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New Ways of Seeing: Tumblr, Young People, and Mental Illness

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My research began with being frustrated. After working for several years as a teacher in adolescent inpatient psychiatric care, based in Melbourne, Australia, I started a research degree to explore mental health and social media. At the time, in 2013, much of what I had encountered about young people using social media to engage with issues of mental illness had focused exclusively on images of self-injury and suicidal ideation. These images, of course, can be distressing for parents and carers, so perhaps it is not surprising that they drew so much attention. But what I was reading seemed too simple and ignored young people's diverse experiences — including the often conflicting and complex feelings they had about their health — and the many different ways they used social media.

My fieldwork at a youth mental health service continued to demonstrate a disconnect between clinical and academic narratives about youth and the way these young people were actually *using* social media, particularly Tumblr, to make sense of their experiences and to form connections with other people. The stories they told me emphasised that making mental illness visible can include more than just self-injury images or explicit references to emotional distress, Instead, they expressed mental health concerns through, for example, sharing hashtags or reblogging humorous memes. In this essay, I advocate for alternative, more user-based approaches to understanding mental health and its circulation on social media. I focus on young people's use of Tumblr because of its popularity among my participants during this period. The platform's affordances offered them new forms of expression and, therefore, new ways of seeing for me, allowing me to shift my focus away from images of self-injury to consider the wider array of "visibilities" the platform indicated.

By "visibility," I mean more than just the visual images users share. Mental illness is made "visible" on Tumblr through images or videos but also through creating, sharing, and reblogging various kinds of posts, hashtags, emoticons and other symbols that reflect not only individual pain and distress but also community support and empathy. These visuals are less spectacular but equally important user practices. We also ignore how Tumblr itself affords authenticity to expressions and experiences of mental illness through *both* identified and

unidentified practices, including text- and image-based activities that mitigate emotional distress.

As examples of alternative approaches, I share two conceptual frames based on my work with young people: visibility as recognition and representation, and visibility as emotional authenticity and recovery. The first example explains how "chat" posts, memes and hashtags provide opportunities to make socially visible experiences of borderline personality disorder (BPD) that are otherwise hidden or misrecognized. The second example relies less on platform vernacular and more on how Tumblr provides a safe space for users to engage in emotionally authentic visual practices, even if reblogged images are not explicitly or directly related to mental illness (and therefore can remain inscrutable to outsiders). I found that users experiencing anxiety often affectively connect with images in therapeutic ways that do not directly refer to mental illness.

My findings demonstrate that the way in which young people use Tumblr to express their mental illness is far more complex than most researchers and practitioners have considered, and encourage us to think more broadly about how mental illness is made visible and circulated on social media. As researchers and practitioners, we need to understand how individual platforms work; we must more closely investigate text and platform-based communication networks rather than simply decontextualize individual images for analysis. By engaging with young people and the multiplicity of visual practices they use to share their experiences of mental illness and distress, we can consider how such expressions may, in fact, offer us important therapeutic insights and opportunities for greater care and understanding.

Tumblr and Visibility

Outside of Tumblr dashboards, what is often visible about mental illness in popular discourses is that which discriminates, alienates and marginalizes people experiencing it by adopting words like "crazy" or "schizo" that stigmatize ill-health or distress, or by depicting

horrific asylums or psychiatric wards. [1] Such popular references do little to illuminate what is habitually a less spectacular and more mundane and exhausting experience. As a result, much of the everyday work of being depressed, distressed or hearing voices remains publicly ignored or unappreciated. People living with mental illness must manage confusion and isolation, cope with boredom in clinic waiting rooms and under-funded services, and negotiate relationships with friends and family who may not "get it". Young people especially, face the persistent anxiety that comes with exposure to stigma and the uncertainty of how others see them.

During the years of my initial research in the early 2010s, the idea of Tumblr as a "dark space" circulated in psychology papers, clinical seminars, and media-panicked online news, further stigmatizing young people's experiences.[2] One question that continually emerged from this discourse — "Is Tumblr detrimental or beneficial for mental health?" — echoed earlier and contemporary debates about platforms and websites as utopian or dystopian, debates that generally amplified anxieties about media as only ever harmful or contagious.[3]

Researchers in the mid-2010s who explored social media, Tumblr, and mental health continued to largely concentrate these debates around the most visible affordances of the platform; their work was dominated by studies of images of self-injury, such as those depicting cutting or other gestures of pain and depression.[4] Such research reflected the

[1] In this essay, I use the word "mental illness" to capture emotional distress, mental disorders and psychopathology including and excluding clinical diagnoses. The term was preferred by participants in my research, but I equally acknowledge the important criticism of it (see, for example Jane Ussher, *The Madness of Women: Myth and Experience*, London: Routledge, 2011).

[2] See, for example, Alice Montague, Kandice Varcin, & Alexandra Parker, *Putting Technology into Practice: Evidence and Opinions on Integrating Technology with Youth Health Services* (Melbourne, Australia: Young and Well Cooperative Research Centre, 2014), 37 and, later, Nina Jacob, Rhiannon Evans, & Jonathan Scourfield, "The influence of online images on self-harm: A qualitative study of young people aged 16–24," *Journal of Adolescence* no. 60 (2017): 140–147.

[3] Natalie Hendry, Brady Robards, & Sonya Stanford, "Beyond Social Media Panics for 'At Risk' Youth," *Beyond the Risk Paradigm in Mental Health Policy and Practice,* eds Sonya Stanford, Elaine Sharland, Nina Heller, & Joanne Warner (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017): 135–154.

[4] Patricia Cavazos-Rehg, Melissa Krauss, Shaina Sowles, Sarah Connolly, Carlos Rosas, Meghana Bharadwaj, & Laura Bierut, "An Analysis of Depression, Self-harm, and Suicidal Ideation Content on Tumblr," *Crisis*, (2016): 1–9; Yukari Seko, & Stephen Lewis, "The Self-

assumption that this specific content was most distressing to users or that this content could only ever normalize or reinforce potentially harmful behaviors or feelings. Although these studies were motivated by sincere — and crucial — efforts to prevent and intervene in distress and mental illness, they did not adequately examine how these users engaged with the diverse, conflicting and often ambiguous content that circulates through Tumblr.

My own research working with Tumblr users during this period made clear that this methodological transference didn't fit; in the case of Tumblr in particular, such approaches did not address or appreciate the specific affordances of the platform or the many ways that users employ them for self-care and connection. The way posts concerning mental illness, emotional distress, and emotional relief circulate through Tumblr's images, hashtags, chat posts, and memes is complex and often ambiguous, and not conducive to simple content analysis. Such approaches do not create space to explore the way Tumblr users, especially young people, experience what circulates there.

My use of 'visibility' here also refers to how, in different ways, platforms make practices and people visible to others: to see and be seen. Unlike platforms such as Facebook or Instagram, Tumblr affords the visibility of shared *interests* (e.g. reblogging) more easily than the visibility of its *users*. Because users employ pseudonyms on Tumblr, they are able to control what is visible about them. They are also not required to provide information that would identify them, such as a photo of themselves or information about where they live, as a condition of their participation. This pseudonymity and control of visibility has important social and political implications; to be 'seen' is often associated with one's position or inclusion in a society or community, and how we interpret what we see has ramifications for how we live in the world.

Because users can better control their visibility on Tumblr, the platform provides a safer space for them to identify and explore emotions without feeling pressured or that they are burdensome to their friends or family. At the same time, Tumblr makes visible to us young people's "bedroom" experiences that might otherwise remain hidden or obscured. These are often interpreted by the public and by clinicians unfamiliar with the platform in ways that

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Harmed, Visualized, and Reblogged: Remaking of Self-Injury Narratives on Tumblr," *New Media & Society*, (2016): 1-9.

make it more difficult for people to seek support and empathy.[5] Given the stigmatization of mental illness, this is a significant concern, which is why it is so vital to better understand how young people use Tumblr.

Visibility as BPD Recognition and Representation

Self-injury (or self-harm) on social media is sometimes attributed to borderline personality disorder (BPD) traits in young people.[6] Yet in some of my early Tumblr research I found that self-injury content (including images of injuring practices) was often disconnected from other BPD content or, at least, I was unable to see a clear link between them. I discovered that, in fact, BPD is visible on Tumblr largely through hashtags, conversation ("chat") posts, or quote posts that represent users' social frustrations in their experience of BPD. At the same time, these posts establish expertise and authenticity for these users.

BPD is listed as a mental disorder in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, a classification system used by psychiatrists and psychologists to make decisions about how to diagnose, and then treat, an individual's psychiatric symptoms.[7] As one classification, BPD includes experiencing chronic feelings of emptiness, impulsivity, emotional distress, self-injury and suicidal ideation. People living with BPD experience an unstable sense of self which can often foster unstable interpersonal relationships, including difficulty coping with abandonment.[8] They may also engage in "splitting" as a way to avoid feeling hurt or rejected by others -- splitting refers to erratic thinking that shifts between

[5] danah boyd, Alice Marwick, Parry Aftab, & Maeve Koeltl, (2009), "The Conundrum of Visibility: Youth Safety and the Internet," *Journal of Children and Media,* 3 no. 4 (2009): 410–419.
[6] Stephen Lewis, & Alexis Arbuthnott, "Non-Suicidal Self-Injury: Characteristics, Functions, and Strategies," *Journal of College Student Psychotherapy* 26 no.3 (2012): 185–200.; Lily Feinn, "9 signs your friend has Borderline Personality Disorder," *Bustle* March 5, 2016, https://www.bustle.com/articles/142966-9-signs-your-friend-has-borderline-personality-disorder
[7] American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (5th Ed.)*, Washington: American Psychiatric Association, 2013.
[8] Jutta Stoffers, Birgit Völlm, Gerta Rücker, AntjeTimmer, Nick Huband, & Klaus Lieb, "Psychological Therapies for Borderline Personality Disorder," *Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews,* (2012): 8.

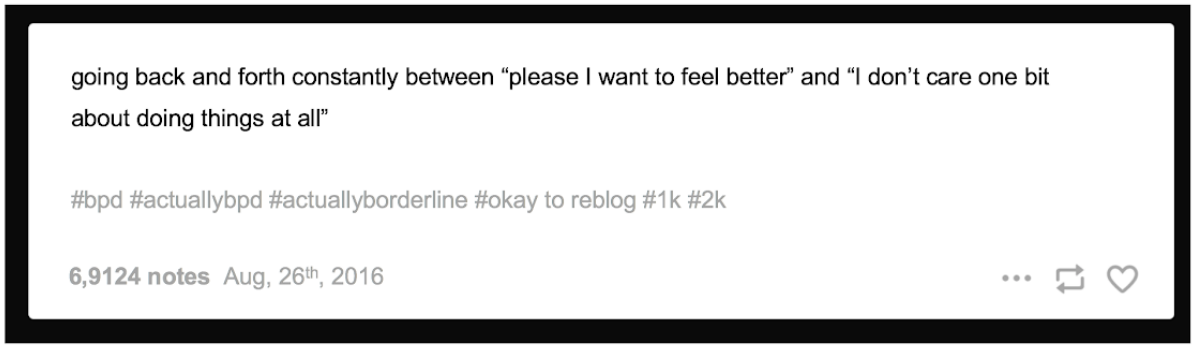
idealization and then devaluation of a person or oneself; it positions others, or oneself, as either good or bad, with no "grey area" in between.[9]

Unlike other mental disorders like depression, the legitimacy of BPD as a diagnosis is controversial and stigmatized, with BPD often perceived –even by mental health professionals-- as an individual character flaw (mostly of women), rather than something people experience as an illness or as a way for them to make sense of pain or trauma.[10] Critics argue that, as a diagnosis, BPD disempowers people because clinicians focus on patient classification rather than alleviating distress or addressing trauma. Others counter, however, that a diagnosis can relieve and reassure people, helping them to make sense of confusion or uncertainty.[11]

For many Tumblr users, legitimating the diagnosis — and their suffering — is very important. Tumblr users make BPD visible through common hashtags linked to posts, such as #bpd, #bpdproblems, #borderlinefeels and #tbpdfw ("that BPD feel when"). Other hashtags such as #actuallybpd or #actuallyborderline construct BPD as an authentic experience, distinguishing it from "just" being "difficult" or "attention-seeking." Tumblr users often capitalize or trademark illnesses or diagnoses around BPD as a humorous gesture towards authenticity, for example The Disorder™ and Borderline™. These practices connect users and allow them to curate shared knowledge, experiences and feelings. Hashtags channel posts, making them searchable and amplifying the value of the content beyond an individual Tumblr account.[12] BPD-tagged posts often refer to the feelings of living with trauma, dissociation and emotional instability. Through reblogging this hashtagged content, users recirculate things that resonate with their own experiences, thus collectively producing an emotionally and socially "authentic" sense of BPD. Even though these practices employ

[9] John Gunderson, "Borderline personality disorder," *The New England Journal of Medicine* 364 no. 21 (2011): 2037–2042.
[10] Pamela Bjorklund, "No Man's Land: Gender Bias and Social Constructivism in the Diagnosis of Borderline Personality Disorder," *Issues in Mental Health Nursing* 27 no.1 (2006): 3–23.
[11] Marie Crowe, "Personality Disorders: Illegitimate Subject Positions," *Nursing Inquiry* 15 no.3 (2008): 216–223.
[12] McCosker, Anthony, "Tagging Depression: Social Media and the Segmentation of Mental health," in *Digital Media: Transformations in Human Communication (2nd Ed., revised),* eds. Paul Messaris & Lee Humphreys (New York: Peter Lang, 2016): 31-39.

impersonal and clinical psychiatric language through hashtags and posts, users translate and reconfigure them in ways that express what it feels like to live with mental illness. [13]



Caption: #actuallyborderline post. This post and the two below are a modified representations of existing Tumblr posts according to Markham's guidelines of ethical fabrication.[14]

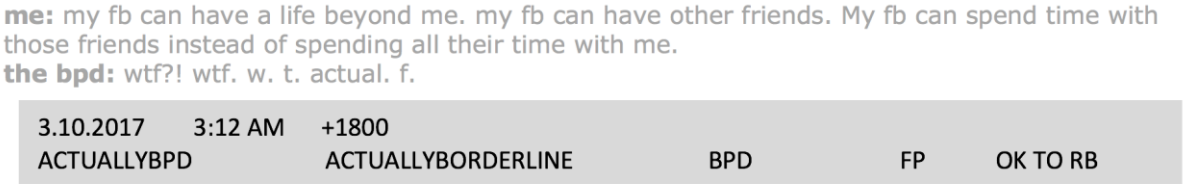
These collective practices and vernacular produce an affective BPD "community" on Tumblr, in which shared language, hashtags and the visual structure of posts help users cope with how BPD is disruptive, distressing or misrecognized by others. This community on Tumblr is distinct from mental health support groups or services that may not sustain their emotional or social therapeutic needs.

As one example, BPD conversations shared through the "Chat" post format expressed the struggle between one person and their BPD "feelings" and/or the frustration with others who don't understand BPD. Sometimes these posts represent an internal struggle between an individual and BPD, their brain or the illness: me and also me, me and brain, me and my BPD. Other posts depict imagined dialogue between an individual and an "other": me and you, me and them, me and a person, me and a friend. The posts can also establish the changeability of emotions over time or in different circumstances: me and me five seconds later, me and me at night, me and me alone.

[13] Seko & Lewis, 1-9.
[14] Markham, Annette. "Fabrication as Ethical Practice: Quantitative Inquiry in Ambiguous Internet Contexts". *Information, Communication & Society* 15, no. 3 (2012): 334-353.

Caption: Me and Also Me conversation post, including the shrug emoticon "¯₩_(ツ)_/¯" to express uncertainty or a lack of care about something or an event.

BPD posts may also refer to a "favourite person" or "FP" (sometimes hashtagged #fp), a person that someone living with BPD identifies as most important to them, and who they may (often unrealistically) rely on for connection or validation. "FP" is not a clinical term, and seems to have emerged from BPD communities on Tumblr (I was unable to find references to "FP" on other platforms). In employing "FP," users are converting the clinical concept of "splitting" into a shared Tumblr vernacular to convey the "black-and-white" thinking characteristic of BPD. Users may express ambivalent feelings towards their "FP" in chat posts by remarking on their behaviour or thoughts prior to and after interaction with an FP. This humorous vernacular is not unique to BPD posts; it follows the patterns of other memes on Tumblr (and other platforms) that rely on dialogic structure. These posts playfully make fun of the user's desire both to feel "normal" or in control, and to simultaneously recognize human failure and imperfection.



Caption: #actuallypbd conversation post between "me" and "thebpd".

Tumblr's platform vernacular of hashtags, chat posts, and memes reflects the way "each social media platform comes to have its own unique combination of styles, grammars, and

logics".[15] While users' humour may seem self-deprecating, it demonstrates their untenable social position, one in which those perceived as having BPD are dismissed as attention-seeking or difficult. The chat posts establish relatability, affinities and recognition among people who share the frustrations of living with BPD, especially dealing with its social stigma. At the same time, as memes, they construct social hierarchies of belonging between insiders who "get it" and outsiders who don't.[16] These chat posts share the internal conversations or thoughts that characterize experiences of BPD that may otherwise be dismissed or derided.

Visibility as Authenticity and Recovery

My second example explores Tumblr images that might not seem to be related to mental illness or may have multiple meanings for different users and contexts This example draws on my in-depth interviews and platform analysis research with young women under 18 who were engaged with a youth psychiatric service in Melbourne, Australia.[17] Here, I focus on experiences of anxiety and anxiety disorders.

These young women were highly attuned to visibility on social media. For them, visibility was about how others saw them: as women, as young people, and as people experiencing mental illness. They faced the tiring challenge of needing to be "seen" on multiple platforms to successfully manage school, family, and friendships, all while struggling with their health. These women acknowledged that although social media didn't necessarily produce these pressures, most platforms made them visible in undesired ways that made them vulnerable to embarrassment or hurtful peer judgement. For example, others could see images they posted to shared Facebook photo albums, or their "Likes" on friends' Instagram posts.

[15] Martin Gibbs, James Meese, Michael Arnold, Bjorn Nansen, & Marcus Carter, "#Funeral and Instagram: Death, Social Media, and Platform Vernacular," *Information, Communication & Society* 18, no. 3 (2015): 255–268.
[16] Akane Kanai, Sociality and classification: Reading gender, race, and class in a humorous meme. *Social Media + Society* 2, no. 4 (2016).
[17] Natalie Hendry, "Everyday anxieties: Young women, mental illness and social media practices of visibility and connection" (PhD diss., RMIT University, Melbourne, 2017).

These young women explained that talking about their anxiety was exhausting, and at times, others required them to justify how authentic their anxiety was, potentially leading to negative critique. They each described how peers and family members would sometimes minimize or misrecognize their emotional distress, assuming that their clinical anxiety disorder was the same everyday anxiety with which most people are familiar. This conceptual ambiguity increased the potential for their anxiety to be misunderstood, misinterpreted or dismissed.

Tumblr however, differed from other platforms in providing some relief for these young women. "Beatrix" explained that Tumblr afforded a space for her to collect and reblog images that made her feel less anxious and more connected to a larger group.[18] Some of the images she reblogged expressed fatigue or boredom, others disconnection and loneliness. Some were fashion photographs of styles, colors, or objects that evoked and affirmed the moods she was feeling. Other images included words or quotes that emphasized emotions she recognized as familiar and those she desired for her future. The images were rarely hashtagged or captioned with words related to mental illness. Even as these were — to her — visible expressions of how she felt, they are ones unlikely to be captured through a content analysis or datamining search of #anxiety or #depression hashtags.[19] Her therapeutic blog could thus easily be dismissed by clinicians and others as irrelevant or unimportant, especially as it did not include distressing self-injury images or suicidal quotes.

Like other women in my study, Beatrix didn't converse with other Tumblr users, but enjoyed feeling like she was part of something bigger, without the "work" she felt was required in actively talking to people. She described her Tumblr blog as an "art gallery" in which she could share her interests and experiences without directly engaging with others (nor they with her) and without having to justify her posts or defend the authenticity of her anxiety. Although her images were reblogged, she considered them to be personal and "real" to her because they felt emotionally authentic to her experience, even though she did not share images she herself had photographed or images of herself. These young women experienced

[18] Each participant in my study chose the pseudonyms used in the dissertation thesis and subsequent publications (Hendry, 2017). The RMIT University Human Research Ethics Committee and the Human Research Ethics Committee of the health service I worked with for my thesis project requested that I use pseudonyms in publications as the young women were under 18 years old and considered minors.
[19] Seko & Lewis, 1-9.

relief from the pressures and frustrations associated with being visible, identifiable and accountable to others on other platforms because, by curating images on Tumblr, they were able to *feel* in control of *how* and to *whom* they were visible.[20]

For Beatrix, these practices were "therapy." She described her Tumblr use as being explicitly connected to her clinical therapy work. For her, such engagements included scrolling through Tumblr as well as reblogging posts; scrolling provided relief and reassurance without the work of justifying her emotions to a therapist or of having to actively manage her mental state when at school or at home. Through Tumblr, she felt recognized and affirmed. Even though users were mostly unknown to each other and didn't converse, participants in my research described a sense of community or imagined community emerging from the visibility of others reblogging content that they could relate to; in fact, they described these as "communities" on the basis of that visibility alone. Similar to Tumblr users in the first example who found community through their BPD-related posts, reblogging images that resonated with their anxiety provided these young women with a sense of emotional recognition and belonging that alleviated the isolation of mental illness. They experienced this community as a safe space where the authenticity of mental illness was not challenged, but rather facilitated through affective recognition.

Conclusion

Exploring Tumblr and mental illness through the way users control and experience how they are seen by others urges us to think broadly and ethically about how we research discourses of mental illness on the platform, and on social media generally. We must revise our idea of what an image of mental illness might look like instead of relying on decontextualized images of distress. We must consider everyday and indirect visual practices as well as the spectacular and explicit. We must recognize the way that specific platforms like Tumblr can provide users with a therapeutic "community" space within which to feel recognized, understood, and affirmed without having to "fix" themselves in that moment -- and we need to better understand how they do this through close analysis of the platforms themselves *and* by working directly with the communities that use them. By better understanding how young

[20] Alexander Cho, "Queer reverb: Tumblr, affect, time" in *Networked Affect*, eds. Ken Hillis, Suzanne Paasonen, & Michael Petit (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2015): 43-58.

people on Tumblr who experience mental illness are able to develop personal self-knowledge, share communication codes, and negotiate social misrecognition of their emotional experiences, we can inform future education and therapeutic work within these communities. And in doing so, we can better acknowledge how users *themselves* are forming these therapeutic online community spaces away from family and friends in order to do vital emotional work towards hope and recovery.