THE POLITICS OF BLOGGING: IDENTITY, ACCESS, AND COMPOSITION

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This dissertation titled “The Politics of Blogging: Identity, Access, and Composition” explores the findings of six IRB-approved case studies on the blogging practices of millennial women between the ages of 20-27. The purpose of this research is to identify how digital literacy practices and access to computer technology influence identity construction and community formation on the microblogging platform and social networking website Tumblr. My project provides a genre study of Tumblr blogs and investigates how different rhetorical appeals classify a blog as being part of a specific blogging community or type of blog. Through this IRB-approved study, I identify the relationship between literacy, identity, access, and multimodal composition.

In chapter 1, I locate my study within current digital writing research that addresses identity construction, digital literacy practices, and access to computer technology. Although early research on Tumblr has focused on identity construction, little attention has been paid to how such virtual identity construction has been influenced by bloggers’ digital literacy practices and their access to computer technology, a gap in the literature this project addresses. Chapter 2 outlines the project’s procedures and methodology. I explain the method of data collection, and I describe the participants.

In chapter 3, my discussion focuses on the composition choices my participants make. These choices create an ethos for each blogger that situates her blog into a specific genre. I analyze some of the visual and verbal markers of each woman’s blog and use Rettberg’s theory
of self-representation to theorize identity construction. I explore how this representation both challenges and reinforces the status quo.

Chapter 4 analyzes how participants’ composition choices reflect differing degrees of digital literacy and access to computer technology. I discuss how to define digital literacy and why our definition must include social media. I further explain the importance of access to computer technology.

In chapter 5, I investigate the impact Tumblr has on human relationships. I explore the ways online and offline composing practices are interwoven in terms of political coalition formation. My goal for this chapter is to problematize understandings of the internet as a utopic-dystopic binary.
DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my students – past, present, and future. Thank you for inspiring me and for giving me so much hope.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION TO “THE POLITICS OF BLOGGING”

This dissertation explores the findings of a series of IRB-approved case studies on the digital writing practices of six female bloggers on the microblogging platform and social networking website Tumblr. Historically, the study of rhetoric has explored the linguistic means by which verbal arguments affect change in the male-dominated public sphere. Consequently, the dynamic and sometimes disturbing ways in which young women compose with images in cyberspace, particularly when using social media, has only just begun to be explored. My dissertation project focuses on analyzing how female bloggers experience and interpret digital images and the rhetorical choices they make when composing their blogs.

Through a series of six case studies, my analysis identifies some of the ways that digital literacy practices and access to computer technology influence women as they form community on Tumblr. My project provides a genre study of Tumblr blogs in that it investigates the ways in which the use of different rhetorical appeals classifies a blog as being part of a particular community or type of blog. Through this genre study, I identify the complex relationships between literacy, identity, access, and multimodal composition by closely analyzing the blogs of six female participants. In doing so, I build on Rettberg’s theory of blog genre and digital self-representation.

Methodological Overview. The purpose of this dissertation titled, The Politics of Blogging: Identity, Access, and Composition is to determine the ways in which women use rhetorical appeals to create blogs to fit the conventions of a specific blog genre. These composition choices are shaped by identity and access. My project is situated in the field of digital writing research
and as such takes a rhetorical, case-based approach to analyzing participants’ identity representation and literacy practices on Tumblr. The participants in this dissertation include female bloggers who I recruited via word of mouth outside of Tumblr and direct message on Tumblr. After agreeing to participate in the study, each blogger completed a 25 question, IRB approved digital interview using Qualtrics software.

To analyze participants’ blogs and the corresponding digital interviews about these blogs, I use mixed qualitative methods, including mediated discourse analysis of archived online texts (blog posts and reblogged posts) primarily on the macro level and qualitative case study methodology. Because my analysis examines the relationship between discourse, agency in terms of digital self-representation, and the blogging practices of the participants, I engage in what linguistics Ronald and Suzanne Scollon term a “nexus analysis” (9). According to Scollon and Scollon, a nexus analysis is an ethnographic methodology that places the researcher “in a zone of identification” in order to observe discourse in action (9). In this sense, my discourse analysis of the participants’ blogs becomes a “form of social action” in practice over an extended period of time (9).

Mediated discourse analysis is sometimes strictly associated with the careful linguistic analysis of alphabetic text that occurs on the micro-level. However, Scollon and Scollon argue discourse as a phenomenon is not limited to linguistic systems and that it encompasses all “the ways in which people engage each other in communication” (4). They note that discourse “is technologized through a very wide range of material supports and extensions,” of which include “pictures” and “digital-electronic systems” (4). I argue Tumblr is one such “digital-electronic
system” where discourse can be observed in action through original blog posts and the circulation of reblogs.

The Tumblr blogsphere is a digital space where anonymity is privileged, and bloggers often create personas for themselves to find community and to explore stigmatized aspects of their identities. In this way, the platform is inherently transgressive at the level of user practice because it allows for a degree of identity play that remains more private than it otherwise would on other social media platforms such as Twitter or Facebook. Tumblr communities are very close-knit and protective of their members, particularly communities that celebrate marginalized identities. As a researcher who carries tremendous privilege, I found it necessary to take concrete steps to respect the agency and autonomy of the participants and the communities to which they belong on Tumblr.

To protect the participants’ privacy and to maintain the confidentiality of this study’s data, I did not seek IRB approval to directly quote from the narrative textual content of a blog post or to include images that appear on a participant’s blog. I also did not seek permission to include pictures of the participants themselves in this study. Due to these limitations, my mediated discourse analysis occurs mainly on the macro level. While I do discuss linguistic and visual components of the participants’ blogs in detail, this study primarily focuses on “the much broader socio-political-cultural analysis of the relationships among social groups and power interests” in a very specific virtual environment (Scollon and Scollon 8). I analyze the archived blog posts between 2015-2016 that collectively comprise the participants’ Tumblr profile (these short posts include written and visual modes of self-representation). By analyzing these modes of self-representation, I engage in what Robert K. Yin terms “pattern matching” and “analytic generalization” to make inferences about the way some women use multimodal composition
practices to construct identities online (35-38). I compare my results to theories of online identity established by digital writing researchers such as Jill Walker Rettberg and Adam J. Banks.

As Heidi A. McKee and Dánielle Nicole DeVoss argue in their introduction to *Digital Writing Research: Technologies, Methodologies, and Ethical Issues*, “computers and digital spaces affect our research approaches” in that research practices outside of cyberspace sometimes do not account for the impact of computer technology (3). Because I view the Tumblr blogsphere as a site of human interaction, my project adopts a case study methodology. I observe how Tumblr is being used to construct identity and community online. As a researcher, I am committed to speaking with my participants rather than for them. To offer an ethically sound study of women’s multimodal blogging practices on Tumblr and in an effort to avoid what digital writing researcher Kevin Eric DePew calls “academic single-voicedness,” my visual and textual analysis of online texts is coupled with participants’ responses to a detailed digital interview (53). I conceptualize visual and textual blog posts on Tumblr as parts of an ever-evolving computer mediated discourse rather than as unconnected static texts. Each post contributes to the much larger text of the blog itself, which in turn contributes to the construction of various blog genres as theorized by Rettberg.

As advocated by DePew, I adopt a methodological strategy framed by the *communicative triangle*. DePew defines the communicative triangle as “the rhetor, the audience, and the digital text or discourse” (52). This triangle is framed by the contexts surrounding it. Because my identity as a white, middle class, cisgendered, heterosexual female influences every aspect of my research, I recognize that I can never be fully unbiased in my study. This technique also allows me to use research methods such as archival and digital interview to collect data from
women across the Tumblr blogosphere. I triangulate data by inviting the participants into my project and allowing them to be a part of my data analysis process. To further protect my participants’ privacy, all bloggers chose a pseudonym for themselves and their blogs. All participants also had the opportunity to review the parts of this dissertation that referenced them or their blogs. By engaging in these practices, I illustrate the complex nature of the Tumblr blogsphere and highlight some of the major tropes I have discovered within this social networking site.

Like Denzin, and as DePew highlights, I believe “the flaws of one method are often the strengths of another” and that by “combining methods” I “achieve the best of each, while overcoming their unique deficiencies” (308). This strategy is particularly important to me when I consider the ways in which my identity limits data collection and analysis as well as the nature of the social media platform being studied. Due to this fact, my process of triangulation is an attempt to mitigate the bias of the various identity positions I occupy.

I further employ the process of triangulation to conduct my research because it fuses postcritical and feminist methodologies, both of which are crucial to the theoretical framework of this project. The fusion of this methodology is feminist in three distinct ways: 1) My series of case studies champions identity and the body as fundamental to life both inside and outside of cyberspace; 2) I conceptualize my participants as public rhetors and co-collaborators rather than research subjects; 3) My project celebrates alterity and explores a variety of different modes, forms, genres, and fluid identities. Due to these feminist underpinnings, I recognize that I must remain open to critique from those whose visions, experiences, and bodies differ considerably.

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1 Yin refers to this process as “pattern matching” (110-113).
2 Sociologist Norman Denzin defines method triangulation as a “complex process” of playing research method, investigator, theory, and data off against the other (310).
from my own. Further, my project celebrates the scholarship of female digital writing researchers, and my study depends on their contributions to the field.

**Theoretical Framework.** Written text, still images, video, and sound merge in complex ways within the digital spaces bloggers inhabit. Carolyn Handa calls this merger a “fusion” and in her book, *Digital Fusion: The Multimediated Rhetoric of the Internet*, she provides a rationale for how we might begin to approach the World Wide Web as a cultural artifact and as a tool for teaching writing. Handa argues this study of digital rhetoric should be conducted by humanists – rhetoricians and compositionists – just as much as it should by artists, computer technicians, multimedia designers, and web technologists (15). Consequently, our study of the World Wide Web and digital literacy should not just be a fusion of modes, but of academic disciplines as well.

Like Handa, I do not object to applying traditional rhetorical categories for linguistic purposes to images and other modes of communication, although other rhetoricians such as Gunther Kress seem opposed to such a theoretical framework. However, I certainly acknowledge that to implement such an analysis, we must adopt an interdisciplinary approach when considering multimodal texts because conventional print rhetoric alone is not an adequate lens to evaluate computer-based composition. By embracing this interdisciplinary approach established by Handa, my project will acknowledge what Claire Lauer terms “Murray-style process theory” in multimodal composition and “fuse” the gaps between digital rhetoric, multimodal composition theory, feminist theory, and praxis (33).

**Limitations of the Study.** The most serious limitation of this study is the lack of racial and class diversity in my participant pool. The women of color I attempted to recruit for the study either were not responsive or declined participation. Although my participants are very diverse in terms
of sexual identity and ability, all of them are white and one-third of them are English graduate students themselves. This outcome may have been the result of negative experiences with academic researchers in the past or unfamiliarity with academic research practices in general. I was also unable to pay the participants; perhaps some of the bloggers I solicited in the early stages of this project expect pay (and rightfully so) for engaging in intellectual labor. Further, my identity as a white, cisgender, heterosexual, thin, able-bodied middle-class academic undoubtedly influenced the participants who responded to my inquiries.

To recruit participants, I created a Tumblr blog myself. As in the case of most qualitative research projects, I did not use deception in my study. I used real pictures of my fiancé and me on my blog. I also identified myself as a digital writing researcher. I used a picture of the Bryant-Denny football stadium at The University of Alabama as my cover photo and a red and white color schematic throughout the blog. These composition choices caused my blog not to match the template of the other blogs I was trying to recruit participants from, each of which shared a very specific ethos in terms of bloggers’ layout, color selections, blog post content, and shot composition in terms of pictures, gifs, and memes posted. These composition choices also unwittingly aligned me with several identity signifiers, many of which carry with them significant cultural baggage: thin, white, heterosexual, southern, middle-class, and academic. These identity signifiers are sometimes met with suspicion and/or resentment from members of communities that have been and continue to be marginalized in the public sphere.

Due to the limitations of my identity as a researcher and the homogenous racial makeup of the participants, this project reaches beyond my six participants and also includes analyses of text and images that engage racial politics. Future studies that explore women’s communities on
Tumblr should include a more diverse pool of both participants and researchers, particularly in terms of race and class.

Despite the limitations of the project, this study provides an in-depth analysis of the ways women engage different rhetorical appeals to form community on a microblogging platform. The participants’ composition choices and curation practices are affected by their identity positions, degrees of digital literacy, and access to computer technology. These factors highlight some of the reasons why certain women may choose to form relationships with others online.

**Research Questions.** I use the following question to guide my nexus analysis of participants’ online texts and digital interview responses: *What rhetorical strategies do women use to represent themselves on the Tumblr blogsphere?* I also consider the following research questions:

- How do female Tumblr bloggers engage various modes of self-representation (visual and textual) in their digital literacy practices?
- To what degree does access to technology affect digital literacy practices on Tumblr?
- How does access to digital technology affect female bloggers’ ability to represent themselves online?
- In what ways do online and offline composition practices intersect for Tumblr bloggers?
- How do women that occupy a variety of identity positions online form digital communities within the Tumblr blogsphere?
- How might blogging on Tumblr provide a politically transformative politic?

**Findings.** Based on my analysis of participants’ blogs, their corresponding genres, and their digital interviews, I argue that the formation of various Tumblr communities suggests the possibility for coalition building between marginalized groups by dominant power structures in
the public sphere. Through multimodal composition practices that engage Rettberg’s theory of
digital self-representation, women composing within the Tumblr blogsphere use images and
alphabetic text in complex ways. Their multimodal compositions both challenge and reinscribe
the status quo through the skillful use of a variety of rhetorical appeals. However, for Tumblr
communities to truly create a transformative politic, more productive ways of communicating
across difference is necessary.

**Literature Review.** Because my project engages an assemblage of different modes, theories,
and disciplines, I have chosen to conceptualize the following literature review as a rhizome³.
Similar to the branching root-like stems, this literature review is “non-hierarchical,
heterogeneous, multiplicitous, and acentered” (“rhizome”). It contains no linear progression of
thought from which I draw my ideas rather it presents a collection of connected terms or points
from which I hope to enter critical conversations surrounding digital writing and multimodal
composition practices. This approach highlights the flexibility necessary when conceptualizing a
digital writing research project. It further underscores the queer epistemology that guides this
dissertation. Like Caroline Dadas in her 2016 study of constructions of marriage equality on
Facebook, I draw on a queer epistemology to explore the “messy” ways ethics and methodology
intersect on social media platforms (62). Queer epistemologies celebrate “the tensions, fissures,
and gaps” found in digital writing research and come with no expectations of “tidy resolutions”
(62). By using this framework to structure my literature review, I hope to underscore the
polyvocality and multiplicity of the digital writing displayed on Tumblr.

**Digital Writing and Multimodal Composition.** Digital writing encompasses a wide array of
writing found in virtual spaces: websites, email, microblogs, and other social media sites to name

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³ Theorized by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, the concept of the digital rhizome is an evolving term within new
media studies. It has been used widely both inside and outside of media theory (“rhizome”).
just a few. Because digital writing is an unavoidable aspect of composing in the 21st century, particularly on social media platforms, digital literacies and composing practices intersect in cyberspace in complicated ways. These literacies provide powerful ways of both thinking and being in the sense that they become an extension of an individual’s thoughts, practices, beliefs, and embodied existence. To theorize digital writing and the ways it affects our understanding of literacy on Tumblr, I will first define the key terms used in the critical conversation surrounding digital writing, multimodal composition, social media, Tumblr, identity formation, and access to technology.

The Writing Information and Digital Experience (WIDE) research center defines digital writing as “writing produced on the computer and distributed via the Internet and World Wide Web” (“Why Teach Digital Writing?”). Digital writing represents information in ways that exceed the alphabetic and include modes of composition such as still image, video, and sound. Consequently, when computers and writing scholars use the term “digital writing,” they are referring to a “changed writing environment,” one in which connected networks allow writers to publish their work “seamlessly” and “instantaneously” to “large and widely dispersed audiences” (“Why Teach Digital Writing?”).

In its broadest sense, multimodal composition can be defined as “communication using multiple modes that work purposely to create meaning” (Lauer 2). To fully understand this definition and draw a distinction between it and the popular term “multimedia,” it is important to note the differences between “modes” and “media.” Claire Lauer, editor of the comprehensive *Multimodal Composition: A Critical Sourcebook*, argues that “modes” are best understood as “ways of representing information” or “the semiotic channels we use to compose a text,” such as words, sounds, still images, and video (27). “Media,” on the other hand, are what Lauer calls the
“tools and material resources” used to produce and distribute texts (27). Media include books, radio, television, and computers.

Although fundamental differences between “modes” and “media” exist, the terms “multimodal” and “multimedia” are used almost synonymously outside of an academic context. Composition scholars tend to use the term “multimodal” to emphasize the importance of the design process, but professionals working in industry or in other non-academic contexts often use the term “multimedia” to emphasize a finished product and its uses (Lauer 27). For example, NCTE produced two documents that addressed “21st century literacies” from 2005-2008. Although the “NCTE Position Statement on Multimodal Literacies” was intended to be read by English educators at all levels (K-graduate level), as well as parents, students, members of the press, and policy makers, the document seemed particularly directed towards English teachers and composition instructors, as it included sections titled “What does this mean for teaching?” However, when NCTE decided to create a more general document titled “Toward a Definition of 21st-Century Literacies,” the term “multi-media text” is used within the document to appeal to a diverse audience that may be unfamiliar with a more theoretical and discipline specific term such as “multimodal” (Lauer 33).

Although Lauer calls for composition instructors to use both terms in their teaching and scholarship to appeal to a broad readership, I will use the term “multimodal composition” throughout this dissertation project to call special attention to the visual and textual composition practices used to craft identity on Tumblr. I further prefer to use this term in my scholarship because it denotes materiality and suggests that the act of composing with modes other than alphabetic text is situated and shaped by the given rhetorical situation, which includes context, access, situation, history, occasion, audience, writer/speaker, place, and time (Lauer 5). These
factors invite us to broaden our definition of literacy outside of the ability to simply read and write the printed word. By doing so, we allow for new, unpopular, or otherwise marginalized voices and ways of being to be heard and understood, as Lauer further notes in her discussion of multimodality (5). Nowhere is this definition more relevant than in regards to microblogging, a means by which many individuals compose a mediated identity for themselves.

Marilyn M. Cooper’s ecological model of writing is particularly useful when considering how digital writing facilitates polyvocality and ultimately changes a writing environment. At the close of the 20th century, composition scholars began to recognize the larger social and cultural contexts of writing (Herzberg, Reynolds, Bizzell 25). Thus, the fundamental tenet of Cooper’s model is that writing is not solely a solitary cognitive enterprise and instead engages a variety of what she calls “socially constituted systems” (367). These systems are not comprised of only immediate personal relationships and social purposes, but also include larger generic and cultural constraints on composing, such as identity. All pieces of writing both determine and are determined by the characters of all the other writers composing within a particular system. Although their content and structure can be evaluated at a given moment, these ecologies are always changing and are inherently dynamic. Margaret A. Syverson refers to this co-evolution of individuals and complex environments as the wealth of reality. This wealth of reality is particularly important in terms of social media and identity construction.

Social Media. The beginning of the 21st century was marked by the explosion of social media. Broadly defined as a category of “many-to-many” communication in networked, digital environments by Jill Walker Rettberg, the term first entered the American mainstream in 2008 (Blogging 13). By 2015, social media use accounted for nearly 28 percent of the time Americans spent online (“Social Media”). Uses range from an alternative news source to a marketing tool,
and this nearly ubiquitous form of virtual communication currently takes place on a variety of different platforms accessed on computer and mobile devices and dedicated to sharing user-generated content within a specific online system (“Social Media”). These applications range from social networking sites like Facebook and LinkedIn to video sharing sites such as YouTube and Vimeo. Each platform features its own unique purpose and set of characteristics that can be classified in distinct ways. While image sharing applications such as Instagram and Flickr focus on visual aesthetics, other forms of social media such as Snapchat provide a means for sharing brief, candid life moments via still image or short video clip with followers. Due to the variety of platforms available to 21st century technology users, our choice in social media, as Erika Lee notes, “is slowly becoming a way to not only communicate with one another, but also to define who we are” (1).

Scholars across the disciplines have long been interested in the ever-evolving relationship between technology and identity politics. Microblogging platforms are some of the most interesting social media spaces where individuals use technology to construct identities online. Andreas M. Kaplan and Michael Haenlein define microblogs as “internet-based applications … which allow users to exchange small elements of content such as short sentences, individual images, or video links” (106). Evolving from the weblogs of the 1990s, microblogs became a popular form of communication after the launch of Twitter in 2006 (“Blogging in the 2000s”). Kaplan and Haenlin explain that microblogs are positioned “halfway between traditional blogs and social networking sites, and are characterized by a high degree of self-presentation/self-disclosure and a medium to low degree of social presence/ media richness” (106). While early blogs functioned much like virtual journals for users to textually express their thoughts and feelings at length, contemporary microblogging platforms often limit textual posts to a few
hundred characters. Consequently, microblogs allow users to frequently and succinctly publish their thoughts, feelings, and interests through streams of images, videos, memes, GIFs, and links to other websites. Microblog posts are often named and categorized by hashtags, or the words and short phrases used to identify posts regarding a particular subject or topic preceded by a hash or pound sign (#) (“Blogging in the 2000s”).

This dissertation explores women’s multimodal composition practices on Tumblr, one of the most popular microblogging platforms used by millennials. By engaging written, visual, and quantitative modes of self-representation, Tumblr bloggers make visual and linguistic meaning and construct individual and communal identities online. Influenced by Jonathan Alexander’s 2005 pioneering work, *Digital Youth: Emerging Literacies on the World Wide Web*, my dissertation includes the case studies of six female Tumblr bloggers in which I observe their multimodal composition practices and identify the complex relationship between identity, access, literacy, and transformative politics. In order to add “new, different, and more-inclusive insights” about not only women’s blogging practices but “also the impact and consequence of women’s lived realities,” a far broader definition of “rhetorical performance, accomplishment, and rhetorical possibilities” is necessary (Royster and Kirsch 29). If we seek to understand how young women engage in rhetorical practices in the 21st century, we must be willing to examine the ways they not only create but also interpret multimodal compositions in forms and spaces.

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4 According to William Strauss and Neil Howe, the term millennial is another name for Generation Y. Although there is no exact date for when this generation begins or ends, scholars generally consider people born between the early 1980s and the early 2000s as a part of this demographic (335).

5 As Rettberg notes, bloggers often choose to represent themselves quantitatively online by including information found on personal “lifelogs, personal maps, productivity records, and activity trackers.” This form of digital self-representation finds its genesis in genres such as “accounting, habit tracking, and to-do lists” (Seeing Ourselves 1). However, this project will not address quantitative modes of self-representation due to its focus on user practice and the limited numerical data that appears on the participants’ blogs.
unrecognized by traditional definitions of rhetoric. This new process requires us to engage in critical literacy practices that no longer privilege the verbal over the visual.

**Tumblr.** Created by David Karp, the social blogging service Tumblr launched in February 2007. Since August 1, 2016, over 307.5 million blogs have been created, and these blogs contain more than 97.9 billion total posts. Nearly 555 million people visit the website per month (“Tumblr”). And if these numbers are not staggering enough, according to an article published in the Washington Post regarding the purchase of Tumblr by internet giant Yahoo in May of 2013, the website receives more than 13 billion global page views (MacMillan “Yahoo’s Board Approves $1.1 Billion Purchase of Tumblr, WSJ Says”). Hence, Tumblr’s global influence and cultural power seems undeniable.

Tumblr appears to be most popular with internet users under age 25, as over half of its composers are teenagers or college students (Lipsman “Tumblr Defies its Name as User Growth Accelerates”), many of whom *Forbes* staff writer Jeff Bercovici identifies as “the artist and designer crowd” (“Why Didn’t Tumblr Turn out More like Twitter?”). Web designers and writers from pop culture website Buzzfeed frequently scour the website, mining it for content that will likely go viral across social media platforms (Lee 1). Part of the site’s appeal with Millennials and members of Generation Z is its ability to be accessed on the go. Mobile apps are available for the site on both iPhone and Android, and on May 16, 2013 an app was released for Google Glass (Tibken “Google: Check out our new Glassware like Tumblr”). My decision to recruit participants between the ages of 18-30 reflects these facts about Tumblr.

In addition to its convenience, Tumblr’s amazing popularity also results from its multimodality. More emotive and sensory than other microblogging counterparts, Tumblr allows users to navigate the site from a dashboard where a live feed continuously posts updates from
other bloggers that users follow on the site. From this virtual command station, bloggers can create original content and like or comment on entries that cross their dashboard. A list of the blogs they follow appears on the right side of the screen, as well as an activity meter that measures information about their site usage. An inbox that allows users to access each other through a messaging feature can also be found in this area of the home screen. Users compose and design their own blogs by posting narrative text, memes, gifs, images, YouTube videos, and by reblogging posts made by other Tumblr users. This reblogged content often originates from pictures found on Instagram or viral tweets. Multimodal posts are somewhat limited in terms of textual composition, as the title of a post may not exceed 50 characters, although the body of a textual composition itself has no character limit.

Due to the ability to reblog multimodal compositions from other users, Tumblr offers bloggers a degree of anonymity that other microblogging platforms do not. Because reblogging allows users to repost another bloggers’ content with the option to add (or not to add) personal comments, “the user’s personal identity isn’t defined by every single post made” (Lee 1). It is often difficult to determine where a post originated, as users sometimes even create multiple accounts for different personas. Reblogs and the comments they receive are compiled in a section titled “notes” on the bottom left-hand side of a post, indicating the number of people who have interacted with it. Users often add hashtags to their posts, creating the ability for other Tumblr bloggers to search posts about a specific topic or subject and then repost them to their own blogs. These tags allow content to become easily sortable, as this established tagging system creates a way for specialized collections of information to be easily accessed and searched. Some Tumblr bloggers link their accounts to other more public social media platforms such as Twitter

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6 Tumblr users may customize the appearance of their blogs by editing the HTML code and by choosing a custom domain name.
or Facebook, and others even include links to a personal email address. However, the majority of accounts remain anonymous. Many bloggers never fully identify themselves and, in this sense, they may be whoever they wish to be within their community of followers.

Hence, the process of creating meaning on Tumblr is both a subjective and a communal experience. Reblogged content can reach diverse audiences across the globe quickly, and this feature allows users to appreciate each other’s collective ideas without the need for approval from personal contacts outside of the Tumblr blogsphere. In this sense, bloggers may form close bonds with complete strangers. Because the meaning of the images, media, and text found of Tumblr blogs is anything but straightforward, traditional rhetorical analysis of these blogs is often very difficult. However, as Claire Lutkewitte notes, “Multimodal composition is not simply an extension of traditional composition, and we can’t simply overlay traditional frameworks onto composing with multiple modes” (4). Because of their multiplicity, Tumblr blogs invite rhetoric and composition scholars to think about literacy in terms of subjective interpretation, an aspect of identity traditional rhetoric most often ignores. These blogs rarely present traditional arguments that follow a linear trajectory of premise, claim, and logical conclusion. Instead, the arguments they present branch concurrently, allowing multiple bodies and voices to be seen and heard. Thus, the interpretation of these blogs depends largely on the subjective, embodied experience of viewers themselves and, perhaps most importantly, their own identities.

A growing body of scholarship from the fields of communication, digital media, and composition studies has begun to explore Tumblr as an important site of community and identity formation. danah boyd’s concept of the networked public provides the framework by which many social media and digital writing researchers, myself included, have come to understand Tumblr in terms of community formation. boyd defines a networked public as “publics that are
Restructured by networked technologies” (8). Because of their connection, boyd argues they are both “spaces constructed through networked technologies” and also “the imagined community that emerges as a result of the intersection of people, technology, and practice” (8). The formation of these imagined communities is dictated by affordances or “the particular properties or characteristics of an environment” (10). Bryce J Renniger applies boyd’s theory of the networked public to Tumblr and argues that it meets the affordances of a networked public in terms of persistence, visibility, spreadability, and searchability (1523-1524). These affordances influence the ways communities form on Tumblr, and, in turn, the ways that different individuals interact with each other within these established communities.

As Abigail Oakley notes, both community and identity formation are complex processes “both in real-world and online situations” (6). Katrin Tiidenberg explains that “other people have both a direct and an indirect (via the common construction of reality) role in one’s identity creation online” (38). On Tumblr, this identity creation and interaction with other people is particularly complex, as Oakley argues, “Tumblr bloggers construct layered identities through personal bios, labels, and post tagging that contain a wealth of information” (2). These affordances of the Tumblr platform are particularly important in forming “gender and sexual orientation identities,” (1) and much of the available contemporary research on Tumblr specifically focuses on these two facets of identity construction (Tiidenberg, 2012; Nicholson, 2014; Oakley, 2016; Kanai, 2016). This dissertation will contribute to the evolving conversation surrounding identity and Tumblr by exploring how digital literacy practices and access to computer technology influence identity and community formation on this platform.

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7 For more on boyd’s theory of networked publics in the context of social media, see “Social Network Sites as Networked Publics.”
8 See danah boyd’s It’s Complicated: the social lives of networked teens for a comprehensive definition of each of these terms.
Identity Formation in Cyberspace. The concept of identity is notoriously difficult to define. Spanning topics from personality to subjectivity, the term suggests ideas of both “individuality and fixedness,” implying that it is at once “structured and open-ended” (Idema and Caldas-Coulthard 3). Rick Idema and Rosa Caldas-Coulthard perhaps best explain the concept this way: “Identity references the tension between what has been and what we do, say and are in the here-and-now; between what has become automatic in our conducts and other aspects of behavior that afford learning, change, redefinition, restyling” (3). In this sense, the concept of identity does far more than simply provide a static description of the self. Rather, it explores nearly every aspect of the social, political, and philosophical dimensions of personhood. Because it involves the images and words we use to express ourselves, identity includes a linguistic component that also encompasses multimodality and the semiotic.

Like a piece of writing, an individual’s identity is constructed by complex discourse systems (i.e. race, class, gender, ability, sexuality, etc.) that they may or may not be a part of and may never fully understand, much less have the ability to control9. Judith Butler explains this identity construction in terms of what she calls “opacity” or “the context of relations that become partially irrevocable to us” (20). These relationships are constantly in flux and their complex interactions shape identity formation. Rhetorician Jay L. Lemke notes that “[the] consistency and continuity [of identity] are our constructions, mandated by our cultural notions of the kinds of selves that are normal and abnormal in our community” (19). We perform our identities amid various discourse systems that construct or configure who we are, what we think, and who we aspire to become. In other words, we constantly renegotiate these social performances in any given situation, both consciously and subconsciously, both inside cyberspace and outside of it.

9 See David Wallace’s discussion of identity on page 554 of his 2014 article, “Unwelcome Stories, Identity Matters, and Strategies for Engaging in Cross-Boundary Discourses.”
Because identity performance is in a constant state of change depending on context, we can never fully bridge the alterity that exists between ourselves and other people. The identities of others are, in many instances, opaque. Composition theorist David Wallace argues Butler’s theory of opacity has three important implications: “(1) we have all been constructed by discourses that we do not fully understand; (2) we have all participated in discourses that have constructed others in ways that we do not fully understand; and (3) we are responsible for the implications of our participation in those discourses even if we do not fully understand them” (554). Like Wallace, I do not view this opacity as a cause for discouragement or surrender to futility; rather, I see our inability to truly know or understand another’s individual identity as a source of endless possibility to embrace the multiplicity of subjectivity, particularly on a social media platform such as Tumblr. Such opacity urges us to write across boundary discourses.\(^\text{10}\)

The change in the writing ecologies and the wealth of reality brought about by computers has sparked considerable debate among literacy scholars regarding identity formation and the writing process. During the mid-1990s, when computers first began to be introduced into writing classrooms, scholars began asking an important question that has persisted into the beginning of the 21st century – Why and how does technology affect the writing process? Some scholars, such as Dennis Baron argue the computer is simply another type of technology that assists writers in the composing process, a technology no different than the typewriter or the graphite pencil that came before it. This view of technology, referred to as instrumentalism, conceptualizes the computer as a tool or instrument that “fosters incremental change,” but “writing, language, and communication” ultimately remain the same as before it came to prominence (Porter 384).

Drawing on Cooper and Syverson’s ecological models of writing, computers and writing

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10 See Jacqueline Jones Royster’s 1996 article “When the First Voice You Hear is not Your Own.”
scholars, such as Jim Porter and the members of the WIDE Research Collective, disagree with such a theory of technology. They argue that while the computer in and of itself is not necessarily remarkable, the networked computer and the new social and rhetorical contexts it introduces has completely transformed publishing practices. Porter labels this stance as the scenic/contextual view of writing.

The mediated scenic/contextual view of writing theorized by Porter fits within a much broader theory of identity within networked publics first theorized by psychologist Sherry Turkle. In her 1995 groundbreaking work Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet, Turkle argues that computers are far more than simply “a tool and mirror” of ourselves (9). Instead, she contends that the networked nature of the newly created internet would “change the way we think, the nature of our sexuality, the form of our communities, [and] our very identities” (9). Because “the boundaries between the real and the virtual” were beginning to collapse even back in 1995, Turkle believed that the internet would “[fundamentally] [shift] … the way we create and experience human identity” due to its ability to provide users with a degree of identity play often limited by the material conditions of the world outside cyberspace (10). For Turkle and other early internet theorists, this sense of identity play initially had disembodied, utopian possibilities.

Turkle argued that “the self is constructed and the rules of social interaction are built, not received” within cyberspace (10). This sense of social disestablishment heightened utopian yearning for a virtual world where individuals might escape the stigmatization associated with certain marginalized identity positions. In his 1996 manifesto, “Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace,” Perry Barlow asserted that internet users were “creating a world that all may enter without privilege or prejudice accorded by race, economic power, military force, or station
of birth” (“Declaration”). In his manifesto, Barlow argued that in cyberspace, “identities have no bodies” (“Declaration”). Barlow looked to the internet as a place of unlimited possibility – free of social ills, government restrictions, and corporate interests.

Although she recognized such a “utopian vision of cyberspace as a promoter of a radically democratic form of discourse,” Lisa Nakamura began to interrogate the ways embodiment is “written” in cyberspace, race in particular, in her 1995 article “Race In/For Cyberspace: Identity Tourism and Racial Passing on the Internet” (181). Nakamura’s ethnographic study of LambdaMOO, an early internet gaming community, found racial identity appropriation to center around racial stereotypes of the Orient, a form of what she terms “identity tourism” (185). The manifestation of such identity tourism led Nakamura to argue that the body matters in cyberspace, and critiques of the disembodiment of the internet continued well into the 21st century. In 2003, Jenny Sundén argued that the self has always already been embodied in cyberspace, as “the virtual does not automatically equate disembodiment” (5). Both critiquing and building on the work of early queer theorists and cyberfeminists such as Donna Haraway11, Sundén’s Material Virtualities calls for a theory of cyberspace that does not ignore the importance the body plays in identity formation in virtual worlds (188). Jacqueline Rhodes and Jonathon Alexander provide one response to Sundén’s call from the field of composition studies in their 2015 book-length multimodal project, Techne: Queer Meditations on Writing the Self. In this work of autoethnography, Rhodes and Alexander explore “the multiple layerings of text, image, and technology as sites from which to perform/write/read ourselves in the digital age” (“Description”). Their text tackles an important question – How do we write and represent ourselves in the posthumanist age of digital technologies? (“Why write the self?’”)

11 See “Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the 1980s"
Digital representations of identity are always theoretically “messy.” This dissertation supports Porter’s scenic/contextual view of writing and investigates the impact that Tumblr has on the relationship between human beings and machines. It builds on the work of Rhodes and Alexander in that it explores one way young women are writing themselves online. The socialized, embodied writing produced on Tumblr acts as an extension of an individual’s identity and culture. Because the machines used to create this writing shape its production and distribution, the machines themselves become an extension of the writers. Jim Porter calls this metaphorical merger of human and machine “the cyberwriter” and suggests that we have not fully explored the implications of this metaphor.

Access to Technology and Digital Literacy. The ability to form identities online requires access to technology and a high degree of digital literacy. Cynthia Selfe began to theorize the ways we might begin the process of redefining literacy in the 21st century with her 1999 landmark work, *Technology and Literacy in the Twenty-First Century: The Importance of Paying Attention*. Published well before social media’s ubiquitous presence in American society, the book provides a case study of how the Technology Literacy Challenge begun in 1996 by the Clinton administration failed to live up to our cultural expectations and enjoyed very limited success in improving U.S. educational efforts. Selfe blames the shortcoming of this initiative on a popular definition of literacy that emphasizes computer competency and fails to encourage a situated view of technology. This definition misdirects the energy invested in the national project to expand technological literacy and limits the effectiveness of literacy instruction as it occurs inside and outside of school settings. Selfe argues that because technology designs are often informed by epistemologies outside of English Studies, some forms of digital literacy may be
unproductive and even harmful, contributing to the ongoing problems of racism, sexism, and poverty.

While rhetoric is an important component of digital literacy, I align with Stuart Selber’s belief that it is only one part of a larger whole. According to Selber, digital literacy requires technology users to be able to strategically move between three specific types of computer literacy: functional (includes the skills necessary to use a computer as a tool to write and communicate with), critical literacy (the ability to conceptualize computers as cultural artifacts and to critique them accordingly in terms of power relationships), and rhetorical literacy (the capability to create or produce technology) (24-25). Altogether, these categories offer a diversity of perspectives, and Selber stresses that the goal is not to endorse one form of literacy over another. Instead, bloggers and others who regularly engage with technology should learn to exploit the different subjectivities that have become associated with computer technologies to obtain the objectives of effective employment, informed critique, and reflective praxis. Selber further encourages the development of a “postcritical” stance on technology. This stance suggests that no theory or position should be immune to critical assessment, as Selber recognizes that technology can often promote inequitable and counterproductive practices, whether they be within the context of a networked public (8).

Although digital writing plays an important role in the lives of cyberwriters across the globe, equal access to computer technology and the literacies required to use it effectively are still important issues for scholars to contemplate. Race is a particularly important matter to consider when addressing the problem of technological access due to the persistence of understanding technology as merely the instruments people use to extend their power and
comfort. Real access to technology engages rhetoric and goes beyond the ability to use a computer as simply an instrument to complete a task. In his groundbreaking work, *Race, Rhetoric, and Technology: Searching for Higher Ground*, Adam J. Banks calls for academics to address the many issues associated with race, technology, and access to push back against an instrumentalist view of technology.

Banks argues true access to technology goes beyond simply having technology available to use to complete a given task. This understanding of technology has an obvious parallel to digital literacy in that it encompasses more than just the functional. The meaningful usage of technology includes five different types of access: 1) material access or “the ability to own or to be near places that allow users to access technology” (41); 2) functional access or “the knowledge necessary to use technological tools effectively” (41); 3) experiential access or a form of “access that makes technological tools a relevant part of people’s lives” (42); 4) critical access or the ability to be “intelligent users and producer of technology” (42); 5) transformative access or “the genuine inclusion of technologies and the networks of power that help determine what they become, but never merely for the sake of inclusion” (45). Like the theory of digital literacy proposed by Selber, the goal is not to privilege one form of access over another – rather, technology “users, individually and collectively, [should] be able to use, critique, resist, design, and change technologies in ways that are relevant to their lives and needs, as opposed to those of the corporations that hope to sell them” (Banks 41).

By analyzing technology, digital writing, and multiliteracies, we begin to pay attention to the complex ways in which social, political, and economic systems intersect in cyberspace.

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Disability is a very important, yet separate aspect of access that I will not fully address in this project. For an introduction to this component of access, see Elizabeth Brewer, Cynthia L. Selfe, and Melanie Yergeau’s 2014 article, “Creating a Culture of Access in Composition Studies.”
These diverse writing situations provide opportunities for bloggers to engage curiosity and play in transformative ways and interact with others radically different from themselves. In my project, I argue social networks such as Tumblr have the potential to facilitate the cross-boundary discourse theorized by Royster and Wallace, and may allow us not to understand an individual’s identity per se, but to appreciate and utilize the wealth of reality available to us as readers and writers.

**Chapter Overview.** My dissertation will adhere to the following trajectory. In chapter 2, I outline the project’s procedures and methodology, and I describe the participants in detail. I also explain the method of data collection. Because Rettberg’s theory of blog genre does not directly address many of the nuances of microblogging, I discuss how my participants’ blogs differ from the styles of blogs Rettberg theorizes. In chapter 3, my discussion focuses on the composition choices my participants make when representing themselves online. These composition choices create an ethos for each blogger that situates her blog into a specific genre (personal or diary style, filter blog, and topic driven blogs). I analyze some of the visual and verbal markers of each woman’s blog and use Rettberg’s theory of self-representation to theorize identity construction in the Tumblr blogsphere. I explore the ways this representation sometimes may reinforce the status quo and how at other times it might act as a form of protest rhetoric.

In chapter 4, I analyze how participants’ composition choices reflect differing degrees of digital literacy. I include a discussion of how to define digital literacy and why our definition must now include social media. I further explain the importance of access as it pertains to digital literacy. In this section, I rely heavily on Adam J. Banks’s taxonomy of access to explore how my participants use Tumblr to “critique, resist, design, and change” the blogsphere “in ways that
are relevant to their lives and needs” while at the same time also reinforce the status quo of the technology corporations that produce computer products (41).

Further, in chapter 5, I investigate the impact Tumblr has on human relationships. In particular, I explore the complicated ways online and offline composing practices are interwoven in terms of political coalition formation. I find danah boyd’s critique of the terms “digital native” and “digital immigrant” useful in stressing the importance rhetoric and composition teachers play in providing students the digital literacy skills necessary to engage in transformative access to technology as defined by Banks. My goal for this concluding chapter is to problematize reified understandings of the internet as a rigid utopic-dystopic binary by exploring the nuanced ways women engage in multimodal composition practices.

Although I use Rettberg’s theory of blog genre as an organizing principle throughout the following chapters, some blogs within the Tumblr blogsphere may fall outside of these three broad categories in terms of composition choice. Tumblr as a microblogging platform provides users with a variety of composition choices, and these choices are dictated by software updates that occur frequently. As a result of this constantly changing technology, studying the ways in which women form community through blogging practices is an ongoing pursuit. My hope is that this dissertation provides readers with a glimpse of how many Tumblr blogs are composed and the ways in which women use genre to form community between the years of 2015-2016.
CHAPTER 2: THE METHODOLOGY OF “THE POLITICS OF BLOGGING”

Historically, the study of rhetoric has explored the linguistic means by which verbal arguments affect change in the male-dominated public sphere. Traditional rhetorical theory often “still [clings] to liberal humanist models of the speaking subject – a sovereign, controlling disembodied and individual voice that deploys language in order to affect some predetermined change in an audience” (Crowley 177). This line of thinking divorces rhetoric from critical literacy and often ignores the ways rhetorical theory and composition studies might work together to fully analyze the rhetoric of complex multimodal texts (Facebook status update, Twitter tweet, Pinterest board pin, etc.). Because of their multiplicity, the rhetoric found in such digital texts structurally resembles a rhizome rather than a traditional linear argument that follows the order of premise, claim, and logical conclusion. Thus, the interpretation of a text such as a Tumblr blog post depends largely on the subjective, embodied experience of the viewers and, perhaps most importantly, their identities.

Within the past eight years, there has been an explosion of scholarship that explores digital writing within the context of social media (Williams, 2009; Buck, 2012; Tekobbe, 2013; DeLuca, 2015; Dadas, 2016). Much of this research finds its genesis in earlier scholarship that explores digital writing in environments outside of the classroom (Prior, 1998; Casanave, 2002; Prior and Shipka 2003; Alexander, 2006; Lunsford, 2008; Roozen, 2009; Grabill, et al., 2010). These “self-sponsored digital writing activities,” as Amber Buck calls them in her 2012 dissertation, are often “varied and distributed” (24). Buck notes that self-sponsored digital...
writing often occurs “in small moments throughout the writer’s day” and as a result, “writing researchers cannot rely on more traditional research methodologies used in literacy research” (24). Further supporting this need for expanded digital writing research methodologies, Caroline Dadas explains that social media sites often function not only as locations of digital writing research, but also as methods for conducting qualitative research because they are often used as recruitment tools for various studies (61). This duality raises important ethical issues in terms of protecting participant privacy and anonymity.

To recognize Tumblr as one such social media site that functions as both an important virtual location of rhetorical activity for women and also as a distinct method for conducting qualitative research, I adopt a queer methodology that Dadas argues “enables the kind of flexibility that social media-based research requires” (61). Queer theory draws on a rich history of “interrogating the public and the private” binary (61). This tradition of questioning the nature of what constitutes the public and the private lends itself well to digital writing research because “social media, in particular, presents scenarios where research-related information becomes publicized to multiple sets of audiences” (61). This unique rhetorical situation presents researchers with ethical dilemmas in terms of participant privacy, representation of digital texts, and researcher transparency (61). Such considerations further highlight the need to rethink more traditional approaches to case study methodology.

Due to the inherent multiplicity of social media as both site and method of research, “tensions, fissures, and gaps” often exist within digital writing research projects (62). Dadas notes that contemporary social media spaces often blur the binary between the public and the private. While social media often functions as a “[platform] for civic work,” many users still tend to “treat online spaces as private interactions” (Dadas 61). Hence, as a methodology, social
media research requires scholars to interrogate the ethics of data collection, as it presents “research-related information [that] becomes publicized to multiple sets of audiences” (Dadas 61). Further, as Dadas notes, social media functions not only as a site of data analysis, but also as a means of recruiting participants. Due to these unique affordances and constraints, social media as a methodology must remain flexible enough to address the ever-evolving nature of these platforms (61).

As a research site, social media is often fluid and “ephemeral” in nature (Cadle “Why I Still Blog”) and presents what Dadas terms “messy methodological situations” that resist “inherited Enlightenment-era notions of replicability, reliability, or objectivity” (63). By adopting queer methodologies, digital writing researchers blur traditional qualitative research methods and objectives. Judith Halberstam calls this approach a “scavenger methodology,” as it “uses different methods to collect and produce information on subjects who have been deliberately or accidentally excluded from traditional studies of human behavior” (13).

Inherently interdisciplinary, queer research methodologies challenge the notion that sound qualitative research should yield neat resolutions to the questions posed by digital writing researchers.

While four of the six participants in this study identify as queer in terms of their sexuality, I find it important to note that queer methodologies and epistemologies are not limited to sexuality studies or the sexuality of participants within a study. Jean Bessette argues that the term queer should not be defined “as a synonym for lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender individuals but rather as an orientation against normativity” (28). Or, in other words, “someone, or something, is queer when [they] or it challenges the social processes that consolidate and

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13 For more on “messy” research methods see John Law’s 2004 monograph, *After Method: Messiness in social science research*
normalize gendered, sexual, raced, and classed identities” (Bessette 28). Further, Kath Browne and Catherine Nash explain that queer research can take many different forms as long as these projects are “positioned within conceptual frameworks that highlight the instability of taken-for-granted meanings and resulting power relations” (4). This project thus draws on both a queer epistemology and queer methods to challenge or “trouble” reified understandings of the technological frameworks that structure virtual self-representation, digital literacy, access to computer technology, and community formation within cyberspace because it adopts a feminist theoretical underpinning that is always already queer (Dadas 63). The queer epistemology I adopt in this dissertation provides a lens for examining the dynamic ways in which young women compose with text and images in cyberspace. The queer methods I use provide a study of how female bloggers both experience and interpret digital images and the ways in which they employ rhetorical appeals through their compositions to form communities online.

**Research Context.** Recent scholarship in both the fields of communication and composition studies have explored Tumblr as a site of identity composition. In her 2014 article, “Tumblr Femme: Performances of Queer Femininity and Identity,” Nichole Nicholson examines how selfies are used by queer femmes on Tumblr to construct subversive identities. Drawing on Judith Butler’s concept of performativity and Elin Diamond’s scholarship on “feminist Brechtian methods,” Nicholson adopts both a queer epistemology and a queer research methodology to explore virtual identity formation (66). Nicholson’s close rhetorical analysis of participants’ selfies included in blog posts explores how femmes perform femininity within a virtual environment. She then goes on to explain how these digital performances enacted through images and texts subvert traditional notions of the feminine and the masculine. In this way,

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14 Nicholson defines femme as “a queering of feminine presentation and gender identity imbued with a feminist politics” (66).
Nicholson’s epistemology and methodology work together to trouble our understanding of gender performance.

Faith Kurtyka’s 2015 study of the visual composition practices of members of a social sorority at the midwestern university where she is an assistant professor also adopts both a queer methodology and epistemology. Keenly aware of the ethical dilemmas associated with digital writing research, Kurtyka uses student actors in images included in the article to protect the privacy of the study’s participants. These actors portray the actual poses participants in the study use in the images they include on their sorority’s Tumblr blog posts. This somewhat unorthodox choice highlights the flexibility of adopting a queer methodology.

Further, Kurtyka adopts a queer epistemology by using Kathy Charmaz’s concept of grounded theory to analyze the data she collected through interviews and rhetorical analysis of Tumblr blog posts. The use of Charmaz’s theory allows her to avoid the creation of “prescriptive or dogmatic instructions for visual composing” by focusing her analysis on “the principles that seemed to guide the women [in her study] as they composed” (“Trends, Vibes, and Energies”). Thus, her analysis reflects the “composers’ recursive and multifaceted composing processes” (“Trends, Vibes, and Energies”). Kurtyka’s queer epistemology complicates the ways knowledge of visual composition practices are produced.

**Design of Study.** Like Buck in her 2012 dissertation that examines the digital literacy practices and identity constructions of graduate and undergraduate students on Facebook, I align myself with Yin’s rationale for engaging in case study research as a means of conducting qualitative research. Yin argues that case study research “investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not

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15 Kurtyka had the explicit consent of all student actors to participate in the project, and it was approved by her university’s Institutional Review Board.
clearly evident” (13). This method is particularly useful when conducting digital writing research, as the contextual conditions of writing within a digital environment are important to what Yin terms “the phenomenon of study” (13). In the case of this project, the multimodal composition practices of women on Tumblr provide a study in microblogging practices within a “real-life context” (1). As a researcher, I have little control over these “real-life” events. Thus, the major research questions I ask in this study address “how” and “why” women use rhetorical strategies to represent themselves in the Tumblr blogsphere. The process of addressing the answers to these questions is well-suited for case study methodology.

Further, case study methodology is nonhierarchical and might be viewed as one of many “inclusive and pluralistic” approaches to digital writing research (Yin 3). Considering the ethical implications inherent in engaging in any form of digital writing research16, protecting the privacy of the participants in this study was a major concern for me as an ethnographer, especially as an ethnographer who carries a large degree of privilege. I recognize that Tumblr functions as a space where many bloggers explore stigmatized aspects of their identities in ways that they may feel unsafe doing elsewhere. The possibility of anonymity while blogging on Tumblr is one aspect that makes it such a popular social media platform. As the participants in this study are all active members of the Tumblr blogsphere, I felt it necessary to take clear steps to protect the confidentiality of their participation in this project and to mitigate my power in the researcher/participant dynamic.

I submitted the methods of this study to the University of Alabama Internal Review Board (Project # 16-OR-218). In my proposal, I explained that each participant would choose a pseudonym for herself and for her blog. The participants’ real names (or any names they assume

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16 See Heidi A. McKee and Dânielle Nicole DeVoss’s 2007 work, *Digital Writing Research: Technologies, Methodologies, and Ethical Issues* for more on the ethical dilemmas facing digital writing researchers.
within the Tumblr blogsphere) would be removed from their writing as well as any other form of identifying information gathered for the study. Participants and their blogs are only referred to by their pseudonyms in the subsequent chapters of the project. Images of participants and direct quotes written by them on their blogs or any accompanying blog posts are also not included. All information gathered during this study, including the written answers to the digital interview questions and any digitally reproduced visual or written information from the blog itself, were stored on an encrypted hard drive. Although one of the co-chairs of this dissertation project, Dr. Michelle Bachelor Robinson, is listed as a co-principal investigator on the study’s IRB approved protocol, only I had access to the study’s data. The methods of this project were granted expedited approval on June 3, 2016.

**Data Collection Methods.** The data sources for the six case studies found in this dissertation include archived blog posts between the years of 2015 and 2016 that collectively comprise major parts of each participant’s Tumblr profile (these short posts include written and visual modes of self-representation). Each blogger who agreed to participate in the study and to have her blog analyzed completed a 25 question, IRB approved, digital interview regarding the composition choices she makes while blogging. The majority of the questions included in the digital interview pertained to how each participant constructed her identity on her Tumblr blog, her digital literacy practices, and her level of access to technology. Each digital interview was completed using Qualtrics software issued to the University of Alabama.

Using Qualtrics software afforded my participants a considerable amount of flexibility in completing their digital interviews. Participants responded privately to each digital interview question without having to personally have a conversation with me about issues of identity that they might feel uncomfortable verbally articulating. Participants were also able to complete the
digital interview on their own time, as the interview questionnaire could be paused at any time and then returned to at a later, more convenient time. Because I was unable to financially compensate the participants for their intellectual labor, I found it very important to respect their time and energy accordingly. Honoring the privacy and time of the participants keeps with the queer epistemology that guided the development of this project.

**Digital Interview Questions.** As stated in the previous section, each participant completed a 25 question digital interview using Qualtrics software licensed to The University of Alabama. Each interview took between 30 minutes to one hour to complete. None of the interviews were recorded. The questions each participant answered are listed in Appendix A.

These questions included in the digital interview are complex and deeply personal. However, each participant provided lengthy, detailed responses for the questions included in the digital interview. Only one participant declined to respond to one question on the digital interview questionnaire. The richness of the written data collected from this portion of the study might partially be attributed to the identities of the participants themselves. Four of the six participants identify as writers in some capacity, either creatively, academically, or some combination of both. All six participants have attended an institution of higher education for at least a short period of time and understand basic academic research practices. Further, all the bloggers are speakers and writers of standardized American English. Two of the six participants are graduate students in English, while one other is an undergraduate student in English. Another has completed a degree in communications, while one other is currently completing an undergraduate degree in biology and is applying to graduate programs. All participants recognize the importance of written communication in their daily lives. The high degree of literacy and the extensive knowledge of communicative practices exercised by each participant affected this
study in terms of the conclusions I was able to draw about the transgressive nature of Tumblr as a microblogging platform. Due to the participants’ educational backgrounds and the advanced levels of digital literacy and access to technology that it affords them, my analysis focuses on the user practices of the participants rather than on the design of the site itself.

In addition to considering the subjectivities of the participants, I informed each of them that all collected data would be triangulated and carefully explained what this process entails. During recruitment, I also emphasized the importance of viewing participants as active collaborators rather than simply as “test subjects.” The participants responded well to this information, and a few even thanked me for considering their representation in the project. Every participant explained that she would be happy to provide me with further clarification to the responses of her digital interview questions if necessary. By explaining my commitment to ethical research practices to participants before they completed the digital interview, I gained their trust and established a personal relationship with each participant. I believe this sense of trust is reflected in the way each blogger honestly and thoughtfully answered the questions included in the digital interview.17

Data Analysis. I initially began analyzing the data for this project during the summer of 2016. Analysis of the participants’ blog posts began after each woman completed her digital interview. Using Qualtrics software simplified the coding process, as each participant’s interview was easily word or phrase searchable. The program also quantifies responses to itemized questions in chart or graph form. I coded the data by first looking at the broad themes that seemed to emerge from each woman’s response to the individual questions included in the digital interview. Next, I created specific codes for identity, digital literacy practices, and access to technology. I then looked for

17 For more on the queer methodological practice of establishing intimate relationships with research participants see Mathias Detamore’s 2010 article, “Method matters: ethnography and materiality.”
archived blog posts during the years of 2015 and 2016 that seemed to match or correspond with these broad themes. These short written posts include written and visual modes of self-representation. Each participant had the opportunity to review the final manuscript before the project was submitted to The University of Alabama as a completed dissertation.

The mediated discourse analysis I engage in is an important component of my nexus analysis. This study carefully considers the relationship between discourse, agency in terms of digital self-representation, and blogging practices on Tumblr. I align myself with Scollon and Scollon’s definition of discourse, which includes images and electronic communication systems (4). Due to the sensitive nature of the compiled data (written and visual), I do not directly quote any of the information on the participants’ blogs. Because of this data constraint, my study does not strictly focus on discourse analysis at the micro level18. Instead, I investigate the ways women represent themselves and form virtual communities on Tumblr much more broadly. Such a macro approach to mediated discourse analysis is beginning to take shape across the disciplines, particularly in New Media Studies (Halkola et al., 2012; Wohlwend & Medina, 2012; livari et al., 2014; Kadhum, 2017). The present study follows in this newly established tradition.

By analyzing written and visual modes of self-representation, I use Yin’s theory of pattern matching and analytical generalization. I align myself with Yin’s rationale for qualitative research methodology to make inferences about the ways some women use multimodal composition practices to construct identities and to form communities online (35-38). Each participant’s response to the 25-question digital interview provides a basis for the analytic generalizations I make about each woman’s blog and the subsequent blog community in which it exists. The answers

18 Scollon and Scollon define micro analysis as small “unfolding moments of social interaction” (8).
participants provided to the digital interview also gave me a means for analysis across a genre of blog.

By analyzing written and visual modes of self-representation, I use Yin’s theory of pattern matching and analytical generalization. Drawing on the work of psychologist David Campbell, Yin defines pattern matching as an approach to case study research in which “several pieces of information from the same case may be related to some theoretical proposition” (26). He contends that it is an appropriate form of analysis for descriptive case studies “as long as the predicted pattern of specific variables is defined prior to data collection” (116). Pattern matching may also span multiple case studies, as different information from each case study may be related to similar theoretical principles or to the same theoretical principle (26).

In terms of analysis, I use the logic of pattern matching to compare the results of my case studies to established theories of online identity formation, digital literacy, and access to technology (Rettberg, 2014; Selber, 2004; Banks, 2006). The answers participants provided to the digital interview also gave me a means for analysis across a genre of blog. This form of analysis, or analytic generalization, uses “a previously developed theory” as a “template” to compare the results of qualitative data (Yin 32-33). Like pattern marching, analytic generalizations may also span multiple case studies.

**Project Rationale.** Due to the inherent “instability” of internet research, digital media and multimodal composition scholars often take a rhetorical, case-based approach to digital writing research (Dadas 64). The Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR), a multidisciplinary organization of scholars dedicated to ethical internet research, supports this approach. The AoIR recommends adhering to “guidelines rather than a code of practice so that ethical research can remain flexible, be responsive to diverse contexts, and be adaptable to continually changing
technologies” (Markham and Buchanan 5). By adopting an “adaptive, inductive approach,” researchers like myself “can yield potentially more ethically legitimate outcomes than a simple adherence to a set of instantiated rules” (5). Thus, my dissertation will keep with this method of scholarship as I analyze my participants’ identity representations and literacy practices on Tumblr.

This chapter will explore Rettberg’s theory of blog genre and explain the adaptations employed to directly address the nuances of microblogging. I will also describe each of my participants and her corresponding blog in detail. As I briefly mentioned in the methodology overview in Chapter 1, the purpose of this project is to determine the ways in which women use rhetorical appeals to create blogs to fit the conventions of a blog genre, and I argue that these composition choices are shaped by identity and access.

Participants. The participants in this study include six people who self-identify as female, ranging in age from 20 to 27 years. All participants are white and middle class and use different types of social media frequently. All participants are registered voters in each of the states in which they reside. Of these participants, two identify as straight; three identify as bisexual, and one specifically identifies as sexually fluid or bi-demisexual. Each woman chose a pseudonym for herself and for the title of her blog to protect her privacy and anonymity. Each woman was also informed that I would be closely analyzing her blog and the answers she provided to the digital interview questions.

I recruited participants via word of mouth and the direct message feature on Tumblr. Although I know three of the participants outside of cyberspace (two as very casual

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19 I base this statement on participants’ responses to a digital interview question that asked, “What other forms of social media do you use besides Tumblr?” I analyze this finding in much greater detail in chapter 4 where I discuss the ways in which participants’ composition choices reflect differing degrees of digital literacy.
acquaintances and one as a friend, I am not (and have never been) a member of their online Tumblr communities. Due to this fact, I do not consider this study to be an autoethnography. My status as an outsider to each of my participant’s respective Tumblr communities afforded me a degree of critical distance while conducting my data collection and analysis that preserved my status as an outside academic researcher.

Further, I recruited women whose blogs were provocative and seemed to loosely fit the conventions of blog genre as theorized by Rettberg. I engaged all participants with a prepared recruitment statement that was approved by the University of Alabama Internal Review Board. Two participants are currently full-time graduate students and earn at least part of their living by working as graduate teaching assistants, while two others are full-time undergraduate students who earn their living by working on campus jobs that directly relate to their respective fields of study. The remaining two participants earn their living through employment outside of the university, although one woman earned a bachelor’s degree in communication studies and the other started college but was forced to abandon the pursuit due to accessibility issues. The women’s familiarity with the university and its mission as an institution that facilitates research endeavors may have influenced their decision to respond to my inquiries and to participate in the study.

Rettberg’s Theory of Blog Genre. The methodology of this dissertation relies heavily on Jill Walker Rettberg’s theory of blog genre. In this chapter, I organize each participant’s blog into a particular category or genre. According to Rettberg, a blog can most easily be defined as “a frequently updated website consisting of dated entries arranged in reverse chronological order so

20 Although some Tumblr bloggers may earn income from product placement in images or by reblogging specific advertisements, Rettberg terms these practices “the monetization of blogging,” none of the participants in this study stated in their digital interview responses that they earned any money by blogging on Tumblr (Blogging 19). This study was also completely voluntary and none of the women in this study were paid for their participation.
the most recent post appears first” (Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory 32). Rettberg considers her definition to be a minimal one, as it is so broad that it could technically include many other types of websites that are not usually considered blogs, such as company newsletters or online newspapers. For this reason, Rettberg argues we might view the blog as a medium (or mode to use the language of multimodal composition theory), rather than as a genre itself (Blogging 32).

The amorphous nature of the internet has blurred the lines between what constitutes mode and genre, and the decision whether to view the blog as a mode of composition or as a genre depends largely on individual perspective (32). Scholars such as Marie-Laure Ryan argue that rather than conceptualizing the internet as a single form of media, we should instead view the various available software as a means of providing different media (50). For example, a blog post created in Tumblr is using a different mode of composition than a blog post created in WordPress or Blogger because the constraints and affordances of each type of blogging software differ considerably from one another (Rettberg, Blogging 32). Therefore, for the purposes of this project, I will consider the blog to be a mode of multimodal composition rather than as its own genre. I will refer to specific types of blogs as genres throughout this dissertation.

**Genres of Blog.** Rettberg theorizes three major styles or genres of blogs: personal or diary-style blogging, filter blogging, and topic driven blogging (Blogging 17). While my participants’ blogs very loosely fit into these categories as defined by Rettberg, they do not adhere to the conventions of each genre perfectly, and the characteristics of each blog tend to frequently overlap. One reason for this discrepancy is due to the blogging software each participant used to

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21 Because I consider this dissertation to be a piece of composition studies scholarship, I use the term “mode” rather than “medium” to describe ways of presenting information or as Claire Lauer terms it, a “semiotic channel used to compose a text” (27).
create her blog. Because Tumblr is a microblogging platform, it presents affordances and constraints that differ considerably from earlier, more traditional blogging software such as WordPress or Blogger\(^\text{22}\). Tumblr blog posts tend to be very brief and intensely visual. The emphasis of a post is often on an image, meme, gif, or short video clip rather than on a large chunk of narrative text, although Tumblr bloggers do sometimes create posts that focus primarily on textual expression, as is often the case with bloggers who write fan fiction. However, as a general rule, Tumblr blogs tend to be more multimodal than blogs created on WordPress or Blogger, especially in terms of the wide circulation of gifs and short video clips.

Tumblr blogs also tend to rely heavily on reblogged pictures, gifs, memes, short video clips, and text. Some bloggers never create their own original content. Thus, Tumblr affords bloggers the opportunity to be anonymous in a way that other social media platforms such as Facebook or Twitter do not\(^\text{23}\). Bloggers often adopt personas within Tumblr communities, and these personas may or may not coincide with the lived realities bloggers experience on a daily basis. Because Tumblr is not necessarily organized by personal contacts outside of cyberspace, hashtags are an important organizing principle. Hashtags allow bloggers to consolidate archived content and share their posts with others within their personal communities and across the Tumblr blogosphere. They also allow bloggers to connect with each other through common interests or identities.

\(^{22}\) When theorizing the three primary blog genres, Rettberg has blogs created using this software in mind. While blogs created using WordPress, Blogger, or other software like it certainly do incorporate images in meaningful ways, the emphasis tends to be on the text or narrative description rather than primarily on the images themselves.

\(^{23}\) American Studies scholar Viviane Serfaty calls this sense of anonymity “the veil of the screen.” Specifically referencing online diarists, she asserts that bloggers use their digital texts to personally reflect and explore certain aspects of their identities in much the same way that mirrors reflect individuals’ physical bodies. While these texts allow bloggers to create a place for themselves within the digital world, they also conceal or “veil” much of their embodied existence from the members of their respective online communities (13-14).
For these reasons, Tumblr functions as a social media platform in a way that WordPress and Blogger do not. Due to these incongruities, I adapt Rettberg’s theory and use it as a blueprint for how we might begin to understand different genres of Tumblr blogs. Each subsequent chapter of this dissertation is loosely organized around one of Rettberg’s original genres and includes analysis of the corresponding participants’ blogs that adhere most closely to its genre conventions. I classify each blog by the purpose it serves for its creator per the explanation she provided in her answer to the digital interview question. I also use each participant’s responses to the digital interview questions to guide my analysis.

**Personal or Diary Style Blogs.** According to Rettberg, the primary subject of a personal or diary style blog is an individual’s offline life (19). Personal or diary blogs on Tumblr are perhaps somewhat more nuanced than those created using other types of blogging software in that many of them are “secret” diaries, and yet they have been created to share with other bloggers. While some posts are lengthy and contain written prose, others consist simply of a single image with an accompanying hashtag or series of hashtags. They also do not always incorporate aspects of an individual’s life offline. Almost all Tumblr blogs incorporate certain elements of the personal blog in that they present aspects of an individual’s identity through the images and text shared. These blogs may exist as a means to post thoughts or ideas that inspire bloggers. However, they may also serve a more serious purpose in that they provide a space where bloggers can express parts of their personalities, interests, and identities that they may or may not feel comfortable sharing outside of cyberspace. I classify two of the six blogs in this dissertation as personal or

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24 The blogging site LiveJournal is perhaps an exception to this claim, as this early social site provided a digital space where bloggers could “set up friend lists and share sections of their diaries with specified friends or groups of friends” (Rettberg Blogging 20). However, Rettberg notes that in these cases, “the blog is often only meant as a way of communicating with close friends or groups of friends” (20). While Tumblr bloggers certainly do communicate with close friends or groups of friends, their blogs often reach far wider audiences, many of which span across the globe.
diary style blogs. Below I provide a brief overview of each woman’s blog. I analyze each blog more fully in the subsequent chapters of this study.

**Meg, Brag, Unit: Lucy’s Personal Blog.** I discovered Lucy’s blog via word of mouth from a good friend of mine from graduate school who suggested that she might be a suitable participant for the project. I perused her blog and was particularly interested in her participation when I saw the positive body image materials she frequently posted. I decided to direct message her and invite her to be a part of the study. She eagerly accepted my request. In her digital interview, Lucy noted that she herself is a part of the body acceptance movement and that her scholarly research as an English academic “focuses on the female body and representations of body image in young adult literature.” She has maintained her Tumblr blog for “three years…off and on,” and “[has] periods of time where [she] update[s] several times a day, but sometimes [she doesn’t] log on for months.” Although she remarks that her blog does not serve any one particular purpose, she also states that she “use[s] it to follow other blogs and reblog things [she] likes.” In this way, her blog functions much like a filter style blog, which I define and discuss in the next section.

When asked why she chooses to keep a Tumblr blog, Lucy said, “I like the platform and the community. It's an interesting study of human interaction online. People get so worked up over posts. I also admit that it relates to my research in many ways. I write about young adult novels and their fandoms have a pretty wide base on Tumblr.” Lucy follows approximately 200 blogs, of which she explains that “initially [she] followed blogs suggested to [her] by Tumblr itself, then [she] searched for various fandoms [that she] was a part of.” She goes on to explain that she “follow[s] very few people [that she] know[s] in real life.” Ultimately, she’s “ended up branching farther and farther from [her] initial follows--following people [her] initial follows
have reblogged and so on.” Only about twenty people follow her blog, and she states that she is “not super popular.” She further explains that her blog has not received much of a response, as she does not “have many followers.” She believes she does not garner much attention within the Tumblr blogsphere because much of her blog content is not original. She makes decisions about what to reblog quickly and these decisions are based on whether she finds the content material appropriate for her audience, which includes a former student. This composition choice suggests that she may temper the content that she circulates on her blog.

Lucy’s blog is a good example of a personal or diary style blog because she classifies it as one herself in her biography section. She invites her followers and other members of the Tumblr blogsphere to contact her with requests for art or friendship. Her blog fits the ethos of most personal blogs because she does not identify it as serving a purpose other than offering her a means to express herself and to connect with other bloggers. She represents herself and her interests in a variety of ways, through images, gifs, memes, and written narrative. This representation is both similar and dissimilar from the ways Lucy represents herself in her life outside of cyberspace, as she is interested “in the same things in both arenas, but [is] a bit bolder on Tumblr.” She also does not particularly feel more comfortable expressing herself on Tumblr than she would when she is not online. She notes the difficulty in “[conveying] tone via text” and sometimes feels “overly emotional and angsty” when posting “just an image.”

**Sunshine Days and Foggy Nights: Rose’s Personal Blog.** Much like Lucy, I came into contact with Rose through the friend of a friend from graduate school who suggested that her blog might be a good fit for my project. After carefully reviewing her blog, I became interested in the different images Rose chose to represent herself and her values. I contacted Rose, and she quickly agreed to participate in the study. Rose has kept a Tumblr blog for three years and
reblogs content weekly. Like Lucy, she uploads original content “fairly infrequently ---every few months or so.” Rose states that the purpose of her blog is to educate and to entertain herself. She chooses to keep a blog because she “truly find[s] Tumblr content to be very original and overall very positive. It's [her] favorite social media and [she] look[s] forward to checking [her] feed at the end of the day. [She] often [saves] it for last, behind Facebook & Instagram. The content is most often the funniest, delightful, & visually pleasing than any other social media [she uses].”

Rose follows 126 blogs. She notes that she prefers to follow blogs that post comedic content, visually appealing images, & positive information. [She] follow[s] quite a few spiritual blogs, which are most likely [her] favorite ones to follow.” Approximately 69 bloggers follow her, although she acknowledges that “some of these accounts may be fake.” She receives an average of 2-3 likes on any given post. She is satisfied with this response to her content because she does not consider herself to post very often.

Although she may not create original blog posts frequently, Rose carefully considers the information she reblogs. She prefers “to post content that is representative of [her] lifestyle and life events,” and tries “to select images that others [sic] might find appealing as well.” Like Lucy, in terms of written content, she considers her audience in order “[to be] sure that [she] perpetuate[s] positive information & ideas that [are] drawn from [her] experiences. When [she] post[s], [she does not] like to use a lot of hashtags. [She] tend[s] to choose ones that are generally and accurately descriptive of [her] content.” She explains that she believes “[her] blog is closely aligned with [her] behavior in day-to-day offline life. On [her] blog, [she] tend[s] to "like" & share content that is representative of [her] offline lifestyle. In turn, “[she] tend[s] to find inspiration from Tumblr posts such as photos that influence [her] clothing style etc.”
Although she notes in her digital interview that she feels most comfortable expressing herself “face to face” with people, I chose to classify Rose’s blog as diary-style because she uses it primarily as a means to explore her personal thoughts, feelings, and spiritual beliefs and practices. She uses a variety of different modes of composition to accomplish this digital introspection. In the biography section of her blog, she includes a written quote that explores her carpe diem attitude and her appreciation of art. A small yin yang symbol\(^{25}\) is the corresponding visual representation of her worldview. She also includes her age (25) and the large city where she currently lives. By posting this information on the homepage of her blog, Rose heightens her ethos and identifies herself as a personal blogger.

**Filter Style Blogs.** Rettberg defines filter style blogs as blogs that do not “log the blogger’s offline life but record [their] experiences and finds on the web” (20). Like the personal blog, this genre often contains reblogged content and presents images or written narrative that explores an individual’s identity and interests that he or she may or may not feel comfortable sharing with others offline. While these two genres often overlap in certain ways, Rettberg explains that while “personal blogs… focus mostly on the life of the blogger, filter blogs filter the web from the blogger’s own point of view” (21). She goes on to explain that while “there are dominant topics … these may shift as the blogger’s interests change over time” (21).

Fandom blogs are one specific subgenre of the filter style blog that are particularly popular on Tumblr. These filter style blogs create a space where fans of just about anything (book series, bands or musical artists, television shows, etc.) can post pictures, connect with other fans, and discover the latest information about a particular fandom they follow. Fandom

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\(^{25}\) The yin yang symbol is a visual representation of the interconnectedness of contradictory forces, an important concept in the Chinese philosophy of Taoism (Hulse 37).
Bloggers often post fan fiction and sometimes they take requests regarding storylines or characters from their followers. All of the three filter style blogs I analyze in this dissertation can also be considered fandom blogs. Below I provide a brief overview of each woman’s blog. I analyze each blog more fully in the subsequent chapters of this study.

**Themortaldu: Lacey’s Filter Blog.** I met Lacey as a very casual work acquaintance while I was a graduate student at The University of Alabama. One day while at work, I briefly discussed my study with her and she mentioned that she had kept a Tumblr blog since she was in high school. I asked her if she would be interested in participating in the project, and she readily agreed. I was most interested in her participation because of the different fandoms her blog engages (Star Wars, Game of Thrones/A Song of Ice and Fire/Harry Potter/Buffy the Vampire Slayer/Peter Pan/The Vampire Diaries, etc.) and because of the length of time she has maintained her blog. Lacey has maintained her blog for about four years, since she was a junior in high school. She updates her blog regularly. During the summer she updates her blog “almost every day,” and during the academic year, she usually does “weekly updates.” She chooses to keep a blog because she “enjoys the anonymity of the Tumblr platform” because it allows her to “share things about [herself], such as [her] bisexuality, without feeling judged or pressured.”

Lacey follows 345 blogs and 302 bloggers follow her. Of these blogs, a handful that she follows “belong to [her] close, personal friends. One belongs to [her] younger sister. Besides those select few blogs, [she] tend[s] to follow people who like the same fandoms/ships/characters [she does].” She feels that her blog has generally received a positive response, although she

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26 Rebecca Sparling Zukauskas defines fan fiction as “fiction written by fans that uses established literary characters and settings” (2). She notes that “many fan fiction writers are amateurs” and that “most fan fiction stories are published free online” (2).

27 I presently do not work with Lacey or have any contact with her outside of cyberspace.
explains that “there’s always some anger between competing fandoms.”

Although she does not publish what she terms “original writing” on Tumblr, she shares fan fiction, and “the response is usually positive.” Like the personal bloggers in this study, Lacey makes decisions about what to post on her blog based on her audience of followers. She posts “things that are relevant to [her] fandom blog type, as well as posts about political subjects, chronic illness, and writing.”

The purpose of Lacey’s blog is general fandom, and it fits well within this genre. Along with reblogging things that “relate to [her] preferred fandoms,” Lacey also posts “a lot about writing,” and represents herself through images, gifs, memes, and written fan fiction. Although Lacey remarks that she is “basically the same person online as [she is] in the real world,” she feels more comfortable expressing herself on her Tumblr blog than when she is not online “because none of [her] followers (excepting a small few) know [her] personally.” This sense of anonymity allows her to “feel safer discussing personal feelings and beliefs that [she] would not discuss with anyone else,” further blurring the line between the personal and filter blog.

**Dragonmask: Raven’s Filter Blog.** I first met Raven at the church I attended while I was a graduate student, and she later became a student herself in this program. I have discussed the premise of my project with most of the people in my program, and Raven was no exception. After listening to me explain the project, she mentioned that she kept a Tumblr blog and would be happy to participate. After reviewing her blog, I welcomed her participation because of the way it engages fan culture through various modes of composition. Raven started her blog in April of 2015 in order to engage with a fandom that she had just begun to follow and to share her fan fiction online. She became even more involved as she started to develop her reputation as a

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28 Lacey notes that the generally accepted term for this competition is “ship wars.”
29 Although Raven and I share the same denomination of Christianity, we are currently not a part of the congregation, as we presently do not attend church in the same physical space. My interaction with Raven is now largely limited to online interaction.
fan. However, over time, maintaining her blog became “more about curating things [she] loved and writing [her] thoughts and putting forward platforms/information/ideas [she] cared about in addition to [her] various fandoms.” She usually creates new posts several times a day or whenever she has “a spare moment here or there.”

Raven follows 298 blogs, and she currently has 370 followers. Although she may “not exactly [be] the most popular blogger, the response to her blog has generally been supportive. She points out that she does not get “anonymous hate or anything like that” and that “the people [she] interact[s] with are nice.” Raven makes decisions about what to post on her blog based on the appropriateness of the content for her audience and what content brings her relief from her depression and anxiety. She notes that “there are things that make [her] laugh, make [her] swoon, [and] make [her] happy…all gathered together in a feed.” Her blog ultimately helps her to “stay strong” in her battle against depression and anxiety.

Raven’s blog is an excellent example of a filter style blog because it presents dominant topics, yet this content shifts as her interests, thoughts, and feelings change over time. One important purpose of her blog is to “express the complex nuances of [her] personhood through the things [she] posts.” When asked if she feels more comfortable expressing herself on her Tumblr blog as opposed to when she is not online, Raven responds by saying the answer to the question is “complicated.” She states that “there are elements of [herself] that are easier to express online than in person and vice versa.” While she feels more comfortable sharing her fandom interests online, she feels even more comfortable discussing her disability activism and religious beliefs in person because she feels “that there are certain elements of sincerity and tone that are lost in an online environment.” However, she ultimately believes that “the best way to
get to know [her] is to look at [her] Tumblr” because it provides information about her that she “would never admit to in conversation.”

**RFL: Jane’s Filter Blog.** I met Jane through Raven, as she is Raven’s best friend and also shares our religious affiliation\(^\text{30}\). Raven mentioned that Jane might be a good participant for the project because she is an avid writer and is also an active participant in various fandom on Tumblr. After viewing Jane’s blog, I sent her a direct message and invited her to be a part of the study; she quickly agreed to participate. Jane had a previous blog that she was very active on for about four years, but she has since deactivated it. She has kept her current blog (the one that will be included in this study) for approximately one and a half years. She started it as a way to interact with the k-pop (Korean pop music) fandom and as a way to find community through making friends online. She also uses it as a space to support and interact with Raven, as they are in many of the same fandoms. Her blog also provides a space where she can “dump feelings and find support” for her Autism\(^\text{31}\) and her “childhood trauma from abuse.”

Jane follows 193 blogs, although she states that it would be difficult for her to explain what her reasons are for following them. The blogs she follows are a collection of those who follow her blog, blogs recommended from Tumblr, and other blogs that she came into contact with through hashtags. Approximately 98 bloggers follow her. Jane states that she has made a lot of friends through Tumblr and that she generally feels well-liked, although she is not positive as to what specific type of response her blog has received in the broader community. Jane makes decisions about what to post based on her own moral standards and the standards of her audience. She says, “If I like something I see or it makes me laugh and it's not offensive or

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\(^{30}\) I presently do not attend Jane’s church congregation, and I do not interact with her outside of cyberspace.

\(^{31}\) I chose to use this term because it is the term Jane used to define herself and her condition in her digital interview.
damaging to my moral standards I reblog it. If I have an experience I think will do the same for someone else and isn't harmful or damaging to anyone else I post it.”

Jane’s blog demonstrates the ways in which filter style blogs present web content from an individual blogger’s perspective. While engaging with her fandoms of choice is an important aspect of why she blogs, Jane’s blog also provides a space where she feels as if she can be more authentically herself:

When I have to interact with people (outside of my husband and my animals) I have a lot of learned behaviors that help me to pass for someone who is more neurotypical. "Don't do that, you're embarrassing me" was the repetition of my childhood right up into my teen years. Because I was undiagnosed for so long [with Autism] I was told I was overly sensitive or just being dramatic or being childish or that my behaviors were weird; and that has carried through unfortunately. I can't even tell you how many looks I've gotten for stomping my feet or tugging on my hair in public. Society stares at me a lot, tumblr doesn't. Tumblr doesn't even think my lack of ability to touch strangers is weird.

For these reasons, she feels that she represents herself differently on Tumblr than in her day to day life outside of cyberspace because her “opinion and experiences as an Autistic person are accepted as more valid” in this digital space.

**Topic Driven Blogs.** Much like diary and filter style blogs, the topic driven blog provides a way for bloggers to share specific information with an audience of followers through hashtags and links to other websites. Rettberg notes that some topic driven bloggers “don’t limit their blogging to a pre-defined topic, although their interests are reasonably stable” (23). However, other topic driven bloggers are focused on very specific subject matter, ranging from fashion to politics and everything in between. Rettberg further explains that while many of these blogs are curated by
individuals, others are maintained by a group of bloggers who frequently contribute to the blog (Blogging 23). This genre of blog tends to champion debate, and arguments about controversial topics frequently break out between blog creators and also between the followers themselves (Blogging 23). For these reasons, topic driven blogs can be some of the most contentious spaces within the Tumblr blogsphere.

What I term “the body blog” is one specific type of the topic driven blog where debates between bloggers become particularly heated. These topic driven blogs encompass a wide array of conversations taking place about the female body. Body blogs are dedicated to fitness, body positivity, healthy eating habits, fat activism, pro-ana/pro-mia, and many other lifestyle choices that relate to the body. Each of these specific types of blogs might be considered a subgenre of the topic driven blog, and each has its own particular ethos. Bloggers post pictures of themselves and celebrities they wish to emulate, share diet and exercise tips, post pictures of fashion they admire, and find community with other women who wish to engage in conversations about body image. In this dissertation, I will analyze different types of body blogs, although I was only able to recruit one fitness blogger to actually participate in this study. Below I provide a brief overview of her blog. I analyze this blog more fully in the subsequent chapters of this study.

**Healthy4life: Jamie’s Topic Driven Blog.** Jamie was one of the first bloggers I contacted about participating in this study. After combing the body blogsphere, I discovered her healthy lifestyle blog after clicking on hashtags accompanying images of healthy foods, a common motif on many fitness blogs. Jamie eagerly agreed to participate in the study after I contacted her via direct message. She has kept a Tumblr blog for almost four years, and she maintains her blog in order to post images and text that she finds inspiring and intriguing. She also enjoys interacting
Jamie follows approximately 351 blogs. She follows these blogs “based on whether [she] likes someone’s blog and their posts.” She states that she’s “more likely to follow back blogs who are following me than seek out new blogs to follow.” She does not hesitate to unfollow blogs that “have been inactive for over a month,” and she herself posts to her blog every day. Even if she is not actively engaging with Tumblr, she has a queue running of automated posts. Jamie has amassed a quite large Tumblr following and presently 46,710 bloggers follow her; she gains between 30-50 followers per day. She credits this “great response” to the content that she posts. She tags this content if she wants to save it or find it again later. She also “tag[s] things others might want to search for on [her] blog, especially if [she] find[s] it really interesting or helpful.”

Jamie’s blog provides a rich example of a topic driven blog. She states that the purpose of her blog is “to promote and motivate a healthy lifestyle: this includes health, fitness, nutrition + food choices, body positivity, eating disorder recovery, organized life (fashion, study posts, etc), as well as share information and enthusiasm for a healthy, happy life.” Although her blog is not limited to only one narrowly defined topic, she provides followers with information regarding nearly every facet of living a healthy lifestyle. While she is “comfortable with who [she] is and feel[s] no need to hide it on the internet,” her “posts represent changes [she] want[s] to make to [her] life to make it better/healthier/etc.” The posts that comprise her blog present an idealized version of what it means to live a healthy lifestyle.

The chapters that follow explore the various genres of blogs that can be found across the Tumblr blogsphere. The communities that form around them suggest the possibility for coalition
building between marginalized groups both inside and outside of the traditionally recognized public sphere. Through multimodal composition practices that engage Rettberg’s theory of digital self-representation, women composing within the Tumblr blogosphere use multiple modes of composition in complex ways. I will argue that such multimodal composition practices both challenge and reinscribe the status quo through the skillful use of a variety of rhetorical appeals. However, to form a truly transformative politic, more productive ways of communicating across difference is still necessary.
CHAPTER 3: DIGITAL SELF-REPRESENTATION IN “THE POLITICS OF BLOGGING”

When analyzing the different ways Tumblr bloggers represent their identities online, digital writing researchers must consider multimodality. A variety of composition choices are available to bloggers as they decide how to represent themselves within the parameters set by the Tumblr blogging platform. Each blogger is limited to 250 posts and reblogs per day, while photo posts are limited to 150. These affordances and limitations create an ethos for each blogger that situates her blog within a genre (personal or diary style, filter style, and topic driven blog). Genre conventions are shaped by the software of the microblogging platform itself and the visual and verbal markers each woman uses to create her own blog. Krista Kennedy notes that the composition skills necessary to create such rhetorically effective blogs are often “invisible,” as they require navigating “strategic links, recomposed texts, metadata elements, and information architectures” (175). Because these skills have not traditionally been associated with writing or the writing process, the creation of Tumblr blogs and the global circulation of their posts encourage us to carefully consider how we might define writing, the composition process, and identity self-representation.

Like Kennedy, I find Andrea Lunsford’s definition of writing most useful when analyzing compositions, like the ones on Tumblr, that are created in cyberspace. During her 2005 keynote address at the Computers and Writing Conference, Lunsford defined writing as,

A technology for creating conceptual frameworks and creating, sustaining, and performing lines of thought within those frameworks, drawing from and expanding on
existing conventions and genres, utilizing signs and symbols, incorporating materials
drawn from multiple sources, and taking advantage of the resources of a full range of
media. (171)

As Jodie Nicotra notes, this definition is valuable because it asks us to reexamine the metaphor
we use when imagining writing (261). Lunsford’s invitation encourages us to abandon our old
idea of writing as “static and linear” and instead to conceptualize the act as both “dynamic” and
“spatial” (Nicotra 261). Tumblr is one such conceptual framework where writing is dynamic and
spatially oriented. Bloggers must “[draw] from and [expand] on existing conventions and
genres” (Lunsford 171). Tumblr users “[incorporate] materials drawn from multiple sources”
across the web on their blogs to examine their own identities and to situate the presentation of
these identities within the context of various online communities (Seeing Ourselves Through
Technology 11). Identity self-representation ultimately becomes a socially situated act that
extends beyond an individualized conceptualization of the self.

The “small and often invisible writing skills” the participants in this study use to navigate
their “personal information ecologies and [the] larger digital texts” of the Tumblr blogsphere can
best be understood in relation to Kennedy’s grounded theory of textual curation (Kennedy 176).
Drawing on scholarship from Museum Studies, Library Science, and Technical
Communication, Kennedy theorizes textual curation as “a conceptualization of authorship and
composition within large information structures that [are] heavily based on the cannon of
arrangement” (175). Kennedy argues that the textual curation that takes places on textually

32 These materials are increasingly multimodal sources, as they include written text, still images, short video clips,
gifs, and memes.
33 See Boylan, 2006; Dias, Freedman, Medway, & Par, 1999; Reyman, 2011; Jones, 2005
comfortable with forms of authorial agency that are distributed and socially situated” because these writers “[work] with a multitude of previously published texts that will be filtered and recomposed into a new unified text” (177). Thus, this project examines the ways that study participants engage in textual curation as writers, online readers, and public rhetors.

Written and visual forms of self-representation overwhelmingly inform the visual curation process that takes place on the Tumblr microblogging platform. This process is marked by “filtration, recomposition, and designing structures for finability and navigation,” all of which require a “closer attention to the canon of arrangement” (Kennedy 177). Rettberg loosely defines curation as the process by which digital technology users present their identities through the records they keep online (Seeing Ourselves Through Technology 1). Unlike older, more traditional systems of classification and self-representation, textual curation on Tumblr occurs largely through the reblogging of post content via hashtag. This process functions as a form of rhetorical invention. Multiple users from across the globe often create different tags for the same image. Through the shared process of naming, “invention emerges from a crowd,” rather than from the mind of a single producer34 (Nicotra 272).

On Tumblr, most images are collected from other sites across the web, and the compilation of these images creates an individual blog. Each individual blog and the specific types of images that most frequently occur on the blog then contribute to the formation of an invisible, although “useable and accessible” blog genre, rather than to any one singular, unified text (Kennedy 175). Pastiche is celebrated, and, for this reason, Tumblr bloggers both maintain and lose a certain degree of rhetorical and authorial agency over the individual blogs they curate.

34 See Kevin Kelly’s 1994 work, *Out of Control*, for information regarding the formation of what he terms the “hive mind.”
Nicotra explains that “Though bloggers still serve what Foucault calls an ““author-function”” insofar as information is gathered, compiled, and synthesized into a type of narrative under the auspices of a single blog title, clearly this author-function is different in kind from that of traditional, print-based texts” or even that of a Wikipedia article (262). While an individual blog can be attributed to a single author or composer, blog creators must still navigate "multiple, collective subjectives" (Nicotra 260) through the curatorial process of images “which [includes] filtration, recomposition, and designing structures for findability and navigation” (Kennedy 177). Seamless incorporation of these images into a cohesive whole is never the end goal on a Tumblr blog, as it is in a more textually driven document, such as in a Wikipedia article (Kennedy 177). The sense of agency afforded to Tumblr bloggers through curation allows the participants in this study to represent their identities in two of the three distinct modes of self-representation theorized by Jill Walker Rettberg: written and visual.

As a microblogging platform, Tumblr is far more amenable to creating and reblogging written or visual information rather than generating numerical based charts or graphs. Rettberg explains that “each mode has a separate pre-digital history” and that these modes of self-representation (written and visual) are “intertwined” (Seeing Ourselves Through Technology 1). She goes on to explain that “digital self-representation is conversational and allows new voices to be heard,” although “society disciplines digital self-representations such as selfies and blogs through ridicule and pathologizing” (1). Although my findings suggest that most Tumblr bloggers are less likely to display the quantified selves they create35, my findings align with

35 Perhaps one exception to this finding would regard the members of pro-ana/pro-mia communities. The quantification of identity by posting numerical data about body weight and number of calories consumed and/or burned is a common rhetorical scheme and trope within this subgenre of topic-driven blog. While this topic is fascinating, it is beyond the scope of the current project.
Kennedy and Rettberg’s ideas regarding curation in terms of written and visual self-representation in digital media.

In this chapter, I explore how and why the participants in my study represent themselves using digital technology available to them on the Tumblr microblogging platform. In doing so, I analyze the written and visual markers of each of my participants’ blogs\(^{36}\). I use Rettberg’s theory of digital self-representation to imagine identity construction in the Tumblr blogsphere. I also explore the ways digital self-representation and the subsequent identities that are created online sometimes may reinforce the status quo, while at other times might act as a form of women’s protest rhetoric.

I argue that as the participants move through the composition stages of “filtration, recomposition, designing structures for findability, and navigation” (Kennedy 177), they engage in what Johndan Johnson-Eilola calls “THE RECURSIVE, SHARED, (AND SOMETIMES ABSCONDED WITH) COORDINATION OR BUILDING OF SPACES AND FIELDS” (“Writing” 1; emphasis his). Here, Johnson-Eilola calls attention to the performative nature of digital writing in terms of its ability to restructure virtual space. The writing found on Tumblr is performative in the sense that it builds spaces rather than simply producing linear, essayistic texts (Nicotra 263). Nevertheless, it is no less of a form of writing because it engages the spatial metaphors associated with the curation process.

To evaluate participants’ blog posts from 2015-2016 and the corresponding digital interviews about these blogs, I engage in macro-level mediated discourse analysis in which I identify broad themes and various motifs that span genre and subgenre. By analyzing written and visual modes of digital self-representation in this chapter, I engage in pattern matching and

\(^{36}\) As Rettberg notes, “music, sounds, and dance are other modes for self-representation” (Seeing Ourselves Through Technology 3). However, these modes of self-representation are beyond the scope of this project.
analytic generalization to make inferences about the way some women use multimodal composition practices to form communities and to construct identities online (Yin 35-38). I compare my results to theories of online identity established by Rettberg.

I begin by providing a very brief history of the ways people have documented their identities both inside and outside of cyberspace. I engage this history to provide some context for the ways self-representation has evolved (and continues to evolve) over time, particularly in terms of curation. While the modalities of self-representation have changed considerably over the course of the Information Age, the concept of women representing themselves is not new; neither are the genres these forms of self-representation take. While some conventions of these genres have held true, others have changed considerably, especially on microblogging platforms like Tumblr. By tracing this history, I provide a framework for exploring how my participants’ literacy practices and rhetorical acts both highlight conventions of self-representation and also depart from established genres. Thus, the subsequent sections of this chapter are divided by genre, where I then analyze the self-representation of each participant on her blog that falls into the included blog genre. In these sections, I explain the ways the different modes of self-representation work to construct an ethos for each blog genre. I discuss specific blog posts from each participant and her answers to relevant digital interview questions.

The main goal of this chapter is to address some of the major research questions I posed in Chapter 1: How do female Tumblr bloggers engage various modes of self-representation in their digital literacy practices? How does access to digital technology affect female bloggers’ ability to represent themselves online? How do online and offline composition practices intersect for Tumblr bloggers? How do women that occupy a variety of identity positions online form digital communities within the Tumblr blogsphere? My collective answers to these questions
ultimately serve to provide one possible explanation for the much broader question that guides this study – What rhetorical strategies do women use to represent themselves in the Tumblr blogsphere? I conclude by briefly discussing how each mode of self-representation converses with the other to create a space for marginalized identities to be recognized.

**A Very Brief History of Self-Representation.** Barry B. Powell argues that it would be difficult to determine exactly when humans began to document their existence using written, visual, and quantitative modes of composition. Primitive art, or, as Ignace Gelb terms it, one of the “forerunners of writing” dates back to the Paleolithic Period, and, in some cases, even before then (20). The earliest evidence of actual written text can be traced to the fourth millennium BC in Mesopotamia and has, of course, continued to evolve over the course of human history (Powell 2). Georges Gusdorf, an early theorist of the genre of autobiography, explained that the invention of writing technologies offered humans the opportunity to have “direct access to the consciousness of individuals.” Thus, by reading, “we can hope to see the world through [individuals’] eyes as reflected in their writing” (qtd in Serfaty 2). Despite the opportunity for the examination of self and others that the invention of writing provided, reading and writing were largely confined to the religious elite until the late eighteenth century, as the majority of people were not afforded this privilege (Rettberg 4-5).

As literacy rates continued to rise and writing technologies such as pen and ink became less expensive in the nineteenth century, personal diaries became more common and were not associated exclusively with ordained members of the clergy, such as priests or nuns (Rettberg 5). Early diaries and journals were, however, associated with Puritanical religious examination and often “[recounted] a spiritual journey towards a personal salvation” (Serfaty 5). Writers “[examined] [their] own flaws and failures, seeing self-examination as the source for self-
improvement and attaining grace” (Rettberg 5). Self-improvement and spiritual examination continue to be important themes found in contemporary personal or diary style blogs, filter style blogs, and topic-driven blogs. These genres have also been influenced by secular diaries and the commonplace book, both of which were popular forms of writing during the eighteenth century. Such secular diaries and commonplace books continued to be major influences on personal diaries and journals during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, of which Ralph Waldo Emerson’s *Notebooks* are perhaps the most famous (Serfaty 45).

The creation of the World Wide Web in 1990 by computer scientist Tim Berners-Lee has led to the development of networked writing unprecedented in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. During the 1990s, interacting with others online often took the form of communicating through “Usenet discussion forums, IRC, MUDs and MOOs” (Rettberg 12). Early online diary writing communities also existed. To facilitate social interaction and to form virtual communities, these forums relied heavily on written text and conversation. They provided little creativity in terms of self-representation, as “each person’s words were presented in the same font, in the same manner and made visible to all subscribers, to all players in the same room or to all users in the same channel” (Rettberg 13). The body and images in general were largely absent.

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37 I will discuss these thematic elements later in this chapter.
38 IRC stands for internet relay chat. This application layer protocol facilitated early internet communication in the form of text.
39 MUDs, originally known as multi-user dungeons, but later as multi-user dimensions or multi-user domains, functioned in the early days of the internet as textually based multi-player real time virtual worlds. According to Richard Bartle, these digital spaces combined elements of various online games (role-playing, hack and slash, player vs. player) and features of interactive fiction and online chat (9-10).
40 According to communications scholar James H. Tolhuizen, MOOs are object oriented forms of multiple user domains (3). See Rawn Shah and James Romine’s 1995 book, *Playing MUDs on the Internet* for further information regarding the history of this topic.
from the internet due to a scarcity of photo sharing technology\(^{41}\) and slow dial-up internet speeds.

The availability and popularity of webcams revolutionized the ways in which people began to communicate, compose, and form community online during the early part of the twenty-first century (Rettberg 12). As smart phones with high pixel cameras and fast, broadband internet connections became more accessible, computer users began communicating using not only written text, but images as well. Rettberg terms the current visual emphasis in digital technologies hastened by graphical browsers, “the visual turn” (3). Nowhere has this visual term been more significant or more complicated than in social media.

The visual turn in social media complicates what defines text and writing in terms of agency, process, and performativity. The ability to compose with images has expanded how individuals represent and explore their identities through the ability to produce a virtual space. While almost all social media platforms (Twitter, Facebook, Pinterest, Snapchat, and Tumblr, etc.) incorporate some form of image paired with text (gif, meme, short video clip, etc.), not all these platforms privilege textual and visual materials in the same ways. Some platforms, like Facebook, allow digital media writers to create user generated content that is still largely text oriented and individualized. Digital writers on Facebook maintain a somewhat more traditional sense of authorship, the self, and rhetorical invention because their compositions can largely be traced back to a single writer using alphabetic text. Other platforms, such as Pinterest and Tumblr, rely almost entirely on the curation process to foreground visual images. Images are often filtered\(^{42}\) and recomposed or redesigned to include descriptive text captions or hashtags for

\(^{41}\) Unlike today, most people during the 1990s did not own some form of digital camera or digital scanning technology. As a point of reference, Apple Inc. released the first generation iPhone on June 29, 2007. Development of this technology began in 2004 (Rowinski “4 Real Secrets We’ve Learned So Far About Apple”).

\(^{42}\) I discuss the filtration process in more detail at the end of this chapter.
findability (Kennedy 177). Tracing the individual image back to its original creator can sometimes be very difficult; therefore, as Kennedy explains, "successful curation requires a broader conceptualization of textual organization that moves outside of individual texts [and writers] ... and into the ecologies they exist within" (177). This circulation and recomposition of images requires users to "become comfortable with forms of authorial agency that are distributed and socially situated" (177). By curating images, social media users learn to situate and represent their personal identities within social contexts to form various communities.

In addition to using images to represent themselves and to communicate with others, social media users sometimes link their accounts to activity trackers such as Fitbits or other lifelogging devices. By presenting their physical activities and/or their health quantitatively through graphs, charts, and geographic maps, technology users show members of their social networks aspects of their identities that may not be visible strictly by viewing a photograph. Such a numeric based form of self-representation, as Rettberg points out, parallels the ways in which governments and large corporations collect big data, using this information as a tool for surveillance (3).

**Self-Representation in Personal or Diary Style Blogs**

*Meg, Brag, Unit: Lucy’s Personal Blog.* As I described in chapter 2, Lucy uses her blog as a personal space to curate information that she finds either personally or professionally inspiring or entertaining. In her biography section, she locates her blog within the genre of personal or diary-style blog by naming it as such and welcoming other members of the Tumblr blogsphere to contact her with requests for art or private questions about her blog. Although the language she uses here is brief and straightforward, it establishes a friendly tone that appeals to a broad audience of bloggers. Rather than posting an actual picture of herself above this text, she chooses
to represent her identity with a small picture of an androgynous cartoon character, and this avatar preserves her anonymity. Although Lucy uses her blog to get inspiration for her professional life as an English graduate student, she clearly does not expect her audience to consist primarily of academics due to the composition choices she makes in this section of her blog.

Situating a blog within a specific genre using written text and an image based avatar acts as an important rhetorical trope across the Tumblr blogsphere. This trope keeps with the tradition started by early blogging platforms, as older blogs often contained a “small section in an upper corner that explained who the blogger was or what the blog was about” as well as a “photograph of the blogger” (Blogging 18). While this trope has remained fairly constant over the past 20 years, the social ecology of blogs has changed tremendously within the past two decades (Blogging 2). Blogs and the identities that they represent are now more connected than ever through curation, although a large part of this process remains invisible. Bloggers can filter large amounts of information without ever directly posting to their blogs or reblogging content.

Over the past three years, Lucy’s most extensive blogging activity occurred on July 7, 2014. This day is the only one included in her blog archive. On this day, she reblogged sixteen different posts over the course of the day. Of those sixteen posts, five were text based. Four of these text based posts also included a corresponding image that illustrated some form of the included text. Eleven posts were primarily image based. Four of these images were gifs, while six were comic-style images, and one was strictly a series of still images. All of the posts, except for one, appear to be humorous in nature. The one post that varied from the others explores her queerness and the feelings associated with not “[fitting] within traditional sexual values.” The other, more lighthearted posts include pictures of cute animals, clips from anime cartoons that Lucy enjoys, and references to various fandoms of which she considers herself a member.
This blogging activity was very atypical for Lucy, as she mostly enjoys observing the ways bloggers interact with each other on Tumblr, rather than reblogging posts or creating original content herself. Because she rarely produces original content and reblogs other bloggers’ posts infrequently, most of Lucy's composition process is invisible. She spends most of her time on Tumblr filtering information, rather than recomposing texts or tagging images for findability or navigational purposes. Although she certainly participates in the filtration stage of the composition process and designs her site for the ease of her personal navigation of it, Lucy also functions in many ways as a more traditional reader. Her role within the Tumblr blogsphere is primarily that of audience member, analyzing other bloggers “primarily as [texts] rather than as … living, breathing human [beings]” (Rettberg 13). In this sense, the ways that other bloggers present their thoughts, interests, and feelings function as representations of the self, open to the filtration and interpretation of bloggers like Lucy, rather than as “true” or “real” depictions of their identities (Rettberg 13). Lucy’s blogging habits complicate the traditional composition process because they are nonlinear, socially situated, and socially constructed.

Contemporary microblogging platforms such as Tumblr facilitate Lucy's form of online engagement in ways that former online communities did not. Her participation within the Tumblr blogsphere as an invisible curator marks a departure from earlier established conventions of the genre of personal blog. Early Usenet discussion groups, MUDs, MOOs, IRCs, and diary writing platforms such as LiveJournal depended on words and written conversation instead of images to form community. Active participation was expected and internet users who did not engage in conversation with others were disparaged and called “lurkers" (Rettberg 13). In these types of early virtual communities, actively communicating with peers directly was key to establishing an

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43 This negative term is currently not used within the Tumblr blogsphere.
online presence and identity among peers. Although Tumblr bloggers may send each other private direct messages and many do engage in this form of communication, “Tumblr [does not] allow direct conversational comments” (Rettberg 13). Instead, “[bloggers] have to reblog a post on [their] own Tumblr blog and add notes44 to it there” (Rettberg 13). Rettberg explains that “this means that only [bloggers’] followers and not all followers of the original poster will automatically see their notes, and although most Tumblr users write under a pseudonym, it means that anything [they] write on another user’s blog also shows up on their own Tumblr blog” (13). The primarily image based posts themselves are emphasized rather than the bloggers or the conversations they publicly generate. Thus, bloggers like Lucy have the ability to use their personal blogs as means to observe conversations within the blogsphere without fear of ridicule or hatred if they choose not to actively engage in the conversations surrounding them. Because so much of Lucy's curation process is invisible, it is difficult to measure her observations of the different conversations that take place within the Tumblr blogsphere.

Sunshine Days and Foggy Nights: Rose’s Personal Blog. Like Lucy, Rose uses her personal blog as a digital space where she mainly curates posts that entertain and educate her. She includes an updated biography section and uses a small picture of herself where her face is partially obscured to represent her identity. Her full lips and dark hair are visible, while her eyes and nose are not. By choosing this selfie, she maintains much of her anonymity online, at least to viewers who do not peruse her post archive or regularly follow her blog. She provides the year of her birthday and somewhat vague information regarding the places in the United States where

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44 The notes feature serves as a way for Tumblr bloggers to publicly communicate with each other. They function in several ways: Users can choose to reblog a particular post and a “note” is then left to indicate that the reblog occurred on that user’s individual blog. Bloggers can “like” a post by clicking on a small heart in the bottom right-hand corner of each post. These likes are recorded in the notes section of each post. Bloggers can also choose to comment on posts and these comments appear in a separate part of each post’s notes section.
she has lived over the course of her life. The language Rose uses in this section of her blog is direct and straightforward. Her tone is not particularly engaging or friendly, as she does not invite other bloggers to communicate with her directly. In keeping with the convention of the genre, Rose's inclusion of such personal information in the biography section of her blog locates it within the genre of the diary-style blog.

Rose has maintained her blog for three years and her first archived post was made on October 30, 2013. Although she creates original posts and reblogs content far more frequently than Lucy does, she still blogs infrequently. During the years of 2015 and 2016, she averaged approximately 17 posts per month\textsuperscript{45}. Of the total 373 blog posts either created or reblogged from 2015-2016, 25 were text based, three of which contain an accompanying image that illustrates some aspect of the written words in the post. Three hundred forty-eight posts were image based and of these image based posts, six contained pictures of Rose herself: one original post shows her as a child, and four others are selfies she took as an adult. The other original post is a picture she took with friends at a bachelorette party. Thirty-nine of the image based posts were gifs, while the remaining 309 consisted of either a still image or a photograph. This blogging activity is fairly typical for Rose. In her digital interview, she explained that she “[reposts] other content weekly. However, in terms of original content, I upload these items fairly infrequently---every few months or so.” Like Lucy, much of Rose's curation process is invisible because she spends most of her time on Tumblr filtering different blogs and individual posts rather than recomposing images or working to its overall findability and navigation. The diction that she uses to identify her blog as a personal/diary style blog reflects these curation practices.

\textsuperscript{45} I arrived at this number by counting all the posts Rose made within the years of 2015 and 2016 and dividing the total number of posts by 22 total months.
Based on the content of her text and image based posts, Rose clearly uses her blog as a space to explore both her secular interests and her spirituality. She explains her thoughts and feelings regarding her spiritual practices and religion this way:

I consider myself an agnostic. However, I often practice yoga and meditation. Over the past couple of years, I have engaged in an exploratory phase in terms of spirituality. However, I believe there is no way in which to prove any absolute truths. Therefore, I continue to remain curious and open in regard to all religions & spirituality.

While some of her posts are either humorous or artistic in nature, many others clearly reference her growing interest in yoga, meditation, spirituality, and religion. She often reblogs ideas, images, and practices found in Eastern religions such as Buddhism, Taoism, and Hinduism. For example, image based reblogs of the atmosphere, cosmos, and ocean are a running motif throughout Rose’s blog and seem to represent a desire for oneness with the universe, a central concept of Buddhism. Other strictly text based posts are reblogs of famous quotations from leading figures in Japanese Zen Buddhism, such as Hakuin Ekaku and Dōgen Zenji. One post combines image with text and includes a large image of two Hindi goddesses and an accompanying poem titled, “Vajnana Bhairava Tantra” by yogi Lorin Roche, found in his book, *Radiance Sutras*.

Rose’s spiritual exploration highlights a long running theme in the history of diary and personal writing. In her study of American online diaries and blogs, *The Mirror and the Veil: An Overview of American Online Diaries and Blogs*, Viviane Serfaty explains “online diaries and weblogs are but the latest avatars in the long history of self-representational writing” (1). Personal blogs like Rose’s find their roots in three major writing traditions, each with its own

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46 Many posts include references to popular culture television shows, movies, and music. Others include scenic pictures of the ocean and of flowers.
source: Catholicism, English Puritanism, and Libertines (Serfaty 4). According to Serfaty, texts such as Plutarch’s *Parallel Lives* and St. Augustine’s *Confessions* strongly influenced the early Catholic convention of religious and philosophical introspection, while seventeenth century English Puritans were influenced by Bunyan’s autobiography, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*. Puritan journals were “a requirement of religious self-discipline,” and were an “exercise in self-scrutiny and interpretation of everyday life events and experiences” (5). Further, the form began to evolve into a more secularized genre with the publication of Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s autobiography, *Confessions*, Gerolamo Cardano’s *De Vita Propria*, and finally the diary of Samuel Pepys. These landmark works led to diaries and personal journals becoming spaces where individuals found places for “internal deliberation” where they could honestly explore their foibles and desires without feeling the need to censor their thoughts for religious reasons (5-6). Such an emphasis on the importance of personal desire changed the way individuals began to think about themselves during the middle of the eighteenth century, and the need “to be ruled neither by religion nor by reason” continues to be a predominant theme found in personal blogs like Rose’s today (6).

This evolution of personal writing and journaling is particularly obvious in the case of Rose’s blog. As a contemporary microblog, Rose’s compilation of posts and reblogs both adhere to conventional literacy practices of diary and personal writing, while also breaking from the form. While she uses her blog as space to explore her own ideas about spirituality, she does not feel the need to censor her thoughts or feelings for religious reasons. Many of her posts reference ideas regarding her personal sense of spirituality rather than any set of specific practices related to any one organized religion. For example, one reblogged photoset explores the existential question – Do you believe in God? The included series of images suggest that finding faith in
God depends more on the ability to recognize a universal sense of interconnectedness rather than in attending worship services or praying to an omnipotent father figure. Other posts might be considered irreverent, such as one meme reblogged on August 8, 2016 that shows Beavis of MTV’s hit animated series *Beavis and Butt-Head* having a conversation with God in front of the gates of Judeo-Christian heaven. Beavis asks God, “Do I get x-ray vision? Can I have some nachos?” God replies, “No.” Beavis responds with the question, “Are you sure this is heaven?” Such posts present none of the guilt or sense of human lacking found in early Roman Catholic and English Puritan conventions of the genre, and yet present the Libertine value of celebrating the profane.

Although Rose’s blog is clearly self-representational in her terms of secular and spiritual desires, she also enjoys using it as a tool to observe human interaction in much the same way that Lucy does. While early online diaries such as those found on LiveJournal and Blogger linked personal blogs together, they were “often only meant as a way of communicating with close friends” (*Blogging* 20). Rose breaks with the tradition of the personal or diary-style blog by using her microblog to observe the compositions and curations of complete strangers. In her digital interview, Rose remarks that she enjoys blogging on Tumblr because she finds “content to be very original and overall very positive,” and that it “is often the funniest, delightful, and [more] visually pleasing than any other social media that [she uses].” Rose follows other blogs “that post comedic content, visually appealing images, & positive information. [She] [follows] quite a few spiritual blogs, which are most likely [her] favorite ones to follow.” In this sense, and as Rettberg notes, “the lines between a self-representational blog and one that is not self-representational are not always clear cut” (7). While contemporary microblogs that belong to the genre of personal or diary-style do function to represent a certain aspect of their creators’
identities, they also serve as a means to view the representations other bloggers create for themselves. They are both introspective and extrospective spaces where bloggers can represent their innermost thoughts and desires and yet also draw inspiration from strangers.

Self-Representation in Filter-Style Blogs

*Themortaldud: Lacey’s Filter Blog.* Lacey uses her filter style blog as a general fandom blog, and she reblogs content “that [relates] to [her] preferred fandoms.”47 She also uses her blog to “post a lot about writing,” as she is currently majoring in English at a university and wishes to pursue a graduate degree in creative writing. In terms of her self-representation in the biography section of her blog, she uses an edited image of herself with her face partially covered by a large fan in the biography section of her blog. By using this picture, Lacey maintains much of her anonymity, as she does not post selfies or other pictures of herself to her blog, at least not during the years of 2015 and 2016. Maintaining this sense of anonymity is important to her, as she feels that she is “able to share things about [herself], such as [her] bisexuality, without feeling judged or pressured.” Under her biography picture, she includes the title of the opening song of the 1953 classic Walt Disney film, *Peter Pan.* Below this title she includes a very brief quote from the 22nd episode of the second season of the popular American ABC television series, *Once Upon a Time.* By including fantasy allusions in her biographical section and titles from a popular film and television series, Lacey locates her blog within the fandom subgenre of the much broader filter style blog. These textual markers also make her curation process far more visible than Lucy’s or Rose’s. While Lacey filters blogs inside and outside of the filter style genre, she is also

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47 Lacey considers herself to be a member of a variety of fan communities, including, but not limited to Star Wars, Game of Thrones, A Song of Ice and Fire, Harry Potter, Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Peter Pan, and The Vampire Diaries fandoms.
clearly concerned about her audience’s ability to find and navigate her blog within the fandom community.

Lacey began her Tumblr blog as a junior in high school, and she made her first archived blog post on November 26, 2011. Since starting her blog, she has been an active blogger, “[updating] her blog almost every day during the summer,” and usually posting either daily or weekly updates during active school semesters. The frequency of her blogging varies considerably; some days she nears 100 reblogs and on other days she does not reblog any content at all. Of the hundreds of blog posts archived from 2015-2016, the majority are image based. Many of these posts include gifs and memes, although Lacey herself has not recomposed the images aside from adding hashtags to them. Lacey also reblogs written quotes from the television, book, and movie fandoms that she belongs to, as well as written posts from other Tumblr bloggers that she follows. While she has posted some of her original fan fiction to her blog in the past, she did not post any of her written work over the course of this study. Many of her past and present posts (both written and visual) represent her allegiance to leftist political ideals and explore her sexual identity as a bisexual woman. She uses character surveys, personality quizzes, including astrological signs and info, to represent herself on her blog.

Lacey also uses her blog to explore her ambivalent thoughts regarding spirituality and religion, and, in some cases, uses her fandom as means to examine this aspect of her identity. Her filter style blog borrows a popular trope from personal or diary style blogs. In her digital interview, she explains that she is “not religious,” although her “parents are Southern Baptist.” She considers herself “to be undecided, although [she] would probably formally identify as somewhere between an agnostic and an atheist.” In one post, Lacey explores these complicated feelings by posting a gif that depicts a parody of the popular song “Let it Go” from Walt
Disney’s 2013 feature animated film, *Frozen*. In the gif, Snow Queen Elsa triumphantly dances through fiery flames towards the front of the image block. The text above her states, “You’re going to burn in hell” and the text below proclaims, “Me not caring!” By posting this gif, Lacey seems to identify with Queen Elsa within the context of the animated, reblogged gif, proudly self-identifying as nonreligious and leaving the hell fire and brimstone ideology of her Southern Baptist upbringing behind her.48

Given the anonymity Tumblr provides and considering the history of fan culture and fan communities, it is not surprising that Lacey feels safer representing certain marginalized aspects of her identity (such as her agnosticism and her sexuality) on her blog rather than in other spaces in the Deep South that do not celebrate marginalized interests and identities. Although now considered to be “the holy grail of media culture,” fans were once unfairly considered to be at best considered mindless cultural dupes, and, at worst, irrational and dangerous (Zwaan, Dutis, and Reijnders 13). The murder of John Lennon in 1980 by a crazed fan “strengthened the idea that fandom was a pathology and that popular culture was dangerous” (13). Such erroneous perceptions were often perpetuated due to a general lack of understanding of the nuances of fan culture by the academy and the public at large. It was not until Henry Jenkins’s 1992 ethnography, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* that fans began to be recognized as “a special audience group” worthy of academic study and recognition (13). The rise of the internet and continued scholarly contribution to fan studies49 affirmed fans and legitimized their existence as members of valid subcultures within the academy and the broader

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48 Queen Elsa’s religious beliefs are not addressed in the Walt Disney feature film, *Frozen.*
public. With the rise of Web 2.0 technology and the ideologies associated with it, many of the negative connotations associated with fan culture were lost “in favor…of the idea that the Internet appeals to people’s inherent desire to belong,” as do fan cultures (13).

Due to the current ubiquity of mobile technology, access to fan culture has become far more available. The networked nature of social media has allowed fans to connect and form communities outside of “offline connections and bodily proximity,” although “a nostalgia” for the value of physical spaces seems to exist among many fans (13). Lacey uses her laptop and smart phone to create her blog posts and to connect with other fans who enjoy the same television shows, movies, and book series that she does. She follows 345 blogs. Of these blogs, only “a handful” belong to her close, personal friends outside of cyberspace, and “one belongs to [her] younger sister. Thus, she uses her blog not only to represent her political beliefs and to observe human interaction in the ways that Lucy and Rose do, but also to connect with other bloggers who share similar interests in politics or fandoms.

**Dragonmask: Raven’s Filter Blog.** Like Lacey, Raven uses her filter style blog to engage with and belong to fan culture, although it serves a variety of different purposes for her. She explains her decision to start a Tumblr blog on April 23, 2015 this way:

> For me, it started out as engaging with a fandom I was new in. I'm a fanfic author, and being able to post my writing was fun. Then I started developing a reputation as a fan, so that got me even more involved. Over time, though, it became more about curating things I loved and writing my thoughts and putting forward platforms/information/ideas I cared about in addition to my various fandoms. So, it's not uncommon to see a disability rights

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50 According Zwaan, Dutis, and Reijnders, Web 2.0 is “a term used to summarize the cumulative changes in the ways the internet is developed and used” (13).

51 Zwaan, Dutis, and Reijnders refer to this phenomenon of audience position as participation culture (13).
post back-to-back with a Korean boyband gifset or pretty pictures of space, because I am trying to express the complex nuances of my personhood through the things I post. Honestly, I think the best way to get to know me is to look at my tumblr; it'll tell you things I would never admit to in conversation.

Raven’s purpose for keeping a filter blog are, in her words, “complicated”:

On the surface, its intention is to be an online home for my internet self – by [Rav or Raven]⁵², though there are a lot of people who know me by name. But, underneath that...

I kind of consider it my Patronus⁵³. What I mean by that is, when my depression becomes too overwhelming, I can go to tumblr and find relief for my sadness and anxiety. There are things that make me laugh, make me swoon, make me happy...all gathered together in a feed. It helps me stay strong, even when the dementors⁵⁴ of depression seem stronger than me.

To represent these purposes to her viewers, Raven uses both written and visual modes of composition in the biographical section of her blog. Although she changes her avatar occasionally, over the course of the study, she used a small picture of Cha Hakyeon⁵⁵, lead singer of the K-Pop⁵⁶ band, VIXX to signify to viewers that her blog is primarily dedicated to K-Pop fandom, Hakyeon in particular⁵⁷. Underneath this avatar, she uses a string of words that describe

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⁵² I use the participant’s pseudonym in this quotation to protect her privacy and anonymity.
⁵³ The Patronus charm is a spell witches and wizards use in the *Harry Potter* book series. When conducted properly, the charm generally takes the shape of an animal with whom conjurers share a deep affinity and act as their personal guardian. Raven is a fan of Harry Potter, although her filter Tumblr blog is not dedicated solely to Harry Potter fandom.
⁵⁴ Dementors are evil creatures from the *Harry Potter* series that drain hope and happiness from humans.
⁵⁵ Hakyeon’s stage name is N.
⁵⁶ K-Pop is the most commonly used abbreviation for Korean pop music, a genre of popular music that originated in South Korea.
⁵⁷ Raven notes that Hakyeon is her “ultimate bias,” as her blog is dedicated to her love for more than just one K-Pop band. In general, only international K-Pop fans have more than one bias or band that they follow at one time, as it is considered “strange and disloyal” to be a fan of multiple K-Pop bands at the same time by Korean K-Pop fans.
or are associated with certain aspects of her identity that are not strictly associated with K-Pop or with K-Pop fandom, such as her affinity for the *Harry Potter* series and her identity position as both scholar and disabilities activist. Listing personal interests and identity signifiers is a popular rhetorical scheme in biography sections across genre on Tumblr. Using this rhetorical scheme expands a blogger’s audience and takes intersectional approach to expression, a hallmark of the Tumblr platform. By choosing to engage this rhetorical scheme on her filter-style blog, Raven expands her audience beyond the K-Pop fandom community.

Raven is a prolific blogger and her curation process is visible in many ways. When asked in her digital interview how frequently she updated her blog, she remarked, “Way too much? Um, every day. Usually several times a day - when I have a spare moment here and there. Or sometimes I go on huge binges where I wander down a tag.” The rate at which she blogs is consistent, and she averages between 25-50 posts per day. Maintaining a sense of anonymity is not a priority to Raven, as she periodically posts selfies with accompanying hashtags that describe the images of herself. These hashtags act as a means for herself and other members of the fan to community to locate and navigate her blog. Of the hundreds of archived blog posts in 2015 and 2016, the majority are image based and most of these reference what she refers to as her “top five biases” or the top five K-Pop bands she follows. Her written posts include fan fiction, written responses to and from other bloggers, as well as reblogs of other posts that address social justice issues regarding race, disability, gender, and sexuality.

While Raven primarily represents herself and her interests by using written or visual modes of composition, she occasionally uses charts or graphs to represent numerical information that pertains to VIXX and other K-Pop bands. In one post, she reblogged three pie charts that

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58 The phrase “wander down a tag” refers to the act of clicking on a hashtag used to identify and classify a blog or reblog. This act leads bloggers to find other blogs or reblogs with the same hashtag.
visually depict the percentage of lines each member of VIXX sings in the popular songs “Love Me Do,” “Butterfly Effect,” and “Fantasy.” The purpose of these charts is to visually depict the percentage of song lyrics her main bias\(^{59}\), N, sings in each song. Based on the percentages depicted by these charts, N seems to play a supporting role in the group. Raven’s affinity for N makes sense in terms of her identification with the marginalized and underrepresented. Using this visual mode of composition allows her to create a visual for N’s relative marginalization within his group performances.

As J Patrick Williams notes, the mass media constructs social identities, such as the one Raven and Jane specifically embody as a K-Pop fan (82). K-Pop fans are often stigmatized both in Korea and abroad, “as mass media sources [are] rife with portrayals of extreme K-pop fan behavior” (85). For example, “as the media-constructed story goes, fandom may begin normally, but can develop malignantly to the point where fans become sasaeng\(^{60}\) who devote too much time to stalking their idols, abandoning their own personal and social lives in the process” (85). Despite such a negative portrayal of K-Pop fandom by many mass media outlets, the virtual identities of the majority of K-Pop fans differ considerably. Sasaeng are not generally accepted in virtual communities, including Tumblr, although the population of sasaeng followers depends largely on the K-Pop band itself\(^{61}\) and its respective fan base. Thousands of K-Pop bloggers have openly condemned the actions of sasaeng, including Raven. She has reblogged multiple text based posts that point out the danger associated with many of the abusive behaviors sasaeng engage in and explains at length the reasons why sasaeng should not be considered fans. These

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59 The term main bias refers to a fan’s favorite K-Pop band or K-Pop band member.
60 According to Williams, sasaeng are typically Korean girls between the ages of 13 and 22 who engage in problematic behaviors such as stalking and damaging the personal property of K-Pop artists. Sasaeng have now reached the level of “mass-mediated folk devil across Asia” (83).
61 According to Raven, K-Pop bands EXO and BTS have higher percentages of sasaeng in their fan base than other K-Pop bands.
text-based posts provide nuanced information regarding incidents and fan identity that an image based post may have difficulty conveying.

**RFL: Jane’s Filter Blog.** Like Raven, Jane uses her filter style blog to engage with and belong to fan culture. She chooses to keep her Tumblr blog “for the community.” She explains that as a fan, she has “always been picked on for [her] taste in music and movies and books by not just [her] peers, but [her] family.” Although Jane has not directly addressed the issues surrounding sasaeng and the stigma it imparts on K-Pop fan communities, she has experienced a considerable amount of shaming over the course of the eleven years she has identified as a K-Pop fan. She attributes much of the western stigma associated with K-Pop fandom to “racism against Asian people that the western world has tried to manufacture” and to “what our culture views as masculine.” Many of her image based posts show male K-Pop stars in elaborate costumes and full faces of makeup that include eyeliner. Jane notes that “G-Dragon has been a model for a women’s fashion brand and Ren from Nu’est has made his image from being prettier than women.” Most of Jane’s written and visual posts highlight male K-Pop stars, as a main purpose of her blog is to “re-blog pictures of attractive Asian men.” However, as Jane explains, “in Korea, being a flower boy is [a] good thing.” The images of flower boy K-Pop stars that Jane reblogs align with her articulation for more fluid gender norms in the United States.

Jane is also a fan of exclusively female K-Pop groups and reblogs images and information about them often. Jane explains that “Amber (a girl in a girl group) [named] f(x) is short haired and wears shorts or pants instead of skirts.” Her identity as a member of one of the most commercially successful K-Pop groups challenges deeply ingrained ideas about what it means to be a successful female pop star in the west. In this sense, Jane’s affinity for posting

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62 In Korean culture, a flower boy is a male who both looks and acts stereotypically feminine.
images of both male and female K-Pop stars that challenge gender norms acts as an extension of her identity as both a fan and as a feminist.

Because she often feels isolated from her family and members of the southern community that she lives in, Jane views Tumblr as “a safe place for [her] to find people that enjoy the things [she] [enjoys] without judging her.” Jane represents the purpose of her blog to viewers by using a small picture of Leo, singer in the K-Pop band, VIXX as the profile picture in the biographical section of her blog. Beneath this picture, she includes brief written references to her identity and interests outside of K-Pop and K-Pop fandom, such as fiction writing, animals, and her struggles with anxiety. This section specifically locates her filter style blog within the subgenre of K-Pop fandom and assists Tumblr bloggers in their ability to find and navigate her blog. Like Raven, she expands her audience outside of fandom communities by engaging the rhetorical scheme of listing other aspects of her identity and her personal interests in the biography section of her blog.

Jane is a prolific blogger. Although the rate at which she produces blog posts is inconsistent, on a given day, she can make upwards of 60 posts per day. Maintaining a sense of anonymity is not important to Jane because she “got over fandom shame ages ago. K-pop has been so much a part of [her] life that [she] sees no reason to separate it from [her] ‘personal’ stuff.” She posts selfies when she changes her hair color, although she rarely posts images of herself on her blog. Jane made hundreds of posts during the years 2015 and 2016. The majority of these posts are image based and reference her K-Pop biases. Jane’s written posts tend to explore her interests outside of K-Pop more frequently than her image based ones do. They

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63 While Jane considers Leo to be her main bias within VIXX, she considers GDragon from the K-Pop band, BIGBANG to be her ultimate bias. Many of her posts include pictures of him and written text that relates to him and BIGBANG.
frequently reference her feminist politics and autism awareness. While she has posted some of her written fan fiction to her blog in the past, she does not engage in this practice very often because she mostly uses Tumblr from her smartphone, and she finds it difficult to format her fan fiction using this form of technology.

Self-Representation in Topic Driven Blogs

*Healthy4life: Jamie’s Topic-Driven Blog.* Jamie uses her topic-driven blog “to promote and motivate a healthy lifestyle.” She uses her blog as a digital space to create posts that she groups into four major categories: “1) inspirational/motivational; 2) helpful/informational/educational; 3) pretty pictures [that] are cool to look at (i.e. travel pictures of places [she has] never been to); 4) news/recipes/DIYs/fashion ideas/new things to try out.” Generally, she reblogs posts for two reasons: first, “to share them with others who also may find them interesting or helpful” and second, “to save [or curate] them for [herself] so [she] can find them later (i.e. tagging).” In addition to creating original posts and reblogging content, Jamie uses her topic-driven blog to form community and “to interact with likeminded individuals” through “messaging” and “sharing posts, etc.” She enjoys using Tumblr because it “is an easy to use interface for blogging.” Her curation process is perhaps the most transparent of all the participants in this project because she is the most concerned with the audience her blog attracts. All the content that she creates or reblogs is carefully filtered to promote what she terms “a healthy lifestyle,” and each post is carefully hashtagged to promote findability and navigation.

Jamie uses the biographical section of her blog to establish it as a place to explore a variety of different aspects of living a healthy lifestyle. She uses a small picture of herself where her face is fully visible as her personal avatar. Underneath her picture, she personally introduces herself to her community of followers and invites them to directly message her with any
questions that they might have for her – not just about health or fitness issues. Maintaining a sense of anonymity is not important to her, as her followers would easily be able to identify her outside of cyberspace based on the picture she uses to represent herself on her blog. She uses written text with a friendly tone to identify the focus of her content as a healthy lifestyle blog, and she also includes a link to her Instagram account, making it easy for followers to contact her away from the Tumblr platform.

Jamie is the most prolific blogger who agreed to participate in this study. She made her first archived post on May 25, 2013, and has updated her blog every day for nearly the past four years. Her collective archive includes thousands of posts, as it is not unusual for her to consistently reblog or create upwards of 30 posts per day. Even when she is not online, she maintains a running queue of posts that is automatically disseminated to her followers. Most of her posts are image based and she either creates or reblogs them by using her PC, laptop or smartphone. Jamie most frequently uses her written posts to interact with her followers by asking them specific questions or to engage interaction with them through the solicitation of reblogs or by asking them specific questions. Jamie’s posts tend not to be overtly political, although she did reblog two text based posts on November 8, 2016 that addressed her disdain and concern for the outcome of the 2016 American presidential election. Neither her visual nor her text based posts address her religious identity as a Roman Catholic, although both her image and text based posts often address different aspects of spirituality in general. Surprisingly, Jamie does not use overtly quantitative modes of self-representation to track her fitness or lifestyle goals and tends to use only images or written text to represent them. This composition choice may have to do with the affordances of the Tumblr platform that do not lend themselves to easily creating charts, graphs, or links to lifelogging devices.
As Rettberg notes, topic-driven blogs like Jamie’s are not always clearly self-representational in the sense that the content of her healthy lifestyle blog address a variety of different topics, including “health, fitness, nutrition + food choices, body positivity, eating disorder recovery, organized life (fashion, study posts, etc), as well as share information and enthusiasm for a healthy, happy life.” While some of this information directly represents Jamie’s interests and core beliefs, it does not necessarily present an accurate representation of herself. In her digital interview, Jamie explains the discrepancy this way:

My posts are often what I want to be or am striving for, my goals essentially. In real life, I am not as well "put together" if that makes sense. My posts are inspirational, and something to strive for and motivate myself in real life to be - from eating healthier foods to exercising more to wearing more fashionable clothes to traveling to clean and organized home. So although I am the same person online and real life, my posts represent changes I want to make to my life to make it better/healthier/etc.

As with any form of identity self-representation, Jamie’s blog literally presents a “filtered” version of herself and of her lifestyle in general because certain “unhealthy” aspects of her life are not posted or reblogged. However, her viewers may not necessarily recognize how technology mediates the identity that she constructs for herself.

**Self-Representation and the Tumblr Microblogging Platform.** In this chapter, I addressed the ways this study’s participants engage various modes of self-representation in their digital literacy practices. The female participants in this study are members of a variety of different Tumblr

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64 Rettberg proposes the term “filter” “as an analytical term to understand algorithmic culture” and explains that “in today’s algorithmic culture the filter has become a pervasive metaphor for the ways in which technology can remove certain content and how it can alter or distort texts, images, and data” Using this term is a very deliberate choice on Rettberg’s part, as she advocates for using terms that “are popular in our culture to understand it” (Seeing Ourselves Through Technology 20-22).
communities, which organize themselves around three major genres of blogs: personal or diary-style blogs, filter blogs, and topic-driven blogs. Within these genres, the participants use a variety of different modes of composition to represent their online and offline identities, many of which intersect in ways that both challenge and reinforce the status quo.

While Tumblr allows the participants in this study to represent various aspects of their identities – race, religion, politics, gender identity, and various recreational interests – these representations of themselves are always filtered. As Rettberg explains, similarities exist between “the visual filters we apply to our photographs, the technological filters we apply to our blogs and other social media feeds and other cultural filters (norms, expectations, normative discourse strategies)” (Seeing Ourselves Through Technology 22). These similarities teach us how to understand and interact with the digital world. For example, we might view Tumblr itself as a technological filter. Each blogger is limited to 250 posts and reblogs per day, while photo posts are limited to 150. These posts and reblogs are somewhat limited in terms of textual composition, as the title of a post may not exceed 50 characters, although the body of a textual composition itself has no character limit. Further, the design and layout of bloggers’ profiles cannot be changed independently of preconfigured templates without having knowledge of computer coding skills. In this sense, the Tumblr microblogging platform offers a template for the ways in which bloggers represent their identities online. It both limits self-expression and yet also creates a space where marginalized identities might be both recognized and organized.

Genre also acts as a filter (30). Personal or diary-style blogs, filter blogs, and topic-driven blogs all contain certain expectations in terms of the information presented in the biographical

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65 Precomposed templates are available to download if bloggers lack computer coding skills but wish to change the design and layout of their blogs.
66 I explore this idea more fully in chapter 5 of this project.
section of each genre and the content (both written and visual) included in posts and reblogs. While many of these conventions are changeable and often overlap, others are not, such as the idea that topic-driven blogs are mainly organized around a dominant idea or main interest rather than mainly by an individual blogger’s point of view. However, because curation is a major organizing principle of a personal microblogging platform like Tumblr, the line between what constitutes each genre is often blurred. And yet, the content of these blogs collectively constitutes how we understand not only identities online, but also personal or journal-style blogs, filter-style blogs, and topic specific blogs in terms of rhetorical performance.

Visual, technological, and genre filters also influence and are influenced by cultural filters. Rettberg defines a cultural filter as “the rules and conventions that guide us” (Seeing Ourselves Through Technology 24). These cultural filters sift “out possible modes of expression so subtly that we often are not even aware of all the things we do not see” (24). The ideology that shapes our cultural mores, values, and motives are often unconscious, and many bloggers, including the participants in this study, do not recognize the ways cultural filters shape the identities presented online (25). These “cultural filters change over time and are different in different cultures,” and yet collective ideas about what constitutes the content of personal of diary-style blogs, filter blogs, and topic-driven blogs affect the choices bloggers make about how to represent themselves online (25). So, while the bloggers who participated in this study may have the opportunity to create original written blog posts or reblog images that challenge prevalent ideologies and social norms, they are still limited in the ways in which they can convey these ideas and sentiments. Collectively, their individual blogs often challenge the status quo of both genre, identity, and political engagement. At the same time, they also reinforce conventions of composition afforded to them by choosing to use the Tumblr microblogging platform.
CHAPTER 4: DIGITAL LITERACY AND ACCESS IN “THE POLITICS OF BLOGGING”

The ability to represent various aspects of identity online requires access to technology and an extensive degree of digital literacy. When analyzing the composition choices associated with identity self-representation, it is important for digital writing researchers to evaluate the ways differing degrees of access and digital literacy impact rhetorical acts on Tumblr. Scholars across the disciplines have considered how to define digital literacy and its far-reaching implications. In the broadest sense, digital literacy is an umbrella term that encompasses a wide range of literacies: media literacy, information literacy, and technology literacy (Small “Digital Literacy”). Considering these collective literacies, the term can most easily be defined as “proficiency in the use and application of a wide range of digital tools, media, and skills, combined with a knowledge and understanding of the norms and practices of appropriate use of those tools and skills” (Small “Digital Literacy”). While this definition may appear comprehensive on the surface, it does not account for the rhetorical complexity of the term.

Because I recognize that digital literacy practices exceed the merely functional, I rely heavily on Stuart Selber’s definition of digital literacy that includes functional, critical, and rhetorical components in order to analyze the rhetorical acts of the participants in this study. According to Selber, functional literacy includes the skills necessary to use a computer as a tool to write and communicate with, while critical literacy refers to the ability to conceptualize computers as cultural artifacts and to critique them accordingly in terms of power relationships. Rhetorical literacy pertains to the capability to create or to produce technology (24-25).
Altogether, these categories provide a more nuanced understanding of the term, and Selber stresses that the goal is not to endorse one form of literacy over another, but to highlight the importance of all three terms working together. Similarly, my purpose in using Selber’s definition is to assess how the bloggers in this study use functional, critical, and rhetorical literacies on the Tumblr microblogging platform to form communities and to engage in informed critique and reflective praxis.

While I find Selber’s definition of digital literacy useful, I do not find that it explicitly addresses the roles that the curation process, access to digital technologies, and identity politics play in the development of this skill, particularly in terms of critical and rhetorical literacy. Consequently, throughout this chapter, I will expand on Selber’s definition of critical literacy by including discussions of access and identity. In doing such, I hope to highlight the ways self-representation shapes the development of Tumblr blog genres and the communities that form around them. Blog genres and their respective communities are, of course, also impacted by the functional and rhetorical literacies exercised by the platform’s users, all of which are affected by differing degrees of digital access.

Although scholars working at the intersection of new media studies, critical race theory, and composition studies have critiqued ideology positing computer literacy in binary opposition to embodiment for some time (including Selber), the idea that computers are about “distance, invisibility, and textuality” while bodies are about “skins and lived experience” still predominates popular thought and discourse regarding computer technology (Kendrick 395). This idea mirrors many of the “invisible” social infrastructures outside of digital environments (Kendrick 397). Like white privilege and other types of unearned social advantage, computer
interfaces work because they “[are] designed not to call attention to themselves” or the ways that they disenfranchise the marginalized (Kendrick 397).

In her article “Invisibility, Race, and the Interface,” Michelle Kendrick argues that on the basic level of the interface computers are consciously designed to “create ease” for certain groups of people in terms of robustness, ease, power, and diversity. While all these terms are specific computer concepts, they also parallel the structure of white privilege within the United States (397). In computer terminology, the word robust describes a resilient system that remains largely unencumbered by changes in one aspect of the whole. In terms of white privilege, American society might be conceptualized as a system that is largely impervious to small, isolated changes (such as affirmative action), which challenge systematic inequalities (397). As Kendrick notes, “Interfaces both digital and social have at their core a desire for ‘ease’” (397). Kendrick defines both digital and social ease as, “the knowledge of where things ‘are’ in a physical but also in an emotional sense” (397). This ease translates into the power of the average computer user understanding where something “belongs” in a digital space or the “place” of a person within a given social order.

In both digital and social systems, the average user is assumed white67, despite illusions of diversity that take the form of customizable digital templates or “celebrate diversity” rhetoric (397). Consequently, within both systems, the ways in which the needs of the powerful are privileged go “virtually unnoticed” and appear to be a “natural” matter of course (398). The similarities between the operations of both systems is not surprising when we consider the fact that computer interfaces are created within larger social interfaces that have little regard for those considered “other” than the “average” user (398). Cynthia Selfe notes that computer

67 I would also argue that average computer users are also assumed male.
“technologies have grown out of the predominately male, white, middle-class, professional cultures associated with the military-industrial complex” (486). Because these ideologies are largely invisible to computer users, much of the inequity that underpins technology is marked by what is absent from traditional computer interfaces (485-486). For example, Selfe notes, “Primary computer interfaces do not … provide direct evidence of different cultures and races that make up the American social complex, nor do they show much evidence of different linguistic groups or groups of different economic status” (485-486). Rather, these interfaces are marked by “manila folders, files, documents, telephones, fax machines, clocks and watches, and desk calendars,” hallmarks of white corporate culture (486).

Due to the invisibility of the homogenizing cultural forces that shape computer technology and the culture that surrounds it, women and minorities (African American women in particular68) continue to be poorly represented within STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) fields and the industries that use the technologies they produce. According to Elisabeth Kelan, women are absent from nearly every aspect of the information and communication technologies (ICT) industry, ranging from education in STEM fields to the consumption of digital technologies (508). This lack of representation led digital media researchers Wieslaw Oleksy, Edtya Just, and Kaja Zapedowska-Kling to predict some of the “potential ethical issues” associated with information and communication technologies in the future and also to pose some possible solutions for these problems (107).

One suggestion posed by Oleksy et al. is to recommend that women be more engaged “in computer science at all educational levels, as well as in the process of ICT design, production

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68 According to a special report published in 2013 by the National Science Foundation, African American women earn 10.7% of Bachelor’s degrees, 13% of Master’s degrees, and less than 1% of Doctoral degrees in STEM fields (Women, Minorities, and Persons with Disabilities in Science and Engineering: 2013).
and application” (117). They also call for a heightened awareness of the ways in which “women’s geo-political locations, cultural settings, various factors of socio-cultural identification such as race, ethnicity, class, age, ability, religion and different structures of subjectivities” impact and influence women’s “participation and consumption of ICT products” (117). Further, they “emphasize the importance of the proliferation of research projects which examine intersections of gender and ICT design, application and representation because such projects may have significant ethical and epistemological implications” (117). They encourage this type of research because “they may result in promoting gender equal practices regarding ICT. They can also indirectly support dismantling harmful stereotypes, which hinder and encumber both women’s and men’s agency and creativity (117). This dissertation hopes to answer Oleksy et al.’s call for more research that explores the intersection of gender, identity, and engagement with ICT design and product consumption.

Oleksy et al.’s recommendation for a more inclusive and comprehensive understanding of engagement with technology, in many ways, mirrors the taxonomy of access theorized by Adam J. Banks. In this chapter, I use Banks’ taxonomy of access as a critical framework to discuss the importance of transformative access as it pertains to the digital literacy practices of the participants. Each blogger in this study exercises a high degree of digital literacy in terms of engagement with social media platforms. In addition to frequently using Tumblr, all participants use Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube. Three of the six participants use Twitter and Snapchat, while one other participant also uses Pinterest. Another uses YikYak. Additionally, one
participant uses WhatsApp\textsuperscript{69} and KakaoTalk\textsuperscript{70}. Participants also use a variety of forms of computer technology to reblog posts and to create original blog posts. All bloggers use smartphones to access Tumblr, while three participants also use MACs or laptops. Two participants additionally use PCs or Tablets, and one participant uses a desktop. Collectively, the participants have varying degrees of experience with computer programming and/or coding. These skills have a strong correlation to the degree of access each participant achieves.

To assess the degree of both access and digital literacy exercised by each participant, I analyze the responses each blogger provided in her digital interview and compare this data with the different modes of composition each participant uses on blog posts between the years of 2015-2016. As in chapter 3, I engage in mediated discourse analysis at the macro level in which I identify themes and various motifs that span genre and subgenre. By analyzing different modes of composition and digital access in this chapter, I engage in pattern matching and analytic generalization in order to make inferences about the relationship between access to technology and community formation within the Tumblr blogsphere (Yin 35-38).

I begin this chapter by providing an in-depth explanation of the key terms Banks’ uses to establish his taxonomy of access. By engaging this critical framework, I hope to explore the nuanced ways in which the affordances and constraints of access to technology both challenge and reinforce the status quo. In some ways, the participants in this project use the Tumblr microblogging platform to “critique, resist, design, and change” the blogsphere “in ways that are relevant to their lives and needs” rather than to those of the technology corporations that produce

\textsuperscript{69} WhatsApp is a free messaging app used on smartphones that allows people to communicate through text chats and face calling features in over 180 countries worldwide.

\textsuperscript{70} Kakao Talk is a free instant messaging and voice calling smartphone app. The app is available in 15 languages and is currently used by 93% of South Koreans who own a smartphone (“With $200 Million in Revenue, South Korea’s Top Messaging App is All Smiley Faces”).
computer products (Banks 41). However, in other ways, their digital literacy practices reinforce the hegemony of a computer consumer culture that emphasizes predetermined modes of composition at the expense of creative self-representation.

The subsequent sections of this chapter are organized by genre. Here, I analyze the digital literacy practices of each participant and explain how the different modes of composition work to construct a rhetorical situation for each blog and its genre. I discuss specific blog posts from each participant and compare these posts to relevant responses from digital interview questions in order to assess the ways that access affects digital literacy practices.

Like chapter 3, the main goal of the present chapter is to address some of the major research questions I posed in chapter 1. The questions include the following – To what degree does access to technology affect digital literacy practices on Tumblr? How does access to digital technology affect female bloggers’ ability to represent themselves online? By providing possible answers to these questions, I continue my exploration of the leading question that has shaped this study – What rhetorical strategies do women use to represent themselves on the Tumblr blogsphere? I conclude this chapter by discussing how access to the Tumblr microblogging platform both challenges and reinscribes the status quo.

**Banks’s Taxonomy of Access.** In order to discuss the ways in which access affects the digital literacy practices of the participants in this study, I rely heavily on the taxonomy of access Adam J. Banks outlines in his groundbreaking work, *Race, Rhetoric, and Technology: Searching for Higher Ground*. In his taxonomy of access, Banks articulates the particular forms of technological access necessary for African Americans to fully participate in American society on their own terms: material, functional, experimental, and critical (41-43). In many ways, these categories of access are similar to the forms of digital literacy theorized by Selber. I argue there
is a strong correlation between the level of access to digital technologies the participants have and their overall high levels of digital literacy. Here I pause to provide definitions for these key terms, as I use them extensively to discuss both the rhetorical agency and the digital literacy practices of the participants in this study.

Banks defines material access as the ability “one has to own, or be near places that will allow him or her to use computers, software, Internet connections, and other communications technologies when needed” (41). Although this form of access is certainly necessary, it is only one component of the much larger matrix of technological access. Banks explains that “for material access to have any effect on people’s lives or on their participation in the society, they must also have the knowledge and skills necessary to use those tools effectively” (41). He calls this knowledge functional access and draws parallels between it and the insufficiency of functional digital literacy alone to create transformative economic or political change (41).

In addition to material and functional access, Banks stresses the importance of experiential access “or an access that makes the tools a relevant part of [technology users’] lives” (42). This form of digital access requires people to be actively involved in “the spaces where technologies are created, designed, planned and where policies and regulations are written” (42). In other words, they must have a voice in determining why new technologies come to be and how they are used once they are developed. Because average computer users (women and racial minorities in particular) often do not have the ability to develop technology, they are frequently relegated to the position of passive consumer rather than active creator. This distinction matters because technology corporations have vested interests in the distribution of products that serve their own agendas. These agendas often marginalize others because they are motivated by money rather than the creation of a more equitable society (42).
While experiential access is essential to achieving transformative access to technology, it does not preclude the necessity of *critical access*. According to Banks, critical access is the ability “to develop understandings of the benefits and problems of any technology well enough to be able to critique, resist, and avoid them when necessary as well as [to use] them when necessary” (42). When they work together, material, functional, experiential, and critical access equate to transformative access. The ultimate goal of transformative access is to make technology meaningful for users by allowing them to challenge the social, political, and economic systems that structure and are structured by technology (43-45).

While Banks’ taxonomy specifically relates the challenges African Americans experience in gaining transformative access to technology, important parallels can be drawn between the “racialized and gendered relationship with technologies” (Oleksy et al. 115). Women have also been systematically excluded from gaining transformative access to technology. Such exclusion is, of course, exacerbated by the intersection of various marginalized identities which includes, but is not limited to race and/or ethnic background. Much like Banks, while I certainly acknowledge the limitations marginalized identities experience when engaging with technology, I am not so much interested in positioning myself in a debate as to whether increased access to technology will lead to a utopian or dystopian future for women or other marginalized groups (2). Rather, my project ultimately seeks to identify the specific opportunities for coalition building between marginalized communities that a microblogging platform such as Tumblr might provide. These opportunities are directly impacted by the ways women represent their own identities and interpret the identities of others online as well as the degree of digital literacy and

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71 Banks defines transformative access as “a genuine inclusion in technologies and the networks of power that help determine what [African Americans] become, but never merely for the sake of inclusion” (45).
access each blogger engages. Hence, this chapter serves to explore the complex relationship between access and transformative politics.

**Digital Literacy and Access in Personal or Diary Style Blogs**

*Meg, Brag, Unit: Lucy’s Personal Blog.* Lucy exercises a high degree of overall digital literacy and access to computer technology. In terms of functional literacy, she clearly understands the skills necessary to use her smartphone and Mac as tools to compose not only with text, but also with images. She uses these devices to curate and filter individual posts and blogs that she finds entertaining. She utilizes these skills not only on Tumblr, but also on Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest, and YouTube. Her public communication with other bloggers in the Tumblr blogsphere is infrequent, and she uses the digital technology available to her to not only “follow other blogs and reblog things [she] likes,” but also to observe how other bloggers interact with each other. Because much of her curation process is invisible, her philosophical view of computers is not obvious from her reblogs or personal observations. However, Lucy recognizes that the text and images she chooses to reblog create a unique rhetorical situation. Although she makes decisions “very quickly” about what to reblog, she considers the “[appropriateness]” of each post, as she has “a former student who [follows] her.” This awareness of audience highlights Lucy’s critical literacy skills and the rhetorical aspects of her curation process. She is clearly aware of the power dynamic that exists between herself and her audience of followers, especially when this audience is a part of her community both inside and outside of cyberspace.

Despite her strong functional and critical literacy skills, Lucy’s rhetorical literacy as defined by Selber is weak in terms of her ability to create or to produce original technology through computer programming and/or coding. According to one of Tumblr’s official help pages, every blog’s description, title, or appearance is customizable (“Blog Customization”). While
customizing any blog’s menu, description, or appearance is simply a matter of reading the appropriate help section on Tumblr’s website and then adjusting the settings accordingly, editing a blog’s theme requires a greater degree of rhetorical literacy because redesigning this structure allows for increased findability and navigation of an individual blog. Tumblr themes are written in HTML and are fully customizable. They can be completely or partially rewritten. While the Tumblr platform does not offer special assistance with HTML or CSS customizations, the help section regarding this issue provides links to detailed information about how to learn more about HTML, CSS, and Tumblr themes in general.

When asked in her digital interview if she had any experience with computer programming or coding, Lucy responded that her experience was “very limited.” She further explained that although she has “used some premade templates and tweaked the code,” she “wouldn't say [she was] skilled by any means.” Lucy’s limited knowledge of HTML and CSS directly relates to her level of experiential access. Because she is not fluent in the computer languages that construct the technical aspects of the Tumblr blogsphere, Lucy is very unlikely to have much of a voice in determining new Tumblr themes or other technologies that may affect the microblogging platform because of the ways that she engages in the curation process. However, despite this constraint, she still determines how she will use newly developed

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72 The Tumblr help page defines a blog theme as “how [a] blog looks at its web address on a regular computer” (“Appearance options”). It differs from blog appearance in that in that “blog appearance is for tailoring how [a] blog looks on mobile devices, search pages, and the popover that appears when someone hovers over [a] username.” In other words, “blog appearance is for anywhere that is not [a] blog URL” (“Appearance options”).

73 HTML (short for Hyper Text Markup) is the most commonly used markup language for creating web pages (“Introduction to HTML”).

74 CSS or cascading style sheet is the “language for describing the presentation of Web pages, including colors, layout, and fonts. It allows one to adapt the presentation to different types of devices, such as large screens, small screens, or printers. CSS is independent of HTML and can be used with any XML-based markup language” (“HTML & CSS – W3C”).

75 Links are provided for www.codecademy.com and www.developer.mozilla.org/en-US/learn, as well as for a guide to making custom Tumblr themes (“Custom HTML”).
technologies, affording her some degree of experiential access in terms of her ability to change premade templates and “tweak code.”

Although Lucy has little power in actually shaping the technology that she uses on Tumblr, her material, functional, and critical access to technology are advanced. She owns computer technology and has the ability to use it at her convenience. She also uses this technology in effective ways in the sense that she has created a personal blog that meets her personal needs from the Tumblr microblogging platform. Her blog allows her to “follow other blogs and reblog things [she likes],” as well as to observe interaction between other bloggers that she finds “interesting.” Further, keeping a personal Tumblr blog relates to Lucy’s research as an English academic “in many ways.” She “[writes] about young adult novels and their fandoms have a pretty wide base on Tumblr.” This engagement with the platform also suggests that Lucy exercises a great deal of critical access to technology. She uses her personal blog selectively, as she has “periods of time where [she] updates several times a day, but sometimes [she] [does not] log on for months.” Although the degree to which Lucy critiques technology is not easily discernable based on her sparse reblogs, she is clearly able to go long periods of time not using Tumblr when the platform does not seem necessary to meet her personal or professional needs.

The degree to which Lucy’s blog affords her transformative access to technology is somewhat difficult to determine. Her audience of twenty followers is extremely small, according to Lucy, because much of her blog content “isn’t original” her blog has received “basically [no] response” from other Tumblr bloggers. As a personal blog, it is unclear as to whether or not it challenges the social, political, and economic systems that structure and are structured by Tumblr, and this fact is complicated by the fact that the purpose of Lucy’s blog is not to promote
political activism. When asked in her digital interview if she considers herself to be an activist, Lucy responded, “Yes. I have written for various blogs on issues of feminism, and my scholarly work deals with body image in the media.” Despite such an affiliation with an activist identity, Lucy has decided to largely keep the content of her blog separate from the social and political activism she engages in both inside and outside of cyberspace. However, her decision to use her blog as a more personally meaningful digital space does not negate its transformative political possibilities. Although Lucy’s filtration process involves privately searching for blogs that facilitate her personal academic research projects, she also blogs to study “human interaction online.” Much of this interaction concerns bloggers who debate different aspects of intersectional identity in the context of popular culture texts and young adult literature. These conversations often take place in the notes section of original blog posts and reblogs. By observing the “human interactions” that take place on many of these posts, Lucy encounters other networks of bloggers, many of whom are involved in political coalition building. The direct messaging feature also provides the opportunity to connect personally with these individuals. These networks inform the activism work that Lucy engages in outside of the Tumblr blogsphere.

**Sunshine Days and Foggy Nights: Rose’s Personal Blog.** In many of the same ways as Lucy, Rose’s access to computer technology and overall digital literacy skills are advanced. In terms of her functional literacy skills, she uses her smartphone and tablet as tools to create posts that engage visual and textual modes of curation. She also frequently composes using Facebook,

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76 It has become increasingly difficult to define political activism during the digital era (Gladwell, 2010; Mirani, 2010; Morozov, 2011; Vitak et al., 2011; Losh, 2014; Barberá et al., 2015). Although I recognize the inherent distinctions between activism and protest that occur outside the realm of the digital, I also find considerable political possibility in strictly digital activism that brings awareness to social issues and facilitates mobilization within the public sphere. As such, I will use Martin, Hanson, and Fontaine’s definition of activism as “individuals embedded in communities in shaping the social networks and relations necessary for social change” (78). They further note that “these networks and relations begin in informal and localized interactions and may evolve into more formalized, institutionalized social movements” (78).

77 Only one archived reblog references her identity as a queer woman.
Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, and YouTube. Although she enjoys utilizing Tumblr as a place to find “[funny], delightful, and visually pleasing content,” her public communication and interaction with other bloggers in general is very occasional. Like Lucy, most of her curation process is invisible, and none of her reblogs or original blog posts reference her philosophical beliefs regarding technology. However, she is clearly aware of her relationship to her audience of followers.

Although Rose chooses “to post content that is representative of [her] lifestyle and life events,” she also “[tries] to select images that other [Sic] might find appealing as well.” She further explains that “in terms of written content, [she] [likes] to [Sic] sure that [she] … perpetuate [Sic] positive information & ideas that drawn from [her] experiences.” Such an awareness of her audience emphasizes Rose’s critical literacy skills, as she is clearly aware of her own ethos as a blogger. However, this awareness does not directly correlate with her experiential access to technology. When asked in her digital interview if she had any experience with computer programming or coding, Rose responded with a simple “No,” and she did not offer any further explanation. While Rose may be able to customize her blog’s description, title, or appearance by referring to a technical support page provided by Tumblr, without knowledge of CSS and HTML, it is highly unlikely that Rose will have much of a voice in developing new Tumblr technologies or creating innovative Tumblr themes for herself or other bloggers. These different degrees of digital literacy also impact her ability to access technology in meaningful ways, particularly in terms of her ability to design structures, such as her blog, for findability and navigation. Many Tumblr bloggers who have the largest followings also have customized blogs, which enhance the content of their blogs.
While Rose does not have any “real involvement in the spaces where [microblogging] technology is created,” her material, functional, and critical access to technology allow her to make Tumblr a relevant part of her daily life (Banks 42). Rose owns at least two different forms of computer technology that she uses at her discretion. She uses these devices in order to create a personal blog that allows her to filter entertaining and educational content across the Tumblr blogsphere. She also has an extensive degree of critical access to these technologies. While she “[looks] forward to checking [her] feed at the end of the day,” she uses her blog selectively in terms of her reblogging and content posting: “[She] repost [Sic] other content weekly. However, in terms of original content, [she] [uploads] these [items] fairly infrequently---every few months or so.” They are mainly hashtagged photographs that have not been recomposed. In this sense, Rose critiques the technology she uses by deciding the ways in which she will regularly engage and disengage with it.

The extent to which Rose wishes for her blog to function transformatively is difficult to determine. While she does not “consider [herself] to be an activist because [she] is not physically out in the world effecting [Sic] change, Rose “[identifies] with very progressive ideals.” She further explains that she intentionally uses her blog posts and reblogs “to generate conversation that perpetuate ideas & views in regard to advocacy.” Because Rose uses her blog primarily to explore her personal spirituality and spiritual practices, many of her posts and reblogs pertain to religious or spiritual advocacy. Based on her text and image based posts, Rose seems to closely align herself with Eastern religious views (Buddhism, Hinduism, and Taoism). Many of her posts from 2015-2016 promote the idea of nonviolent religious plurality. They take a variety of visual and text based forms. While some display images of popular yoga poses, others are simply quotes from famous spiritual teachers or yogis. These quotes are composed in black Times New

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Roman font and are set against a plain white background. These spiritual reblogs (both image and text based) tend to contain a range of notes sections. However, the text based posts usually have far shorter notes sections. While the notes section of a text based post or reblog usually numbers in the hundreds, an image based post or reblog can easily contain tens of thousands of notes. Although I did not find where Rose engaged in any direct conversation with other bloggers in the notes sections of these types of spiritual posts, she could have easily sent a private direct message to a blogger who reblogged or liked one of the posts had she wished to start a personal conversation about this topic.

As a personal blog, Rose’s audience of 69 followers is very small, and she “[receives] and [Sic] average of 2-3 likes on [her] posts.” She “[considers] this number to be a rather decent response to [her] content” because she “[does not] post very often.” While it may not challenge social, political, and economic systems on a large scale, Rose’s personal blog provides the possibility for extended political coalition building between Tumblr bloggers. It also provides her with the opportunity to privately filter a vast amount of information across the Tumblr blogsphere that suits her spiritual needs and practices.

**Digital Literacy and Access in Filter-Style Blogs**

**Themortaludud: Lacey’s Filter Blog.** Lacey engages with her filter blog frequently. She uses her MAC, laptop, and smartphone to compose posts that utilize visual and textual modes of composition. In addition to Tumblr, Lacey also uses other social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, and YouTube. Lacey’s functional literacy practices on Tumblr extend to interaction with other bloggers, and her communication with them is visible through the comments section on reblogged posts. Lacey explains that “while [she does not]

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78 Rose states that she “[knows] some of these accounts may be fake.”
publish original writing on tumblr, [she does] share fanfiction and the response is usually positive.” These published works are not “simply texts published from a distance” (Rettberg Seeing Ourselves Through Technology 19). Rather, they are examples of Lacey’s functional literacy skills in practice, which allow her to form connections with the community of followers who read her fanfiction and view her other reblogs.

Many of Lacey’s reblogs explore the role technology plays in contemporary culture. Some of these posts explicitly critique the ways in which computer technology disrupts social interactions, while others examine the benefits technology offers the environment in terms of less dependence on fossil fuels. These reblogs generate varied and longstanding conversation amongst bloggers. The notes section of each post contains thousands of likes and textual comments. This number continues to grow as the reblog circulates across genre and the Tumblr blogsphere. While I did not find any instances where Lacey herself engaged in any of these conversations personally, her reblog of posts that engage these types of social issues highlight the ways that knowledge production is an active, ever-evolving process in a digital environment like Tumblr.

Lacey recognizes the unique rhetorical situation Tumblr affords her. She “[enjoys] the anonymity of the tumblr platform” because “[she is] able to share things about [herself], such as [her] bisexuality, without feeling judged or pressured.” Because of her desire to remain largely anonymous while blogging on Tumblr, “none of [her] followers (excepting a small few) know [her] personally.” Lacey uses her anonymity to advance her personal activist agenda. Her decision to maintain a large degree of anonymity makes Lacey “feel safer discussing personal

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79 Likes are indicated on Tumblr by clicking on a small red heart icon in the lower right hand corner of a post. 80 Lacey notes that “a handful of the blogs [she] [follows] belong to [her] close, personal friends” and that “one belongs to [her] younger sister.”
feelings and beliefs [she] would not discuss with anyone else.” Lacey’s conscious decision to construct her audience in a way that suits her needs as a queer woman living in the Deep South underscores her critical literacy skills. She recognizes the power dynamic the platform provides and uses it to her advantage by limiting not only the followers of her blog, but also her identifying images and information. This careful filtration of images and text demonstrates Lacey’s ability to effectively engage Tumblr as a rhetorical situation.

The high degrees of functional and critical literacies that Lacey exercises do not negate her limited rhetorical literacy skills. When asked in her digital interview if she had any experience with computer programming or coding, Lacey responded, “No. None at all.” While she cannot produce computer technology independently, she is still able to alter the presentation of her blog to a certain extent. Lacey has altered her blog’s description and title, although its appearance has remained unchanged from the stock template provided by Tumblr. The theme of Lacey’s blog has also been changed, and, for this reason, she does have some agency in terms of her self-representation. However, because she is not familiar at all with CSS or HTML, her choices are limited to stock templates designed by other technology users. She is unable to design the way her audience navigates her site, and this condition may somewhat limit the findability of her blog within the community of other fiter-style blogs.

While her experiential access does not extend outside of the premade design templates created by others, Lacey has material, functional, and critical access to technology. She uses at least three different forms of computer technology to curate her blog and to use them in ways that are personally meaningful for her. She uses her blog to find information about the fandoms she follows and to find community with other likeminded bloggers. Her critical access to these technologies is also considerable. Although Lacey updates her blog frequently, she restricts the
time she spends blogging when personally necessary: “In the summer, [she] [updates] almost every day and during school semesters, [she] usually [does] weekly updates.” By recognizing when it may be necessary to limit the time she spends using computer technology, she manages her time efficiently and effectively.

Based solely on the levels of material, functional, critical, and experiential access Lacey exercises, it is difficult to determine the degree to which her blog functions transformatively. When asked if she considers herself to be an activist in her digital interview, she responded this way: “Yes. I'm not highly involved, but I do get involved with online activism.” She notes that “she post things that are relevant to [her] fandom blog type, as well as posts about political subjects, chronic illness, and writing.” However, the hashtags she uses to reference these posts do not function explicitly as a way for her followers to locate her online activism. Instead, “[she] [uses] hashtags both seriously (to differentiate between character, different tags, etc.) and comedically (joke tags, [she] commonly use the tagging section on posts to make smart ass comments and other things.)” In this sense, her blog may not explicitly serve as a way for the community of 302 bloggers who follow her to form a coalitional politic that challenges the status quo of social, political, or economic systems of oppression. And yet, her blog allows her to connect with other bloggers to voice feelings, thoughts, and opinions that may otherwise be silenced within the public sphere outside of cyberspace. In this sense, it is personally transformative for Lacey.

**Dragonmask: Raven’s Filter Blog.** Raven exercises some of the highest levels of digital literacy and access to computer technology of all the participants in this study. She uses her desktop computer, smartphone, and tablet to create and reblog posts that engage visual and textual modes of composition. Raven is the most active participant in terms of her social media usage in
general. She is active on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube, as well as WhatsApp and KakaoTalk. Much like Lacey, Raven’s functional literacy practices on Tumblr extend to interaction with other bloggers, and her public communication with them is visible through the comments section on reblogged posts. Raven states that “the people [she] interacts with are nice” and are “generally supportive” of her blog in general. She further explains that “[she] [doesn’t] get anon hate or anything like that” and notes that she has “only ever headbutted with one person.” Although the majority of her reblogged posts do not directly engage critiques of computer technology with other bloggers, a few do. These reblogs, which range from how computer robotics will affect food production to the role fashion will play in the Digital Age, have generated considerable conversation in the notes section of each post. These written exchanges between users are ongoing and quite nuanced, as bloggers debate the limitations and affordances technology provides in a variety of contexts.

Raven is keenly aware that many of her original posts and reblogs generate critical conversation between bloggers, and they also help to construct the K-Pop fan community to which she belongs both socially and politically. She carefully considers her composition and hashtag choices, as they are key components to connecting other bloggers and consciously forming different communities on Tumblr. When determining which type of content, she will create or reblog, Raven first considers if the written information or visual image pertains to one of her biases. She explains the rationale behind her composition and hashtag choices involving K-Pop fandom this way:

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81 Both WhatsApp and KakaoTalk are popular in South Korea, the origin of K-Pop music and its fandom community.
82 Raven uses the word “anon” to abbreviate the word anonymous in her written digital interview.
83 This reblog has generated 65,430 notes to date.
84 A bias is a fan’s favorite performer within a particular K-Pop musical group.
If it is related to one of them, there's a high chance I will reblog it. There are people who follow me specifically because I bias a certain person, so they enjoy that content appearing in their feed the same way I like seeing it. So, I like to pass on those items. Additionally, if it is a band I like, I'll consider reblogging. If something is funny or particularly impressive - like a great video of them singing - there's a very high chance I will reblog. I try to avoid images that have been whitewashed, as I like to represent the actual artist instead of the offensive fan interpretations of their persons. With these posts, I almost always tag the artist (by actual name and stage name, as applicable) and their band. If I'm really feeling it, I will often comment in some way, because who doesn't love a good meta commentary? I've also noticed that when I do leave commentary tags, my followers connect with me more - I'm more of a person and less of a funnel for content. She further elaborates by explaining her composition and hashtag choices for other fandoms:

When it comes to other fandoms, it depends on if it is something with particular meaning to me. Like, I reblog certain Harry Potter gifsets because they feature a favorite scene or the house I identify with. For these posts, I tag the fandom and whatever content is relevant - like the specific house. With activism things, I sometimes will tag trigger warnings or things like "nsfr" (Not safe for Ramadan), depending on what it is. I also will use "important" or "truth" as tags to indicate my personal investment in something. For personal posts, I almost always tag with "me" or "personal," just so followers can blacklist those if they don't want that content.

Raven also posts fanfiction to her blog, and she considers this content to be some of the most difficult to hashtag effectively:

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85 Whitewashing is the editing process of making a K-Pop idol’s skin appear lighter in digital images.
The really hard one to kind of pin down are writing related things. I will use a lot more
tags on those posts, because I want them to have a lot of visibility in community. The
better you tag, the more people read your work. However, I don't post all of my writing to
tumblr - some of it is left on A03 or other sites instead. I'm very particular about what I
post there, because I want to represent myself well. If a piece isn't good enough, I won't
post it.

Raven also explains that not all the hashtags she uses pertain to a particular fandom or political
cause:

There are also miscellaneous tags that pop up across the genres of things I post.
"Aesthetic," for instance, is used both literally and ironically. "His most beautiful smile"
is a tag I use for when I have bad days and need to oggle beautiful smiles. I even have
"and puppies" so I can look for pictures of peoples with puppies. Admittedly, though, if I
am on my phone I am very unlikely to tag, because I am lazy.

Raven’s deliberate composition choices and rhetorically savvy usage of hashtags not only
highlight her critical literacy skills, but also the rhetorical aspects of the curation process.

Hashtags function as an important component of blog design, findability, and navigation. These
aspects of the curation process create networks of bloggers on Tumblr. Jodie Nicotra argues that
the success of virtual networks “depends on having a critical mass of users to both create and
upload information and to interact with it” (265). By recognizing her blog as a cultural artifact,
Raven, much like Lacey, carefully filters the followers of her blog. This skill allows her to
critique the power relationships afforded to her by the microblogging platform.

Raven’s rhetorical literacy skills also function as a way for her to expand her network of
followers. As a doctoral student, she “did some coding for a class she took” and she has also
“done some messing around with coding, just in [her] spare time, since [she] first got involved with the internet eons ago.” Raven has clearly edited her blog’s description, title, and appearance. While she did not elaborate as to whether or not she has used her computer coding skills to edit the theme of her blog in her digital interview response, the basic skills that she has acquired would allow her to modify the code of various Tumblr themes and provide a basic foundation for learning more advanced skills on websites such as www.codecademy.com and www.developer.mozilla.org/en-US/learn, both provided as links on Tumblr’s technical support page.

The development of Raven’s digital literacy skills has been directly impacted by her material, functional, critical, and experiential access to technology. She uses at least three different types of digital technology (desktop, smartphone, and tablet) to compose her blog in ways that provide her with personal meaning and to promote awareness of various social, political, and economic issues facing marginalized communities. Raven considers herself to be a disabilities activist and names herself as such in the biography section of her blog. In her digital interview, she elaborates on this identity position when asked if she considers herself to be an activist:

Yes. In so many ways, yes. I not only advocate for disability rights - both by loudly proclaiming my own identity and posting things related to my community - but I post about intersecting concerns as well. I also do my best to respect other communities that I come across on tumblr, because I consider that another form of activism. Realistically, I see activism as promoting respect for other people, and if I can do that by tagging certain types of images or blogging supportive messages… why not?
Because of her passion for activism and the Tumblr platform as a site of community formation, Raven updates her blog “every day. Usually several times a day – when [she] [has] a spare moment here and there.” In this sense, her frequent blogging serves as a means for the community of 370 bloggers who follow her to form a coalitional politic. While the degree to which this coalition actively affects transformative change outside the Tumblr blogosphere is unclear, her blog is genuinely included in one network that in some ways determines the role technology plays in the lives of marginalized identities across the world and functions transformatively.

**RFL: Jane’s Filter Blog.** Like the other participants in this study, Jane’s digital literacy skills are advanced, and her access to computer technology has contributed to the development of these skills. In terms of her functional literacy skills, she uses her Mac laptop and smartphone as tools to compose and reblog visually and textually based posts. She uses these skills on Tumblr, as well as on other social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, and YouTube. One of the main purposes of keeping her Tumblr blog is to communicate with other bloggers. Her functional literacy of this specific networking platform allows her to form community online. The fandom communities to which Jane belongs are important to her because she has “always been picked on for [her] taste in music and movies and books by not just [her] peers but [her] family.” Due to the alienation she experienced from her peers and family members, Jane feels that “Tumblr is a safe place for [her] to find people that enjoy the things [she enjoys] without judging [her] or making fun of [her] for it.” Although she is unsure of the general response to her blog, Jane notes that by blogging on Tumblr she has made “a lot of friends,” and she assumes that people like her and her blog.
While most of the public conversations Jane has with her friends and the other bloggers who follow her do not directly critique technology, a few of them explore the various aspects of evolving computer technology. One post, which has garnered well over 135,000 likes and comments in the notes section, explores a list of sensory related memories from the childhoods of various millennials. Two other reblogs explore the roles computer technology has played and will continue to play in K-Pop fandom in the future. These K-Pop related reblogs have circulated widely and each notes section contains hundreds of likes and comments, critiquing both the affordances and limitations of technology. Such posts underscore Jane’s awareness of technology as a cultural artifact that is subject to continuous evolution.

These conversations and others like them present unique rhetorical situations that Jane actively constructs through her original blog post compositions and the choices she makes in the content that she reblogs. Jane’s material and functional access seem to directly correlate with her level of critical access. She thinks carefully about the composition of her blog and explains that “if [she] [likes] something [she sees] or it makes [her] laugh and it's not offensive or damaging to [her] moral standards [she] [reblogs] it.” She further elaborates by explaining, “if I have an experience I think will do the same for someone else and isn't harmful or damaging to anyone else I post it.” This awareness of the way reblogged content may affect not only her audience, but herself highlights Jane’s critical literacy skills.

She notes that she had a previous Tumblr blog that she “was very active on” for “about four years and then [she] left because [she] realized that the fan culture was toxic and taking over [her] life.” While she did not elaborate on the specific ways that she believed this engagement was harmful for herself, other than to mention that it contributed “to a porn habit” that she had, Jane seems to have developed a much healthier relationship with her current Tumblr blog.
because she uses it far more discriminately. She explains that she “[goes] through phases with it, like [she] [does] with most things, where [she] update all of the time,” she also “just [leaves] it set for a couple of days or weeks or even months while [she’s] doing other things or because [she is] overwhelmed by fandom and [needs] to take a step back into reality.” While she recognizes the ways that she uses technology as a tool to represent her identity and to communicate with others, she also clearly recognizes that it has the power to shape her reality and the social, political, and spiritual conditions surrounding that reality. She now seems able to “critique, resist, and avoid [her blog] when necessary (Banks 42). Developing such a sense of agency is crucial in achieving personal transformative access to technology.

Jane’s degree of rhetorical literacy is difficult to determine based on her filter-style blog. She has clearly modified the description, title, and appearance of her blog within the stock template theme provided by the Tumblr platform. However, when asked if she had any experience with computer coding in her digital interview, she chose not to include a response. Her decision not to respond to this question may have been a simple oversight or she may not have felt comfortable discussing her computer coding skills in general.

Jane enjoys high levels of material and functional access. Although she uses her Mac laptop to reblog and to generate original posts, she relies heavily on her smartphone to create her compositions. This mobile technology both enhances and constrains her functional access. While she is able to use her device to connect with her 193 followers, her smartphone also limits the visibility of her blog within the wider Tumblr blogsphere in terms of hashtag construction. Jane notes that she is “terrible at [using] hashtags because [she] [posts] from [her] phone a lot and

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86 Jane notes that she maintained her prior Tumblr blog before she became a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. The church condemns pornography, and this is one reason Jane may have considered her viewing habits problematic.
that’s a pain.” She explains that when she does use hashtags, “they’re about half relevant and half a meta commentary on the post itself.” Jane is clearly aware of the importance of hashtags in gaining visibility and followers, as she follows other bloggers when she “[keeps] seeing [them] in tags…and [realizes] [they have] common [interests].” Jane’s limited use of hashtags is fairly surprising, as she “[spends] a lot of time trying to inject visibility for the disabled community where [she] can. Particularly in [her] own fandoms but also just wherever anyone will listen.” By limiting her use of hashtags, the audience with whom Jane connects with is much smaller. While this decision affords her a more intimate community of followers, it also limits the degree of digital activism in which she engages.

Because of the ambiguity surrounding Jane’s rhetorical literacy and overall level of experiential access to technology, it is difficult to assess the degree to which her blog functions transformatively in terms of Banks’s definition of the term. When asked if she considers herself to be an activist in her digital interview, she responded that “[she] likes to think [she] is,” although she does not consider herself to be on the same level as her best friend, Raven. Due to her limited hashtagged posts and small base of 98 followers, her blog does not appear to form a large coalitional politic that challenges broader social, political, or systems of oppression. However, much in the same way that Lacey’s blog does, Jane’s blog is personally transformative for her as an individual because it provides a way for her to connect with other bloggers who promote activist agendas. She uses her blog to educated herself about a variety of social issues as well as to connect with other bloggers who share marginalized identities and interests.

**Digital Literacy and Access in Topic Driven Blogs**

*Healthy4life: Jamie’s Topic-Driven Blog.* Of all the participants in this study, Jamie has the most well-developed overall digital literacy skills and access to computer technology. Her
functional literacy skills are excellent, as she uses her smartphone and laptop to compose and reblog posts that incorporate text and images. She also uses these digital composition skills on Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube. She interacts with other bloggers regularly and encourages viewers of her blog to message her about any content they may find interesting. In addition to using her blog as a tool to personally communicate with others, she uses it to “share information and enthusiasm for a healthy, happy life” with a broad audience of bloggers. These strong functional literacy skills also contribute to her understanding of computer technology as cultural artifacts subject to the power dynamics of identity politics.

Although Jamie’s philosophical position on computer technology is not obvious from her reblogs or personal observations, both her functional and critical literacy skills are essentially social. Based on her interaction with other bloggers in the notes section of many of her posts, she understands that her personal computer and smartphone are far more than just tools; rather, they are a means for her to interact with a community of followers to exchange knowledge about a specific topic and to form community. For example, in an original text-based post, Jamie reaches out to other bloggers and inquires as to whether they would be interested in her creating a series of podcasts about food science. After several bloggers publicly showed interest in this idea in the notes section of the post, Jamie attempted to create the podcast. However, in a follow-up post to the original, she explained that she was experiencing technical difficulty converting an m4A file into a mp3 file that could be uploaded to iTunes and asked for suggestions about how to fix the problem. One follower offered a solution, and Jamie herself offers her own ideas about yet another possible solution for the issue. This exchange illustrates one way that “rhetorical production” is socially situated within the context of a networked digital ecology (Nicotra 273). Knowledge production in this ecology is nonlinear, and the process is a “collective, recursive
The process of invention” where individuals contribute information to the established network (273). Although I did not find this particular type of collective problem solving about technology anywhere else in my data, other bloggers such as Raven often engage in conversations with other bloggers in the notes sections of their posts.

The success of the extensive network that Jamie’s blog facilitates can largely be attributed to Jamie’s rhetorical literacy skills. When asked if she had any experience with computer programming or coding in her digital interview, Jamie responded, “Yes, very familiar with HTML, CSS, etc. I used to design websites back in middle school and high school, so I had taught myself basics but I'm not sure how much I remember now if I had to start from scratch. I can easily modify existing codes now, such as tumblr themes.” Due to her knowledge of HTML and CSS, Jamie modifies her blog’s theme and has done so frequently. She has also edited its description, title, and appearance. Jamie’s rhetorical literacy skills further enhance her ability to form personal connections with her followers, as she has created a “queue running” of content to post to her blog every day, even if she herself is not online. Her rhetorical savvy and constant digital presence has allowed her to amass a following of 46,710 bloggers, the largest of any of the participants in this study.

Jamie’s strong digital literacy skills translate into high levels of material, functional, critical, and experiential access. Her basic material access allows her to use at least two different types of digital technology (desktop and smartphone) to compose her blog in ways that connect her with other bloggers. This functional access to computer technology provides personal meaning for her as an individual and underscores her experiential access. Jamie finds part of her personal fulfillment with technology by using her blog to promote awareness for various social
and political issues that affect her as a woman studying to become a STEM professional. She uses hashtags to “save or find [content] again later” or to “tag things others might want to search for on [her] blog, especially if [she] [finds] it really interesting or helpful.” However, when asked if she considers herself to be an activist in her digital interview, she responded to the question in this way:

No. I keep up with news and politics and although I have opinions I am not an activist. I will share my opinions, but I won't "fight" for a cause, because I am not that interested in politics, etc. If there is misinformation I may step in to correct it, but otherwise no.

Although she uses computer technology to spread awareness about social and political issues that are meaningful to her, this usage does not fit with how she personally defines activism. Jamie’s ability to be able to use technology in ways that allow her to “keep up with news and politics,” and yet also not to allow this technology usage to determine an identity position in a way that would feel disingenuous to her highlights her critical access to technology.

Because Jamie does not see herself as an activist, it is difficult to determine whether her blog functions transformatively. The purpose of her blog is “to promote and motivate a healthy lifestyle,” rather than to challenge the overarching social, political, and economic systems around body image or that structure and are structured by technology. However, while she may not be “fighting for a cause” per se, she is definitely a part of “technologies and the networks of power” that determine how and why computer technology is used in cyberspace (Banks 45). She has an important influence over a large number of bloggers and has the ability to interact with them outside of the Tumblr blogsphere through her familiarity with other digital technologies and

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87 In a recent post, Jamie mentions that she considers herself to be a “food scientist” and that she would like to become a professor in the future.
other social media platforms. This combination of digital literacy and access affords Jamie the option of using her blog in ways that are even more transformative in the future if she so desires.

**Digital Literacy, Access, and the Tumblr Microblogging Platform.** In this chapter, I addressed the ways the participants in this study use their access to technology and their digital literacy skills to both challenge and reinforce the social and political systems that structure and are structured by the Tumblr microblogging platform. In many ways, the participants successfully use their blogs to “critique, resist, design, and change” the networks that underpin Tumblr “in ways that are relevant to their lives and needs” (Banks 41). All the participants use the platform to educate themselves about stigmatized social issues or other personal interests, and two-thirds of the women in this study use the platform to find community and to interact with likeminded individuals. Thus, the participants are members of networks that circulate information that is “relevant to their lives and needs” and some of this information critiques or resists the status quo in terms of gender, race, and ability politics. However, these networks are neither politically neutral nor disembodied. They are created by individuals, including the participants in this study, with differing digital literacies and access to technology. These discrepancies have a strong correlation with the various identity positions that technology users hold in terms of race, class, gender, and level of education.

In order for the Tumblr microblogging platform to be a truly transformative digital technology that assists in political coalition building, more of the female bloggers who use it must gain important rhetorical literacy skills and gain experiential access to it. Tumblr is an ideal social media platform for this type of coalition building because it has the potential to be transgressive at the user practice level. These skills allow bloggers to increase their virtual networks and the navigability of their individual blogs. While Tumblr provides helpful links to
websites providing information about computer programming and coding languages on its tech support pages, this information may be intimidating for women and other groups who have been marginalized by the digital technology industry. By using the preconfigured templates provided by Tumblr, bloggers reinforce the status quo of the composition choices presented to them by large media conglomerates such as Yahoo! who produce computer technologies for profit.

Although all the participants have had at least some experience with higher education, four of the six women have had little to no experience with computer programming languages such as HTML or CSS. This lack of knowledge directly translates into limited rhetorical literacy and a lack of experiential access to digital technology. Perhaps one reason for the rhetorical and experiential limitations of these four participants and other female bloggers like them lies with what Jessica Enoch and Jean Bessette term “the culture of code” (652). As Enoch and Bessette note, this culture or the classes, seminars, and conferences where technology users can learn computer coding languages “is likely to be off-putting to women at best and discriminatory at worst” (652-653). Further, English undergraduate and graduate students often do not have the option to complete classes in computer languages as part of their course of study in English Studies. While Raven had the opportunity to learn some code in a past class she took, her experience is out of the ordinary for the women who majored in English that participated in this study. Neither Lacey nor Lucy have any experience with computer languages or computer coding. Rose, who majored in Communications, also does not have any experience using HTML or CSS.

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88 Yahoo! Inc. has owned Tumblr since 2013. See Marissa Mayer’s 2013 article, “Tumblr + Yahoo! – It’s Officially Official.”
89 See the blog posts of scholars such as Miriam Posner, Bethany Nowviskie, and Stephen Ramsey for more information regarding this topic as it pertains to the study of the digital humanities as a whole.
When microbloggers like the participants have a coding background, they can exercise far more agency in terms of their digital self-representation. They can make their blogs easier to navigate and more readily searchable. These two aspects of the curation process directly relate to the findability of a microblog, an important aspect of gaining followers on Tumblr. The larger the number of followers a blogger has, the more influence across the platform they exercise. For example, Jamie, the microblogger with the largest following of 46,710 bloggers also has the most comprehensive sense of digital literacy and access to technology. Microblogs like Jamie’s form networks and as Nicotra notes, “A network’s success depends on having a critical mass of users to both create and upload information and to interact with it (such interactions may include operations like liking and commenting)” (265). However, these networks are neither neutral nor disembodied. They are shaped by the degree of digital literacy a blogger exercises and how much access to digital technology she has. Cultural filters also dictate much of the content that circulates across these networks.
CHAPTER 5: THE CONCLUSION OF “THE POLITICS OF BLOGGING”

“One of the great hopes for the internet was that it would serve as the great equalizer. My research into youth culture and social media – alongside findings of other researchers – has made it obvious that the color-blind and disembodied social world that the internet was supposed to make possible has not materialized. And this unfortunate reality – the reality of racial tensions and discrimination that long predates the rise of digital media – often seems to escape our public attention.” (boyd, It’s Complicated 23)

I begin the conclusion with an epilogue from danah boyd’s book length project, It’s Complicated: the social lives of networked teens. In this work, boyd explores the networked publics of American teenagers and argues that the internet ultimately recreates and magnifies many of the social structures that exist outside of cyberspace (24). While social media platforms such as Tumblr or Facebook may have changed how individuals form community, these communities are not immune to the rampant racism, classism, sexism, and homophobia that we find in non-networked publics.

In many ways, the findings of this dissertation confirm boyd’s theory of networked publics. Within the Tumblr blogsphere, the participants in this study use images as texts in complex ways that are both visible and invisible to their community of followers. Their curation practices call into question traditional metaphors that conceptualize writing as a linear, text-based practice. This change in how we imagine writing is important because it accounts for the performative aspects of the composition process. The participants’ digital literacy skills and

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90 Boyd defines networked publics as the “publics that are restructured by networked technologies.” These technologies are “(1) the space constructed through networked technologies and (2) the imagined community that emerges as a result of the intersection of people, technology, and practice” (8).

91 These are just a few of the systemic social evils that manifest themselves within online communities.
access to computer technology are gendered in ways that affect the rhetorical strategies they use to represent their identities online. While some of these strategies challenge the status quo, others reinscribe it through the participants' use of precomposed blog templates.

The primary goal of this dissertation has been to study the relationship between the participants' digital literacy practices, identities, and access to computer technology. Tumblr, as a microblogging platform, provides the participants with a variety of composition choices, and these choices are dictated by software updates that occur frequently. Such updates provide the women with different affordances and limitations. boyd explains that “the particular properties or characteristics of an environment can be understood as affordances because they make possible – and, in some cases, are used to encourage – certain types of practices” (10). boyd further contends that “understanding the affordances of a particular technology or space is important because it sheds light on what people can leverage or resist in achieving their goals” (10-11).

While Tumblr provides the participants with the affordances of multimodal composition as well as a way to form online communities, it presents limitations in terms of identity self-representation, rhetorical literacy, and experiential access to technology. However, these affordances and limitations do not necessarily predict how the participants form communities within the Tumblr blogsphere.

When asked how they made decisions about which blogs to follow, one of the primary means of forming virtual communities on Tumblr, the participants' responses varied. Although I have explored these responses extensively in Chapters 3-4, I revisit them here as I consider how the personal interests of the participants affect their curation practices in terms of community formation, regardless of blog genre. In her digital interview, Lucy explains that she often follows blogs that relate in some way to her research as a scholar of young adult literature. Rose, the
other participant who keeps a personal blog, tends to follow blogs "that post comedic content, visually appealing images, & [Sic] positive information.” Rose also notes that her favorite blogs contain spiritual content, and her reblogs often reflect what she terms “an exploratory phase” in her personal spirituality.

Individual interests also influence the participants who keep filter-style blogs. Lacey remarks that she “[tends] to follow people who like the same fandoms/ships/character [that] [she] [does].” This decision in her curation process is not surprising because she considers her filter-style “tumblr” to be “a general fandom blog.” In much the same way as Lacey, Raven also follows “blogs on a specific topic, like a blog about sloths or Lord of the Rings, so [she] [can] add that content to [her] feed.” She goes on to explain that at “Other times, if someone follows [her], [she] will go check their blog to see if [she] [likes] it. If [she] [does,] [she] will almost always follow back. If [she] [is] reading a great fanfic and the author has a tumblr, [she] will sometimes subscribe to their blog to keep up with previews or updates for what they're writing.” Despite her interest in various fandoms and fandom culture, Raven’s “follow content is constantly in flux as [she] [brings] new identities and interests to [her] feed.” She follows friends she’s made “either in real life, at concerts and stuff, or online.” Like Raven, Jane follows other bloggers with whom she seems to share “common [interests].” However, she also admits that she “honestly [can’t] tell you what exactly [her] reasons are [for following certain bloggers].” In many instances, her reasoning is simple: “If someone follows [her, she will] go check out their blog and if [she] [likes] what [she] [sees,] [she] will follow.” Although she cannot always articulate them, her personal preferences dictate many of the choices that she makes while blogging.
Jamie’s interests also influence the choices that she makes while curating her topic-driven blog. When deciding to follow other blogs, her decisions are “based on whether [she] [likes] someone's blog and their posts. If [she] [likes] the majority of the posts they have on their blog, [she’ll] follow them.” Unlike the other participants, Jamie says that she’s “more likely to follow back blogs who are following [her] than seek out new blogs to follow. [She] also [unfollows] blogs that have been inactive for over a month.” Jamie’s ability to be so discriminate reflects her large following of 46,710 bloggers, of which she has amassed due to her rhetorical literacy skills and experiential access to technology.

Based on these responses to their digital interviews, the participants’ individual interests influence the context of the rhetorical situations of their personal, filter-style, and topic specific blogs. In one sense, the participants’ ability to form Tumblr communities around intersectional interests and individual identity signifiers has the potential to be personally and politically transformative for them. Tumblr bloggers with marginalized interests and/or identities, such as Lacey, Raven, Jane, and Lucy, find safety and a sense of community within the Tumblr blogsphere. The anonymity of the platform allows them to represent, share, and discuss aspects of their identities that they may not otherwise feel comfortable exploring outside of cyberspace. Because the participants can connect with other bloggers who are marginalized by dominant power structures in similar ways, the possibility for extensive political coalition building exists on Tumblr. However, despite this affordance, the platform presents limitations that impede communicating across difference.

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92 According to Vivian M. May, intersectionality can best be understood as an epistemological approach that “examines the politics of everyday life” (157). These politics include “the lived experiences of privilege and oppression, the implications and structures of marginalization, and the phenomenological and political meanings of identity” (157).
Because algorithms suggest blogs for users to follow based on the content that they already follow, the platform can easily create filter bubbles\(^9\) or “ideological segregation by automatically recommending content an individual is likely to agree with” (Flaxmon, Goel, and Rao 299). While blog recommendations from Tumblr may unite bloggers like the participants with other likeminded individuals, these suggestions also tend to be homogenous in terms of blog genre and content. While Raven actively seeks “to bring new identities and interests to [her] feed,” the other participants in this study rely primarily on their personal beliefs and interests to form community through their curation practices. Though Tumblr has the potential to be an intellectually and socially transgressive space, and though my initial response to this digital space was to read it as such, my findings indicate that Tumblr needs more effective ways of communicating across difference in its microblogging platform to create a truly transformative politic.

Due to the ephemeral nature of social media and the small sample size of this study, this project does not attempt to make sweeping generalizations regarding the roles identity, digital literacy, and access to computer technology play across different social media platforms in terms of filter bubbles or otherwise. Although Tumblr may not exist forever as a microblogging platform, the social dynamics that manifest on it will inevitably persist as digital technologies continue to evolve over time (boyd 5). While genres and modes of composition may change in the future, digital composers will still need to find productive ways to transcend alterity. As a result, studying the ways women form community using social media should continue to be an ongoing pursuit by multimodal composition scholars.

\(^9\) See Eli Pariser’s *The Filter Bubble: What the Internet is Hiding from You*
As I explained in Chapter 1, after recruiting participants, analyzing their blogs, and reading the responses to their digital interviews, I assert that many of the identity characteristics (race, class, gender, sexual identification, ability status, etc.) that make communicating across difference difficult in communities outside of cyberspace remain the same within it. The kinds of mainstream communication practices that engage identity politics in face to face communication are still present within digital spaces. Because the designers of technology largely belong to dominant power structures, technological design matters when forming digital communities. However, despite the complications associated with the design of social media platforms, I believe that the women centered communities found within the Tumblr blogsphere are personally transformative for the participants themselves and highlight the intersectional coalition building possibilities of the platform.

In the following sections of this chapter, I discuss some of the major political implications of this study and the possibilities for future coalition building between people who identify with marginalized groups. My discussion begins with a synopsis of the findings of this project as they relate to the politics of the participants themselves. Next, I briefly explore the implications of this study for the field of digital writing research at large, particularly in terms of composition pedagogy. To engage this conversation, I discuss danah boyd’s critique of the terms “digital native” and “digital immigrant” to stress the importance rhetoric and composition teachers play in providing students the digital literacy skills necessary to engage in transformative access to technology as defined by Banks. I conclude by providing a future research agenda that emphasizes the importance of collaborative research methods, taking the identities of principal investigators into account.
**Findings.** Based on my analysis of study participants’ blogs, their corresponding genres, and their digital interviews, the findings of this dissertation imply that multimodal composition on the microblogging and social networking website Tumblr has the potential to both challenge and reinforce the status quo in terms of women’s self-representation, digital literacy, and access to digital technology. Through multimodal composition practices that engage Rettberg’s theory of digital self-representation, all the participants in this study use images and written text to represent their identities in complicated ways that have evolved over time. The participants’ high levels of digital literacy and access to computer technology allow them to connect with other female bloggers, and their curation practices often trouble dominant power structures. However, the creation and reblog content of these participants often center on a personal interest or individual identity characteristics. Hence, for various Tumblr communities to form a transformative politic, more productive ways of communicating across difference is necessary.

The findings of this study are not bound to cyberspace. All six participants in this study are registered voters. Of the six women, Raven and Lacey identify as independents, although both expressed that they have democratic or green party leanings. Rose and Jane are not party affiliated, and Jamie simply stated that she is registered to vote. Lucy is the only participant who is a registered democrat. All six participants consider themselves to be politically active at the national level, while five of the six women also consider themselves to be politically active at both the local and state levels.

Though I discussed the participants’ activist identities at length in Chapter 4 to explore how their blogs might function in politically transformative ways, I revisit their digital interview responses about activism to analyze their rationales for engaging in political discourse while blogging. Two-thirds of the women who participated in this study identify as activists. Lucy
considers herself to be a body positive activist because she “has written for various blogs on issues of feminism, and [her] scholarly work deals with body image in the media.” When asked if she considers herself to be an activist, Jane responded to the question by remarking,

I like to think I am. I'm nowhere near my best friend as far as that goes but I am passionate about finding equality for the disabled community. My mother has a chronic pain disorder and both she and my brother are probably living with undiagnosed autism like I was. We all three have hallmark symptoms and behaviors they're just all on different parts of the spectrum. So I spend a lot of time trying to inject visibility where I can. Particularly in my own fandoms but also just wherever anyone will listen.

When asked the same question on her digital interview, Raven responded with a resounding “Yes.” She explains that she not only [advocates] for disability rights - both by loudly proclaiming [her] own identity and posting things related to [her] community - but [she also posts] about intersecting concerns as well. [She] also [does her] best to respect other communities that [she comes] across on tumblr, because [she considers] that another form of activism. Realistically, [she sees] activism as promoting respect for other people, and if [she] can do that by tagging certain types of images or blogging supportive messages.. why not?

Although Lacey does not identify as strongly with an activist identity as Lucy, Jane, or Raven do, she still considers herself to be a member of the activist community. Although she is “not highly involved [with activism outside of Tumblr] … [she does] get involved with online activism.”

In contrast to Lucy, Jane, Raven, and Lacey, Rose and Jamie do not consider themselves to be activists. Rose explained her feelings regarding activism this way:
I believe I identify with very progressive ideas, however, I don't consider myself to be an activist because I am not physically out in the world effecting change. Although I do try to generate conversation that perpetuate ideas & views in regard to advocacy.

Jamie remarked that while she is willing to “share her opinions,” she “won’t ‘fight’ for a cause because [she] is not that interested in politics.” However, she does explain that she is willing to “step in to correct” any misinformation that she might see within the Tumblr blogsphere or elsewhere. Both women reblog posts that pertain to gender inequality and creating a just, equitable society.

The data collected from this study demonstrates that most of the participants reblog politically charged posts while blogging on Tumblr, even though Rose and Jamie do not personally identify as activists. These engagements, regardless of whether Rose and Jamie self-identify as activists, are particularly pertinent to the concept of the cultural filter. Cultural filters\(^{94}\), as defined by Rettberg, shape the political discourse the participants present on their blogs. Because cultural filters subtly sift expression, some bloggers who do not identify as activists, such as Rose and Jamie, may find themselves subconsciously engaging in online activism to heighten their digital ethos within a specific blogging community. On the other hand, these women may only feel comfortable asserting certain thoughts, feelings, and beliefs within the Tumblr blogsphere.

Collective ideas about what constitutes the content of personal or diary-style blogs, filter blogs, and topic-driven blogs affect the choices bloggers such as Rose and Jamie make about how to represent their identities online. The results of this study suggest that the curation practices of the participants do not always correspond directly with the perceptions they have of

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\(^{94}\) I discuss the way cultural filters affect the participants’ blogs in detail in chapter 3 of this study.
themselves while blogging. Within the constructed Tumblr blogsphere, activism is often championed, and all the participants, including Rose and Jamie, reblog posts that challenge prevalent ideologies and social norms both visually and linguistically. While the Tumblr microblogging platform is certainly not free from classism, sexism, ableism, or homophobia, it has the potential to operate as one of the “interconnected sites of resistance” that political theorist Cathy J. Cohen conceptualized back in 1997 when she began to reimagine the politics of the marginalized (22, 47).

Although Cohen would not have been writing about Tumblr as a digital platform during the late 1990s, her argument about transformational spaces aligns with my assessment of the Tumblr blogsphere because Tumblr “[creates] a space in opposition to dominant norms” in terms of identity politics, it already operates as “a space where transformational political work can begin” (Cohen 22). The women in this study often follow and form relationships with other women who have intersectional identities, Tumblr is a space where marginalizations can be reclaimed for the participants. This celebration of intersectionality is one way that the platform functions in politically transformative ways in the participants' public and private lives. Due to the searchability of hashtags and the ability to follow multiple blogs, Tumblr is a space “where one’s relation to power, and not some homogenized identity, is privileged in determining one’s political comrades” (Cohen 22). For example, although Raven and Lacey are marginalized in more than one aspect of their identities (gender identity, sexual identification, and ability) their white ethnic backgrounds afford them a tremendous amount of privilege inside and outside the Tumblr blogsphere. Despite this privilege, both women frequently reblog posts in support of anti-racist ideals and follow blogs for and by people of color. By aligning themselves with women who are marginalized in both similar and dissimilar ways than themselves, these
participants gain “an understanding of the ways in which power informs and constitutes privileged and marginalized subjects” alike (Cohen 21-22). Such coalition building “allows us not only to privilege the specific lived experience of distinct communities, but also to search for those interconnected sites of resistance from which we can wage broader political struggles” (47). Because it already provides such an opportunity, the next step in using the Tumblr platform to form such a transformative politic is to theorize ways for bloggers like the participants in this study to communicate across alterity or the irreducible difference that structures so many of their individual beliefs and personal preferences.

Much like Cohen when she does not provide specifics “when trying to describe how we move concretely toward a transformational coalition politics among marginalized subjects,” I do not offer any concrete suggestions as to how we begin to bridge the alterity that so deeply divides us inside and outside of cyberspace in the chapters that comprise this dissertation project (482). As an educator, I have a vested interest in the ideological construct that students’ digital literacy and access to digital technology allow us to communicate across difference to create a more equitable future. However, I realize that even comprehensive digital literacy and transformative access to technology in and of themselves will not bridge alterity. As a scholar and teacher, the best I can do is to offer this project as a means of continuing a burgeoning conversation regarding the ways in which digital literacy and access to computer technology affect how women form community and represent their identities online.

**Study Implications.** The case studies included in this dissertation provide important implications for rhetoric and composition studies, especially as the broad goals of the field relate to digital writing research and composition pedagogy. As danah boyd notes, most scholars have rejected the idea that teens or young millennials are “digital natives” or “automatically
understand new [computer] technologies,” while older adults are “digital immigrants,” inherently “less knowledgeable” and “less capable of developing [computer literacies]” (196, 176). In addition to the racist implications of these terms⁹⁶, they also suggest that age predetermines a high level of digital literacy and an increased degree of access to computer technologies.

While the participants in this study exercised high overall degrees of digital literacy and access to computer technology, their development of these digital literacies might be attributed to their socioeconomic class and educational backgrounds rather than monolithically to their ages. Further, the challenges many of them experience in gaining experiential access to technology and the rhetorical literacy that corresponds with it have inevitably been shaped by their identities as women, a point that referring to them as “digital natives” ignores. The lived experiences of the participants as women influence how they represent themselves on their blogs, and this representation in turn categorizes each blog as being a part of a personal/diary style, filter-style, or topic specific blogging community. While material access to these communities provides a space in which women can learn about different intersectional social issues, simply participating in them does not teach bloggers in general the computer coding skills necessary for women to create their own transformative virtual politic as defined by Banks.

Because the general public continues to embrace “digital natives” and “digital immigrants” as terms for understanding engagement with computer technology, rhetoric and composition teachers have a responsibility to fully engage with the use and development of computer technologies both inside and outside of the classroom (boyd 196). Because English

⁹⁵ boyd explains that it is difficult to determine where the terms “digital native” and “digital immigrant” originated (239). For more information regarding the origins of these concepts, see John Perry Barlow’s “Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace,” Dough Rushkoff’s Playing the Future: What We Can Learn from Digital Kids, and Marc Prensky’s “Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants Part 1.”
⁹⁶ Anthropologist Genevieve Bell and computer scientist Paul Dourish provide a racialized critique of the concept of digital natives and digital immigrants in their 2011 monograph, Divining a Digital Future: Mess and Mythology in Ubiquitous Computing.
educators are often not included in designing educational software or creating technology policy, students often do not understand computer technology in critical, contextual or historical terms (Selber 13). To address this issue, Stuart Selber urges writing teachers to adopt what he terms a “postcritical” stance toward technology” (8). This position includes computer literacy within English studies curricula and recognizes that no theory or practice should be beyond critical critique or assessment. Adopting this critical position requires teachers and students to “be mindful of the ways in which they can unwittingly promote inequitable and counterproductive technological practices,” as technology is not “a self-determining agent” (8). A postcritical stance recognizes the inability of computer technology to create transformative educational and political change. Rather, it recognizes computer technology as merely one element within a complex matrix of social factors (8).

**Study Limitations.** A major limitation of this study was my inability to directly quote the alphabetic text and visual images included on the participants’ blogs. Because of this constraint, I was unable to engage in micro-level discourse analysis that accounts for the exact language and images the women used when creating blog posts or hashtagging reblogged posts. To protect the privacy and anonymity of the participants, I had to describe the ways the women critiqued gender norms, racism, ability status, and religious dogma rather than including the alphabetic and image-based texts themselves.

Additionally, another major limitation of the study pertained to the questions included in the digital interview. A few of the questions were vague, particularly as they related to the concept of political activism. Although I did ask participants to comment on the degree of their involvement in the political process and whether they identified with activist identities, I did not specifically define activism in the digital interview I distributed. A question that asked
participants to define activism would have been pertinent to my analysis. Further, additional questions that related to digital literacies and access to technology could have been included. A question that asked participants to explain whether they felt their blogs made an impact on the Tumblr blogsphere and whether this impact accurately reflected their digital literacy skills and access to computer technology would have been useful in assessing the goals of this study. It would have also been useful to ask the participants to address how keeping a personal blog may serve a political purpose even if the goal of the blog is not to promote political activism.

**Future Research.** Although this project provides insight into how identity, digital literacy, and access to computer technology affect women’s self-representation within various microblogging communities, considerable limitations exist. As mentioned in Chapter 1, the most serious limitation of this study is the lack of racial and class diversity in my participant pool. Although my participants are very diverse in terms of sexual identity and ability, all of them are white and belong to the middle class. Many of them are also graduate students themselves. This outcome may have to do with other Tumblr bloggers’ unfamiliarity with academic research practices, negative experiences with researchers in the past, or my inability to compensate participants for their participation in the study.

My identity as a white, cisgender, heterosexual, thin, able-bodied middle-class academic undoubtedly influenced the participants who responded to my inquiries. Future studies that explore women’s communities on Tumblr should include not only a more diverse pool of participants, but also of primary investigators, particularly in terms of race and class. Future studies may benefit from collaborative research methodologies that emphasize the importance of creating more inclusive academic partnerships between participants and primary investigators.
Researchers might form such relationships with participants by ensuring that the privacy of participants is protected and that data is always triangulated.

**Conclusion.** Despite the limitations of the project, this study provides an in-depth analysis of the ways these participants engage different rhetorical appeals to form community on a microblogging platform. These composition choices are affected by both identity and access to technology, highlighting some of the reasons why certain women may choose to form relationships with others online. This dissertation anticipates rising questions regarding the complicated relationship between identity and the curation process on social media platforms. While scholars such as Krista Kennedy have outlined the stages of the curation process, little critical attention has been paid to the ways the stages of this process take place on microblogging platforms. My hope is that this work will continue a conversation started by James Porter, Jonathon Alexander, Cynthia Selfe, Jill Walker Rettberg, and Adam J. Banks to highlight the importance of and need for continued community among women.
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APPENDIX A

Digital Interview Questions

- How old are you?
- Please describe in detail the way(s) in which you identify in terms of gender.
- Please describe in detail the way(s) that you ethnically or culturally identify.
- Please describe in detail the way(s) that you sexually identify.
- Please describe your educational background in detail.
- In what ways do you earn your living?
- What are your religious/spiritual practices?
- Are you a registered voter? Please explain your answer.
- How would you describe your thoughts about your body?
- What other forms of social media do you use besides tumblr? Please circle all that apply.
  Also, please feel free to add any other form of social media you might use or engage with if it is not listed below. (Facebook) (Twitter) (Instagram) (Pinterest) (Snapchat) (Foursquare) (YouTube) (Vimeo) (Yik Yak)

- How long have you kept your tumblr blog?
- How frequently do you update your tumblr blog?
- Why do you choose to keep a tumblr blog?
- Does your tumblr blog serve a specific purpose? If so, please explain your answer.
• How many tumblr blogs do you follow? Please describe how you are making choices about who to follow and for what reasons.

• How many bloggers follow you on tumblr?

• How do you represent yourself on your tumblr blog? Please circle all choices that may apply below. Please add any other way that you may represent yourself on your tumblr blog if the option is not listed below. (Visually- images, gifs, memes) (Textually-written narrative) (Quantitatively- Numerical results from a lifelog, personal map, productivity record, activity tracker, or diet/fitness plan)

• What type of technology do you use to create a blog post? Please circle all choices that may apply. Please add any other technologies that you may use if the option is not listed below. (PC) (MAC) (Desktop) (laptop) (smart phone) (tablet)

• Do you have any experience with computer programming or coding? If so, please explain your answer.

• How do you make decisions about what to post or not post on your blog? How do you make decisions about how to hastag the posts on your blog?

• At what levels do you consider yourself to be politically active? Please circle all choices that may apply. Please add any additional information that you think might be pertinent to this question. (local) (state) (national)

• What response has your blog received? Please explain your answer.

• Do you consider yourself to be an activist? Please explain your answer.
• Do you feel more comfortable expressing yourself on your tumblr blog than you would when you aren’t online? Why or why not? Please explain your answer.

• Do you represent yourself differently on your tumblr blog than you do in your day-to-day offline life? Why or why not? How so? Please explain your answer.
APPENDIX B

June 3, 2016

Leah DiNatale
Dept of English
College of Arts and Sciences
Box 870244


Dear Ms. DiNatale:

The University of Alabama Institutional Review Board has granted approval for your proposed research.

Your application has been given expedited approval according to 45 CFR part 46. Approval has been given under expedited review category 7 as outlined below:

7. Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

Your application will expire on June 2, 2017. If your research will continue beyond this date, please complete the relevant portions of the IRB Renewal Application. If you wish to modify the application, please complete the Modification of an Approved Protocol Form. Changes in this study cannot be initiated without IRB approval, except when necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to participants. When the study closes, please complete the Request for Study Closure Form.

Please use reproductions of the IRB approved stamped consent forms to obtain consent from your participants.

Should you need to submit any further correspondence regarding this proposal, please include the above application number.

Good luck with your research.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

Stuart Uslan, Ph.D.
Chair, Non-Medical IRB
The University of Alabama
You are being asked to be in a research study. This study is called “The Politics of Blogging: Identity, Access, and Composition.” This study is being done by Leah DiNatale. She is a PhD candidate in the Composition, Rhetoric, and English Studies Program at the University of Alabama. Leah DiNatale is not receiving any additional compensation for this study.

What is this study about?
This project focuses on analyzing how female bloggers experience and interpret digital images. I am interested in analyzing the rhetorical choices they make when composing their blogs. I hope to analyze and identify both the linguistic and visual markers women use to challenge the sociocultural foundations of gender, racial, and sexual oppression on the microblogging platform and social networking website, Tumblr.

Why is this study important—What good will the results do?
I hope to identify and then analyze the complex relationship between literacy, identity, and multimodal composition. Historically, the study of rhetoric has explored the linguistic means by which verbal arguments affect change in the male-dominated public sphere. Consequently, the dynamic ways in which young women compose with images and other modes of composition in cyberspace has only just begun to be explored. This study hopes to provide more knowledge to this aspect of digital writing research.

Why have I been asked to take part in this study?
You responded to an invitation made to you on the microblogging platform, Tumblr. You told us that you self-identify as a female and that you are between the ages of 18-35. You have maintained a Tumblr blog for at least one year. You gave us contact information, including a current email address.

How many other people will be in this study?
The investigator hopes to distribute a digital interview to 3-6 female participants within the next three months.

What will I be asked to do in this study?
If you agree to be in this study, Leah DiNatale will analyze your public blog posts from 2015—2016. She will evaluate the rhetorical strategies you used to create your blog by closely examining the content (text, still images, and videos, etc.) that you posted to it. She will then distribute a digital interview to you via email that asks you detailed questions about the content of this public blog and the composition practices you used to create it. This digital interview consists of 25 questions and should take you approximately one hour to complete. Finally, she will compare and contrast your
responses to the digital interview questions with the actual content of your blog. You will not be video or audio recorded at any point during this study.

**How much time will I spend being in this study?**

Completing the digital interview should take between 45-60 minutes, depending on how much information about your experiences you choose to share.

**Will being in this study cost me anything?**

The only cost to you from this study is your time.

**Will I be compensated for being in this study?**

You will not receive any compensation for participating in this study.

**What are the risks (problems or dangers) from being in this study?**

The chief risk to you is that you may find the discussion of your experiences to be sad or stressful. You can control this possibility by not being in the study, by refusing to answer a particular question, or by not telling us things you find to be sad or stressful. We can recommend a counselor to you if you seem to be upset or depressed. Seeing the counselor would be at your own expense. We can also direct you to a counseling website that you may find helpful.

You may also experience a breach of confidentiality. The ways in which your privacy and confidentiality will be protected are detailed below.

**What are the benefits of being in this study?**

There are no direct benefits to you unless you find it pleasant or helpful to describe your experiences with blogging. You may also feel good about knowing that you have helped writing researchers learn more about women’s blogging practices.

**How will my confidentiality be protected?**

Participants will be given a pseudonym, and their real names and other identifying information will be removed from their writing and any other form of information gathered from this study. In any research generated from this study, they will only be referred to by a pseudonym. All information gathered during this study, including the written answers to the digital interview and any digitally reproduced visual or written information from the blog itself, will be stored on an encrypted hard drive. Only the co-principal investigators will have access to the study data. No pictures of the participants themselves or direct quotes from their blogs will be included in the study.

The only place where your name appears in connection with this study is on this informed consent form. The consent forms will be kept in a locked file drawer in the co-principal investigator’s office, which is locked when she is not there. We are not using a name-number list so there is no way to link a consent form to an interview. Although Leah DiNatale will write a dissertation and may publish research articles about this
study, you will only be identified by your pseudonym. No one will be able to recognize you.

**What are the alternatives to being in this study?**
The only alternative is not to participate.

**What are my rights as a participant?**
Being in this study is totally voluntary. It is your free choice. You may choose not to be in it at all. If you start the study, you can stop at any time. Not participating or stopping participation will have no effect on your relationships with the University of Alabama.

The University of Alabama Institutional Review Board is a committee that looks out for the ethical treatment of people in research studies. They may review the study records if they wish. This is to be sure that people in research studies are being treated fairly and that the study is being carried out as planned.

**Who do I call if I have questions or problems?**
If you have questions about this study right now, please ask them. If you have questions later on, please call Leah DiNatale at 912-220-0299 or contact Dr. Michelle Bachelor Robinson at 205-348-4177. If you have questions or complaints about your rights as a research participant, call Ms. Tanta Myles, the Research Compliance Officer of the University at 205-348-8461 or toll-free at 1-877-820-3066.

You may also ask questions, make a suggestion, or file complaints and concerns through the IRB Outreach Website at [http://osp.ua.edu/site/PRCO_Welcome.html](http://osp.ua.edu/site/PRCO_Welcome.html). After you participate, you are encouraged to complete the survey for research participants that is online there, or you may ask Leah DiNatale for a copy of it. You may also e-mail us at participantoutreach@bama.ua.edu.

I have read this consent form. I have had a chance to ask questions.

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