A nude-dar. Is this a good place for a picture. Is this? Is this light good for taking pictures of my butt? In our text conversations, my participants have reflected on the luxury of being able to post images, check in a couple of hours later for some compliments that make them smile or laugh, and possibly a message or two, which they have relative freedom to answer, ignore or take forward towards sexting.

Politics of NSFW

On the one hand, these love-letter-like posts and the little snippets of shared loss that pop up as chats and texts reiterate the empirical findings I painstakingly worked for over the years. They confirm my earlier interpretations of the key practices within particular tumblr communities. But these expressions of loss and love can also offer an analytical frame one step removed from the ethnographic detail. They can be thought of as a way to talk about why tumblr was special, or what made tumblr special, and what makes this NSFW ban a loss on a macro scale.

In a recently published article, my colleague Andrew Whelan and I analyzed how a particular shared ethics emerged on NSFW tumblr (Tiidenberg and Whelan 2019). We argue that shared practices of interpretation, representation and interaction materialized out of how the users felt the platform worked, and how they actually used the platform. Here, users' experiences and presumptions about how the platform functioned, what features and affordances it had, what corporate interests and logics drove it, merged with presumptions about people's needs and motivations, and about how sexually explicit content as such shapes interactions and local norms.

Imagine a post that consists of a sexy selfie of a naked woman on a bed and a caption. The 'formal' logic of representation in the image – the content, the posing of the body, the composition – usually emulates erotica or pornography. It might be a sensual image of a lot of skin in golden sunlight. It might be a more explicit image where breasts are on full display and legs are spread. However, this erotic logic is remixed with the visual logic of the genre of selfies: what Paul Frosh (2015) has called the gesture of me showing you me. Often enough, it is obvious from the angle and the upper arm in the frame that the person is taking this image using a front-facing camera. In other situations, a timer function is used but references to having taken the pictures on one's own abound in the captions. Finally, the representational logic might be further interspersed with various subcultural signifiers – props that function as meta-communicative signs. Maybe the woman in the picture is not entirely naked, but is wearing a Storm Trooper helmet. Maybe she is wearing a leather harness. Maybe she is covered in colourful fallen leaves or gummy bears. Now imagine this to be an older woman. A fat woman. A woman with scars. A gender-queer person. A man.

Within the shared practices of representation and interpretation, this selfie of a naked person on a bed is very likely to be interpreted as 'sexy' by everyone in the community. Those outside the shared practices might read the same image as pornographic, shameful, gross or self-objectifying, or simply as bizarre. Beyond the 'sexy' interpretation, and depending on the caption, the hashtags and the awareness of what this person usually posts, this same selfie might be intended and interpreted as political, poetic, funny, sad or cute, or as signalling a particular sexual kink. These local cultural literacies of

representation and interpretation emerged from a very particular style of interaction, which was supported by tumblr's affordances of anonymity and pseudonymity, the platform's differentiated messaging system and what participants describe as the 'reverse' order of exposure accompanying tumblr interactions – first you see someone naked, or read about their fantasies, and then you say 'hi' to them (Tiidenberg and Whelan 2019).

Because the community was relatively stable – many people kept posting and engaging with others' content from under the same pseudonyms for years – local norms emerged from these shared practices, and converged into an ethics of sorts. People were not just representing their bodies and sexual interests, interpreting representations of those of others and interacting, they were also self-reflecting and becoming more self-aware. In many cases, this resulted in people feeling that their participation in the community had significantly improved their personal lives and highlighted certain widespread, even structural, issues and inequalities in dominant norms and standards regarding appearances, sexuality, gender, nudity and the like. This realization often led to a conscious effort to help other members of the community experience the same benefits by purposefully posting and praising queer, non-white, non-thin, scarred, non-able bodies; loudly questioning some forms of thinking, or holding oneself to a standard of honesty in order to unsettle stereotypes of a lifestyle or an identity with details of lived experience.

Pleasure of NSFW

It is important to keep highlighting the ethical, political and critical affordances of NSFW cultures and practices on tumblr. Demonstrating that sexual expression is inextricably entangled with overall well-being for many people and groups is unarguably relevant. But this argument does tend to frame NSFW tumblr as significant only in as far as it is for 'more than just horny people'. And that includes a problematic omission. The masturbatory deserves a eulogy too. 'Horny' and meaningful are not mutually exclusive when it comes to NSFW tumblr.

The conceptual framework of pleasure is useful for articulating the significance of the 'just horny' aspects of NSFW tumblr. Relying on extant literature on play, which focuses on the various types of pleasures and intensities that allow people to temporarily suspend how they partake in the world (cf. Winnicott 1971; Getsy 2011; Sicart 2014), as well as on marketing literature on hedonic consumption, which emphasizes the affective, fantasy related and multi-sensory aspects of experience (Hirschman and Holbrook 1982; Wu and Holsapple 2014), I operationalize pleasure as a practice of interactivity and creativity that affords immersion, fantasy and escape, and offers validation.

This definition allows viewing NSFW tumblr as an extraordinary pleasure machine. While my participants often found tumblr via images on other sites, their experiences show that it was the playfulness, creativity and interactivity which sucked them in enough to make using tumblr a pleasure they kept coming back for, and not just a fleeting moment of captured attention. Before tumblr became a tool for self-reflection and conscientious expression towards a more diversified discourse of sex or body aesthetics, it was playful. On an everyday level, my participants experienced logging on to tumblr as silly, light-hearted, flirty, non-combative, supportive and caring. Pseudonymous strangers became each other's 'tumblr people' through games like 'list the top 5 songs that remind you of great sex' or 'reblog, if you were born before 1983, so we can find each

other'. In the early phases of building the community, shortly after most of my participants had set up their accounts (in around 2010), public, performative Asks⁴ and Answers were very common. Anonymous asks were often publicly answered to showcase one's wit and humour, although some bloggers, especially those who lived and blogged about a specific lifestyle (e.g. ethical non-monogamy), also gave extended advice or became informal counsellors via published Asks. When Ask and Answer interactions between two pseudonymous users who followed each other were published, they usually served the purpose of signalling mutual admiration and laying the foundation for some sort of a relationship. In the following excerpt, Antoine and Rachel, who had been following each other's blogs and leaving each other's content hearts for a while, flirt through a published Ask. Antoine's blog tended to feature images of young women in knee-high socks playing sports or being spanked. Now, Antoine had sent Rachel a compliment to one of her images via Ask, and Rachel had chosen to publish it:

Antoine asked: oh ... wow ... the stripey shadowed nude ... hubba,

xx, Antoine

Rachel: ;) Oh heavens! *takes Antoine's temperature* how can this be, I'm not exhibiting any of the signifiers of a naughty girl in socks about to be given a hiding? (nor is there a gigantic soccer ball in sight, for that matter). I am flabbergasted, Mr. Antoine, utterly flabbergasted (I just like saying flabbergasted).;

Simplistic compliments like Antoine's here only led to publishing with good-natured teasing if the people were already flirting. Strangers had to be witty or funny in their compliments to warrant a publishing. For example, one of my participants, Luna, posted an image and later published the following Ask-box exchange:

Richard asks: I do not know a foreign language but I loved your last pics so much I think I need to express myself in something other than English: Ja la boobenheimers sha sey wha de la es delicioso e san tes grande organ de moi. She le twintiovisio!

Luna: *laughs*

boobenheimers you say?:D

laughs some more

you are too cute, really.

And thank you.

Yours, Lunaheimer

People were also incredibly creative and playful in terms of the self-representational sexy content they produced. My participants staged elaborate photoshoots in costumes instead of posting rows after rows of nudes, where they tried to look as skinny or as muscled as possible. 'I staged another fantasy' the caption to a photoset reads:

I am a warrior princess kidnapped, stripped naked and molested by an evil tentacly alien king. In retrospect it's obvious that I was inspired by Return of the Jedi. I bought a special lazer gun for it in the toy store.

People were also inspired by each other's creativity and content, and wanted to find out more about others. However, the tacit rules of pseudonymity meant that it was not common to ask for images of one's face or ask questions about where exactly one was from or what one did for a living (these questions were often submitted by people from outside the community and generally ignored). Thus, all kinds of unlikely self-representational or self-referential content circulated in the NSFW tumbleverse. People recorded themselves reading out horribly bad erotica and laughing, or reciting beautiful poems they loved. They made videos of their bad dance moves as seen in shadow-play or from the neck down. They started contest-like games, where they asked for submissions of particular kinds of images, short stories or love letters from fairy-tale creatures, and actually got them. I remember a moment when one of my participants posted that if she was to be asked about her favourite word on *Inside The Actor's Studio* (Ovation TV n.d.), she would claim 'penis'. This resulted in three people writing her a poem about a penis. One of them was in French.

While specific games and activities changed in time, the overall playful vibe that made space for and validated pleasure persisted. In time it became something akin to a collectively construed Goffmanian backspace (Goffman 1963). Backspaces shield individuals from stigmatization, because they consist of people who have no stakes in stigmatizing the deviant performances. Rather, within backspaces, playful deviance is applauded and validated. Pleasure of what Redmon (2003) called playful deviance in his analysis of Mardi Gras tourism made NSFW tumblr a profound place for escaping and resisting the mundane for my participants.

In memoriam, in conclusion

NSFW tumblr allowed people escape and immersion, it thrived on interaction and creativity, and it became a backspace for playful deviance. Even though one of the purposes of this piece was to elevate the pleasures NSFW tumblr offered to stand next to the critical consciousness it afforded, the truth is that the two are entangled and bound. Play and pleasure have subversive potential embedded in them. We know that play can reorder the social relations that it supposedly stands apart from, and provide an opportunity to critically reflect on actual events and situations (Avedon and Sutton-Smith 1971; Winnicott 1971). Michael Foucault (1985) found pleasure to have subversive potential, and black feminists have discussed the resistance coded into pleasure for decades (Lorde 1978).

So, instead of saying that the disappearance of the NSFW tumblr is a significant loss because the cultures served a pedagogical and a political purpose, and because it brought some people pleasure, we could rather say that NSFW tumblr became political and pedagogical, because it was a source of pleasure. As Adrienne Brown writes, 'pleasure is a measure of freedom' (2019). If we care about freedom, we should care about the ghettoization of sex on social media and the ongoing deplatformization of pleasure.

Notes

1. Lowercase tumblr is used throughout this article to reflect the logo and the community standard of referring to the platform.
2. For an extended analysis of NSFW, see Paasonen, Jarrett, and Light (2019).

3. Michael Agar (2006, para. 82) explains ethnographic abduction as follows: 'taking surprises seriously and creating new explanations for them. It is also iterative, something that is applied over and over again in the course of a piece of work. And it is recursive, calling on itself to solve a problem that comes up even as it is solving a problem.'
4. Tumblr's messaging system is quite complex, where the earlier option of contacting other users (Submission and Ask) remained even after newer options (Chat) were added. tumblr users choose whether to allow anonymous asks or just those from logged in users. An Ask can be answered publicly (so the question and the answer become a post) or privately, in which case the question disappeared from the Ask box of the person, who received it, and the answer appeared for the person, who had asked the question. This interaction did not leave the back-and-forth trace we are used to in messengers.

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