

# **Audience 2.0: New Dynamics of Audience Reception in the Age of Social Media**

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## Abstract

Recent years have seen a rise in interest in 'interactive' audiences, with the ongoing spread of digital media enabling media viewers to develop new participative and collaborative activities. As a hub of communication, the Internet has become a crucial enabling platform for these new forms of audience engagement. Audiences migrate to social media to share impressions, interpretations and issues with the content they view, an action which, it is argued, 'makes visible' the often-unseen processes that constitute audience reception. Using the microblogging site Tumblr as case study, this thesis makes a case for developing an integrative approach to media reception, by consolidating knowledge from film studies, fan studies, and participatory cultures, that these subjects might better address the mutable nature of the modern audience. This thesis commits to a radical contextualist approach which challenges the application of 'linear' frameworks to postmodern audiencehood, drawing specifically on the research of danah boyd, Henry Jenkins and Carolyn Michelle. This study contributes original knowledge on young adult's processes of 'meaning-making' when online, by examining (1) contexts of social media engagement in the audience's daily life (2) the forms of interpretative work produced online in relation to film texts (3) the social and cultural implications of this online audience activity. The research questions for this study are as follows:

- *How do social networking sites such as Tumblr figure in young adult's daily media use? How do Tumblr users engage with film content when interacting online?*
- *How are Tumblr users utilising the site in their reception of film texts? What are the forms of receptive work taking place online?*
- *How does the audience interpret and reflect on their online activity? What do these practices reveal about the nature of online audiencehood?*

The study employs online ethnographic methods, including participant observation and Skype interview, to detail the processes of online audience reception. An intensive period of fieldwork was undertaken, consisting of 12 months participant observation of 150 users within the Tumblr community, followed by a series of 24 online interviews, carried out synchronously (via Skype) and asynchronously (via email). The ethnographic data collected for this study was analysed thematically in order to produce an initial conceptual guide to online audience engagement. This study identifies several key themes which typify audience work on this site, including 'performance', 'anonymity', and 'bricolage'. The study finds that the 'exhibitive' quality of online interpretative work, being intrinsically informed by the contextual collapse between public and private in online spaces, promotes self-conscious responses whereby audiences can actively assert their sense of self and their place within a wider social and cultural sphere. This appears to have specific generational resonances, as critical discourses on the ideological basis of the film industry are increasingly propagated amongst Tumblr's young adult userbase. The thesis concludes with an interrogation of the thresholds of participation in interactive audience engagement and the implications this has for the future of audience research. It is argued that the role of social media in audience enquiry should not be understood merely as a new source of data about audiences, but rather as a crucial enabling platform for audience participation and contribution.

**Keywords:** *Online audiences; social media; digital age; reception studies; film reception; Tumblr*

*For Gramps, with love*

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# 1. Introduction

## 1.1. Research Questions

Audiencehood, in today's media-saturated society, is seeming less like an occasional experience and more like a way of being. We are in constant contact with media technologies; from the mobile devices in our pockets to the multimedia devices present in our homes, we engage with media content on an unprecedented scale. As digital technologies are integrated seamlessly into the flow of daily life, it is becoming much more difficult to determine where peoples' engagement with media content - their 'audience experience' - begins and ends. Because of this, audience study - a subject that has remained at the forefront of media and communications research across the years - has become an increasingly complex pursuit, an essential feature of contemporary engagement seeming to be that in the digital world, 'everyone becomes an audience all the time' (Abercrombie and Longhurst, 1998:68). Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998) propose that modern viewers represent a 'diffused audience', in that 'the qualities and experiences of being a member of an audience have begun to leak out from specific performance events which previously contained them into the wider realms of everyday life' (Abercrombie and Longhurst, 1998: 36-37). Notions of the 'audience' are now often entangled with those of the 'user', the 'follower', or the 'public', further confusing an already diverse (and divisive) subject of media investigation (Barker, 2006; Hermes, 2009). This study attempts to reassert the significance of audience enquiry by extending the theories and methods of active audience research to the realm of social media, proposing routes to knowledge which both *incorporate* and *expand upon* prior critical work. This thesis considers investigation of social media engagement as affording new scope and significance to audience research, a dynamic which may very well provide a blueprint for trends of media engagement to come.

The changes we are encountering in the nature of the audience are, ultimately, reflections of changes occurring in society itself, the disjuncture of the transition from mass consumption to individualised use, from modes of one-way communication to the 'network society' (Castells, 2000). Our postmodern condition is often characterised by features of fragmentation, diffusion, and division; all symptoms, it is argued, of the increasing mediatization of contemporary life (Giddens, 1991; Buckingham, 2016). It is difficult for any field of study to maintain ontological integrity under such conditions, and so media studies – like many research fields – are having to reorient themselves to accommodate new social logics of mobility, fluidity, and convergence. This has manifested in a swell of interest in digital cultures and online communication. What was once a niche subject of interest in social science research - cyberculture and online community - has since risen in prominence across a range of disciplines; scholarly sentiment regarding online media has quickly moved on from considering online communication as a form of fringe engagement, towards an appreciation of digital networks as integral features of our current communication culture (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010:67). It struck me that studying *online* audience interactions could provide a crucial 'inroads' for exploring the contemporary media scene, as forms of current audience engagement are showing increasing interconnections with Internet usage (McQuail, 2010:431). As Dunas and Vartanov (2020) state: 'social media and internet platforms universalize not just transmitted *meanings*, but also *human practices and communications*,

*social interaction, identities and the life worlds of individuals*' (Dunas and Vartanov, 2020:187, emphasis author's own). This work argues, therefore, that social media sites represent a vital 'nexus' – an intermediary point – between differing technologies, texts, social practices and audience groupings, and that studying the flows and patterns of communication as they occur on these sites will present a more intricate, in-depth and inclusive account of modern media engagement.

There are a number of interrelated elements of this study that should, when brought together, offer unique contributions to the existing research canon. Firstly, this study intends to bridge a gap in knowledge by contributing to a fledgling body of research on the nature of audience's 'interpretative work' in online spaces (Deller, 2011; Newman, 2013; Mathieu, 2015). Audience reception, which is the study of how people 'make sense' of media content, has been a foundational element of research throughout the field's lifespan, but it is only recently that the subject has begun to assert itself as a discipline in its own right (Hermes, 2009). Understanding audience reception is integral to understanding how people find meaning in their encounters with media; a process that wrestles with concepts of identity and shifting alignments to social signifiers, such as age, class, race and gender (Morley, 1980). Online engagement offers audiences new and vibrant ways of communicating meaning, which should enable researchers to 'capture' an otherwise illusive and varied cognitive process. Another unique element of this study is that it draws specific attention to processes of film reception. As discussed in Chapter 3 of this thesis (pg.45), ontological disagreements have meant that contextualised studies on the reception of film texts are still lacking in the research canon, therefore this study presented a unique opportunity to produce new data and open up some long 'dormant' avenues of dialogue between film studies and cultural studies. Finally, the choice of setting for this study should offer some compelling insights into the machinations of Internet culture. The microblogging site Tumblr was chosen as case study for this empirical investigation: Tumblr boasts a progressive, youth-dominated user base, which has drawn attention in recent years as a source for creative content production and counterpublic communication, factors which I believe can contribute much towards understanding the nature of online audiencehood. An intensive period of fieldwork was undertaken on this site, consisting of 12 months participant observation of 150 users within the Tumblr community, followed by a series of 24 online interviews with Tumblr users, carried out synchronously (via Skype) and asynchronously (via email). This study adopted thematic analysis in order to consolidate the processes and practices involved in online audience work into an initial conceptual guide. The research questions for this study are as follows:

- *How do social networking sites such as Tumblr figure in young adult's daily media use? How do Tumblr users engage with film content when interacting online?*
- *How are Tumblr users utilising the site in their reception of film texts? What are the forms of receptive work taking place online?*
- *How does the audience interpret and reflect on their online activity? What do these practices reveal about the nature of online audiencehood?*

Overall, this thesis aims to describe how social media usage is insinuated into the everyday media activities of young adults, and how this engagement generates distinctive modes of

‘meaning-making’. This empirical study should contribute to a developing faction of audience research concerned with analysing audiencehood in the context of digital media.

## **1.2 Approaches to Study**

Before delving into more detail in the following chapters, it is important that this introductory chapter briefly foreground some of the contextual considerations that shaped this study. Two particular contextual elements have made this research project possible. The first is the presence of the Internet as a multi-media resource, and the fundamental role it has played in the convergence of media content (Jenkins, 2006). The second element central to this study is the development of social networks ‘oriented towards interaction [and] participation’ (Mathieu, 2016:30), which have served to connect formally disparate social groups and facilitate processes of cross-cultural knowledge transfer. The audiences produced by social media break down atypical barriers between ‘consumers’ and ‘producers’, with audiences being able to publish and distribute their own media content, as well as engage in democratized conversation with other audience members, sharing their opinions, ideas and expertise within an increasingly globalized community. The online audience is thus seen to occupy a position as a ‘producer’: a collaborative entity which merges the social activities of the media consumer with the productive capacities of the media producer (Bruns, 2008).

In turning their attention to these new audience alignments, however, audience researchers are finding themselves arriving at a moment of critical introspection. New mediatory experiences are emphasising the need to consolidate what has been learned about how audiences adapt to media evolution, the topics have remained constant in audience study across the years, and how it is that the field has now arrived at an understanding of media viewers as ‘active’ consumers (Hall, 1980; Fiske, 1992). In doing so, these explorations are uncovering how the rhetoric of audience studies has been built around a host of conceptual ‘polarities’, with each advancement in knowledge tending to stigmatize the work that went before it (Barker, 2018). Media scholars are continually making a push to break with older traditions and formulate adventurous new frameworks for audience engagement, and as a result, depictions of audiences are becoming increasingly abstracted as scholars struggle to capture the ‘shifting constellations’ of audience work (Bird, 1992; Grossberg, 1988). I argue, in line with Andrea Press and Sonia Livingstone’s reasoning, that rather than hurrying to redefine or ‘revamp’ audience studies in light of the subject’s increasing diffusion, the field would be better served by homing in on the ‘routineity’ of the media/audience encounter, as a process embedded in the course of people’s daily lives (Press and Livingstone, 2006:175). As dramatic as the changes in media landscape may seem, they nevertheless present themselves in people’s everyday life as a collection of routine actions and habits, meaning the best way to counter audience ‘abstraction’ is to embed study within the ‘flow’ of the audience’s everyday lifeworld. This thesis therefore aligns to frameworks of ‘radical contextualism’ (Grossberg, 1998; Ang, 1996), as a means of grounding audience activity in its material forms and contents.

Predominant within the epistemological traditions of British Cultural Studies, radical contextualism emphasises an awareness of social reality as complex, fragmented, and endlessly ‘messy’ (Davis, 2019:48), therefore advocating routes to meaning that would deny essentialism and reductive reasoning (ibid.). Attention to embedded practices has cultivated within audience studies a new host of emic perspectives on media use. By having audiences

relate their 'routine' experiences with media, audience researchers have been able to make the consolidation of media into the 'fabric of everyday life' more intelligible (Cavalcante, Press and Sender, 2017:2). Ethnography has therefore (re)emerged as a predominant methodological approach within the field. Ethnography has proved to be an effective approach for audience reception research, having been utilised in studies since the late 1980's (Hine, 2015). Recently, the development of online ethnography (OE), an extension of traditional ethnographic methods which incorporates the use of digital technologies in data collection, has expanded the range of the methodology by providing access to more wide-ranging audience populations, and allowing for the possibility of real-time capture of audience data (Salmons, 2016; Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce and Taylor, 2012). As suggested in this study's literature review chapters (pg. 35), this has proved to be particularly useful in clarifying forms of audience engagement in a moment of media ubiquity. It is argued that in light of the diversity of our current multimedia environment we are beginning to lose sight of the 'conventionality' of media, as our media encounters become more individualistic and innate (Couldry in Nightingale, 2014:222). As an ethnographic study, this thesis sets out to provide an embedded account of online audience activity as it occurs in daily life, the aim being to holistically study the contexts within which we 'become' audiences (a.k.a. 'audiencehood'), and the ways that these encounters converge with aspects of citizenship, performance, and social participation.

This study represents an attempt to provide an integrative framework for understanding the complexity of our current moment in audience understanding, elaborating on the dynamic practices undertaken by online audiences. Reception research has found a useful 'foothold' in media studies as this data plays a vital role in anchoring processes of 'audiencehood' in people's 'meaningful practices' (Livingstone, 2013:1). Reception research has proved to be valuable in contextualising data on audience practices that could otherwise be presented as another 'generalised' overview of media usage (ibid.). Sonia Livingstone argues that an emic perspective on audience meaning-making is indispensable when working on processes of audiencehood, as it works to distinguish how people 'engage with, accede to, negotiate or contest' media messages at the same time that they 'explore and invent new ways of connecting with each other through and around media' (Livingstone, 2013: 1). As detailed in Chapter 2, this field has explored numerous ways in which to approach the subject of audience interpretation; however, from this established canon of active audience research, three general principles for understanding the nature of audience reception have been agreed upon:

First, audiences must interpret what they see even to construct (or decode) the message as meaningful and orderly, however routine this interpretation may be. Second, the experience of viewing is socially and culturally located, so that viewers' everyday concerns, experiences and knowledge become a resource for the interpretative process of viewing. Third, audiences diverge in their interpretations, generating different readings of the same media text.

(Livingstone, 2005:16)

These three 'mandates' represent the lessons that this study has carried forward in its approach to online audience practices. These mandates provide a framework for understanding audience reception through examination of the everyday contexts in which these viewers

engage and interact with media, appreciating the diversity of the viewers' 'readings' (e.g. interpretations) of media content, and analysing how these readings reflect upon social and cultural contexts. In adopting this contextualised 'framework', this thesis attempts to bring a (long-awaited) empirical study of film reception to fruition (Meers, 2001; Staiger, 2005).

### **1.3 Theoretical Aims of this Thesis**

Prospects of 'online audiencehood' have set new precedents for audience interaction and prompted a re-orientation of the scholarly field. As Denis McQuail (2015) notes, audience practices now frequently coincide with Internet usage, an intervention which serves to construct for audience members 'a [new] network of contacts in response to mass media content' (McQuail, 2015:431). The Internet represents a hub of public engagement wherein 'collective collaboration and sharing of knowledge, opinions and ideas' (Tagrit, 2015) can be spread across local, regional, even multinational networks. This broadening of our communicative horizons has radically altered the ways we receive information, interact with one another, and conceive of our own public and private identities. Social media sites, on the whole, have marked a significant leap forward in the 'visibility' of audience work (Mathieu, 2015). These new platforms of mediation make room for audience participation in ways that broadcast mediums, with their 'linear' modes of transmission, could not. Indeed, one reason why the canon of audience research has become so segregated over the years is because broadcast technologies situated their audiences within specific ontological confines. Previous studies have therefore tended to 'allocate' findings either by medium (television, film, newspapers, theatre etc.) or demographic (gender, sexuality, age, race or class). Whilst this has been useful in establishing key logics of the research canon, I argue that this style of approach is no longer representative of the current realities of audience engagement. Modern day media engagement is kaleidoscopic and diverse and cannot be easily aligned only to one medium, text or platform – and therefore only to one research field. In the same way media researchers are embracing new consumptive practices of 'cross-media' engagement (Schröder, 2011:6), this study proposes a need to embrace a 'cross-mediatory' perspective on theory, that we can in some way account for the diverse (and often contrary) nature of modern media engagement. The contrary logic which dictates that we might find cohesion in amongst fragmentation is one that underpins much of this audience study, which seeks to align processes of mediation within formally contradictory research fields and mediums. This thesis takes up a number of 'contrary' perspectives and approaches, uniting disparate mediums like cinema and social media, aligning what have been primarily 'textual' approaches to film audiences within 'contextual' paradigms, and more – in doing so, my hope is that this study can articulate how conditions of digital consumption will not fall neatly into pre-determined theoretical or epistemological categories. This thesis articulates the necessity of developing dexterous perspectives on contemporary audience practice. I illustrate in the forthcoming chapters how exploration of online audiences is very much characteristic of audience studies current research agenda, and what this study can contribute to this 'new generation' of audience praxis. The primary theoretical aim of this thesis, therefore, is to further understand processes of online audience activity, by illustrating the diverse range of interpretive and participative practices undertaken by Tumblr users.

The second theoretical aim of this study is to introduce Tumblr as a prospective site for future audience research, particularly those studies interested in youth audiences. This study is timely, as attention to Tumblr within the research sphere has enjoyed a swell in the last few

years (Keller, 2019; McCracken, 2017; Pignetti, 2020). First launched in 2007, Tumblr has long claimed distinction from other microblogging platforms by '[pitching] itself as a creative community' (Renninger, 2015:1519), wherein users can publish high quality photography, edited imagery, amateur and/or professional video, and other media content. Notably, Tumblr was one of only a few early microblogging sites that offered integration of animated GIFs as part of the site offer, which Renninger (2015) points out makes Tumblr content more 'dynamic' than that of its closest competitors (Facebook, Twitter, Reddit, Pinterest, Instagram) (Renninger, 2015:1520). Tumblr is well suited, then, to engagement with visual media texts such as film and television, which makes up the majority of the content shared on the platform (Pandey and Mittel, 2016). Attention to the 'multimodality' of the site, as a place to circulate high-quality imagery, video and audio (as well as long-length blog posts), has identified Tumblr as a key location for the creation of viral material (Attu and Terras, 2017:528). Studying Tumblr therefore helps to understand the 'spreadability' (Jenkins, Green and Ford, 2013) of media content. I believe Tumblr is uniquely positioned to detail ways that online users engage with traditional media texts, why they share the content that they do, and how they can rework and remaster them to fit their own meanings.

As suggested previously, Tumblr has proved particularly appealing to teens and young adults. For young people, engagement with digital mediums has already come to constitute a considerable part of their lifeworld, with young adults aged between 18-29 years comprising the largest demographic of existing social media users in the Western hemisphere (PEW Research Centre, 2018). Frequently referred to as the 'digital generation', or more recently 'millennials', this age cohort has attracted attention for their high-frequency use of digital technologies (Lenhart et al, 2010). Previous studies into young people's engagement with social media have shown the key role online networks play in organizing social life (boyd, 2007), the development of civic identities (Loader, Vromen and Xenos, 2014), and the various uses and gratifications that can be derived from online activity (Dunne, Lawlor and Rowley, 2010). However, there is still significant work to be done regarding the ways young people are interpreting or 'making sense' of media content in the context of their online activity. In the course of this thesis, I will describe how Tumblr offers its youth userbase affordances that can help 'make visible' their forms of audience interpretation, functioning as it does for its young adult userbase as a sort of 'writing machine', a means of performing identity and articulating consciousness (Burnham, 2015:164). This thesis will explore how the site's intersecting affordances of anonymity, exhibition, and visual content produce an opportune environment for audience 'play' and 'performance'. This study should also contribute to a growing number of studies interested in analysing Tumblr's community culture (Hannell, 2020; Reid, 2019), and will advance understanding of Tumblr as a site for 'enacted' audience reception (Monk, 2011; Newman, 2015).

A final theoretical aim of this thesis is to 're-incorporate' film into the spectrum of audience reception research. 'Film', used in this regard, is intended to encompass a broad spectrum of motion picture work, including animation, live-action and documentary film. My rationale for studying the reception of film texts is linked to wider ontological aims of uniting theoretical 'divides' between contextualised and textual approaches to audience study. Though it may seem contrary to study forms of *film* reception *online*, prior difficulty in engaging film audiences, whose viewing practices take place over a range of public and private sites (cinema, DVD or blu-ray, home television, video-on-demand), means that there are still very

few contextualised studies on this subject. Whilst there has undoubtedly been a range of *textual* studies on film reception (namely, works that analyse a film's textual structure as delivering coded messages to its audience) a lack of practical data based on the interpretative responses of 'actual audiences' (Ang, 1989:99) has resulted in a methodological imbalance, which this study seeks to address. Studies of film reception have often been considered as emerging from two contrasting 'strands' of knowledge. The first strand, rooted in Film Studies, approaches films as texts, seeking to analyse how these cinematic texts construct the abstract position of the spectator through the deployment of targeted ideological messaging. The field's attention has mostly been in dissecting the aesthetics of the picture, how the movie has been shot, cut, edited and screened. The second strand, which rose to prominence along with the field of Cultural Studies, focuses instead on the embedded experiences of viewers, whose interpretations of the text are seen as being shaped by their social backgrounds. This means that whilst studies of film reception have generally maintained a focus on the 'authorship' of the text, audience studies have steered away from a focus on textual mechanics, regarding them as producing an abstracted account of audience engagement. A lack of attention to the actual responses of the audience in favour of analysing the structural elements of the text means that audience readings reported in regard to film are either presumed, idealised, taken as the property of the text, or (perhaps most damaging of all) subsumed into the textual interpretation of the researcher. There is, therefore, increasing pressure for film studies to incorporate a more 'grounded' approach to reception study. Film scholars such as Jackie Stacey (1993), Janet Staiger (2005) and Phillippe Meers (2001) have elicited a call for an empirical reception study that positions the social practices of the film audience at the forefront of investigation. This study represents an attempt to fulfil this objective.

With this thesis, I wish to address the polarisations that have developed between film studies and audience studies in their approach to reception and propose a study of online audiencehood as a route to bridge these philosophical (and methodological) divides. My research is motivated by a pressing need to level out some of the conceptual schisms within the field of audience study. These 'disjunctures' are making it almost impossible to develop the interdisciplinary account of audiencehood that is necessary, as they emphasise divisions between fields as 'discursive horizons' that the researcher cannot move beyond (Diamantaki, 2011). Again, it is my hope to illustrate how the convergent properties of the Internet offer online users opportunities to intersect with different mediums, audience segments and content, thereby enabling an integrative approach to audience study. In making interpretative work around film texts the primary focus of this audience study, I aim to produce an inclusive account of reception that will revitalise disciplinary ties between film and cultural studies.

### *1.3.1 A Note on Language*

This study includes examples of Tumblr text posts and other user generated content (UGC) as part of its findings. This material is included as documentary evidence of the processes under study and is necessary for forming a detailed 'picture' of how audiences interact online. For this reason, the language used in these posts - which includes slang terms, internet jargon and obscenity - has not been altered and has been reproduced in the same format as it was presented on Tumblr. Some grammar may be out of place (e.g., lower-case typing is common on Tumblr - often a post will include little or no capitalisation) and some spelling may be incorrect. Though this is not intended to be a discourse study, I feel the language the online



audience is using to communicate is intrinsic to understanding of the user culture, and therefore integral to the account being presented. Any editing of language may 'add clarity' to the textual examples but would surely also 'remove authenticity' (Miller, 2015:29). As this study is intending to present new information on the Tumblr community, as well as new data on online audience practices, I believe it is necessary to produce as authentic a representation as possible, in order that my own intervention in the data collection process remain transparent, and the study's findings true to life. A glossary of terminology has therefore been included as part of this study's appendices to assist in reading, and brief context for memes and quotations offered in the chapter footnotes.

Another linguistic quirk that should also be addressed is the author's alternating use of 'audience' and 'user'. Instead of adopting a misnomer refer to what is an increasingly multi-faceted subject (or creating one, which seems to be the standard for recent audience studies), I alternate between terms depending on what I feel is most appropriate in each given context. For example, when reporting on a participant's use of Tumblr, I will more regularly use the term 'user' to describe them, as within this context we are discussing actions relating specifically to Internet usage. However, if reporting the same subject's interpretation of a film, I would be more inclined to describe them as an audience, as this process falls within the traditional dimensions of audience engagement.<sup>1</sup> This means sometimes referring to subjects as 'audiences', sometimes 'users' - often also 'publics' and 'communities'. My aim is not to confuse the reader - 'audience' is, after all, already a recognisable derivative of 'user', 'public', and vice versa - but rather reiterate the importance of maintaining a grounded perspective on media engagement. Toshie Takahashi (2016) claims that the effort to move away from the subject of 'audience' and towards other terminology provokes unnecessary abstraction, stating that 'audience' still represents a specific set of enacted (and embodied) practices that clearly define the practice, including watching, skimming, flicking, reading and more. I believe that continuing to conceptualize 'audience' as *consolidating* the enacted processes of users, publics, consumers and more, will build insightfully on the history of the discipline and reveal the continuities that persist in the articulation of 'active' audience work (Livingstone and Das, 2013:1). There is also a critical motive to this thesis's convergent use of the term 'audience', however. Takahashi (2016) suggests that the urgency to throw away the construct of the 'audience' in favour of other terminology is indicative of a long-simmering resentment towards audiences as a subject of popular thought (Takahashi, 2002). As addressed in this study's literature review chapters (pg. 22), the concept of the 'audience' has been coloured by a discursive history of 'passivity', wherein notions of the mass media audience as being 'vulnerable' to media message and indiscriminate in their consumption have persisted across the years. This study approaches the online audience from an 'active' perspective, and though 'active audience research' has come to classify most modern audience work, many still subscribe to the notion of audience engagement as a passive pursuit, invoking notions of audience research as 'pointless populism' (Seaman, 1992). My own continued use of audience is purposeful, therefore, as I intend to make its inclusion a 'counter-critical' stance regarding attempts to trivialize audience as a category of study. I

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<sup>1</sup> To clarify my frequent use of this term, by 'engagement' I mean to delineate a process which encompasses multiple dimensions of audience activity, including (but not limited to) viewing, discussing, debating and participating. I adopt this term in line with Takahashi (2002) who claims that it the most effective phrase for addressing the manifold activities of an audience that moves beyond simplified or dichotomised articulations (Takahashi, 2002:307)

further expand on the contradictions surrounding the nature of the ‘audience’ – and the justifications for my own critical position - in the following chapters.

### **1.4 Outline of the Study**

The following chapters build on theoretical aims addressed previously and describe how I developed my methodological approach. Chapter Two of this study outlines the theoretical evolution of audience reception studies. Audience studies has emerging from a rich history of different research traditions and interests, before establishing itself as a discipline in its own right. In tracing the history of reception studies, the chapter locates the points of disjuncture between cultural studies and film studies attitudes towards audience reception, embellishing on how they pose limitations on interdisciplinary work, and consolidating them into a critical discussion of how audience reception studies has built into a polarising discipline. This chapter therefore addresses two of this study's theoretical aims, as well as establishing the unique gaps in the research tradition wherein this study seeks to situate itself.

Chapter Three places these theoretical changes in context by expanding on the broader socio-cultural and technological ‘shifts’ in which online audience practices are taking place. This includes a consolidation of academic work on social media - including further research on Tumblr - as well as a treatise on the importance of investigating the 'post-cinema' audience. The chapter details the convergent qualities of media in the current day and provides further contextualisation on why 'participation' has become a crucial precedent in contemporary audience research. The chapter concludes that it is helpful to locate forms of interactive media engagement in their social and material contexts, in order to gain an embedded understanding of how people are using new media technologies.

Chapter Four discusses the methodological design of this study. The chapter offers prior examples of online ethnographical studies and builds on issues and challenges relevant to a study of audience reception. Basic principles of OE are outlined and ethical issues - including reliability, validity and intrusion - are addressed. The chapter provides an account of the sample of online audience members that participated as part of this investigation and walks through the process of designing and initiating this study’s qualitative approach. The chapter goes on to describe how thematic analysis can complement an ethnographic research design, both following similar epistemological principles. The chapter elaborates on how combining the two analytical approaches provides an enhanced methodological offer. This chapter illustrates how the theoretical aims of this thesis can be put into practice, and how online research methods can contribute to the advancement of audience research.

Chapters Five to Seven represent the findings of this study. Firstly, Chapter Five details the processes by which users engage with Tumblr within the course of their daily lives. The chapter identifies four primary features of site interaction: performance and exhibition, self-expression, anonymity and bricolage. In doing so, the chapter addresses the first of this study's research questions, which is concerned with establishing routine contexts of audience engagement. Chapter Six embellishes on the specific forms of reception present on Tumblr by producing analysis of Tumblr user's readings of a variety of popular films. This chapter addresses the second research question, in specific, the modalities of reception present amongst the site’s community. Chapter Seven goes on to critically evaluate the audience processes identified, deliberating to what lengths online audience practices can be seen to either subvert or challenge media powers. This should be considered a key critical objective

of current audience work, which should aim to ‘map’ the contestations and constraints of social power (Davis, 2019:49-50).

Lastly, Chapter Eight concludes with a summarisation of the study's key findings. This chapter attempts to locate points of thematic ‘cohesion’ across the body of this study’s findings, in order to offer an initial conceptual groundwork for online audience study. The chapter revisits the theoretical aims addressed in this introductory chapter and evaluates the lengths to which this study has been able to cross epistemological divides. The chapter concludes with a consideration of the implications of this analysis for future research, and suggestions for the further advancement of interactive audience research.

## 2. From ‘Spectator’ to ‘User’: A Brief History of Audience Research

This literature review chapter intends to set out an inclusive history of audience research, drawing on interdisciplinary knowledge from the fields of film studies, television studies, and fan studies. Audience study has emerged from a rich background of differing research traditions and interests. In order to better understand how the field has developed, it is useful to detail a history of the research discipline to date, so that I might more clearly illustrate those 'intersections' in knowledge wherein this thesis situates itself. This first chapter presents a chronology of audience research as it has occurred in the Western canon (i.e., research undertaken primarily in the European tradition). The chapter works with the premise that an embedded understanding of previous research will not only help contextualise the methods used to study audiences today but will also provide a useful 'jumping-off-point' for future investigation (Livingstone, 2005).

Audience research has undergone some fundamental changes within the last two decades. As addressed in the previous chapter, the introduction of new digital technologies and the concurrent 'shift' in modes of media consumption have prompted a flood of new critical literature, each of which are pulling the research canon from one direction to another in an attempt to situate the multi-faceted practices of the modern media viewer. Already conscious of the confusion this is creating, audience scholars are turning their attention back to older theoretical frameworks in order to reflexively 'ground' the conceptual progression of the research canon (Hermes, 2010). In doing so, however, some long-standing issues within the research tradition have become more apparent. One of the concerns that audience scholars such as Sonia Livingstone, Martin Barker and Carolyn Michelle have brought to light in reconstructing their respective histories of the field is the 'divisiveness' that appears to lie at the heart of the discipline. Audience studies has been underscored by a long history of theoretical and methodological oppositions, including debates over quantitative versus qualitative methods and textual versus empirical approaches, all of which have operated alongside conceptual distinctions between settings of consumption, genres of medium, and active and passive responses (Livingstone, 1994). The aim of this chapter is not, therefore, limited to merely chronicling the progression of audience research as a means of establishing 'where we are now' in the research context, my intention is also to offer an inclusive account that more clearly shows the points at which the field has diverged. In the spirit of convergence, this study meets 'dislocation' as a site of opportunity, building into these liminal spaces a holistic understanding of how we might 'apply the best theories and research methods at our disposal' to bridge these epistemological gaps (Nightingale, 2014:4).

The structure of the literature reviewed in this first chapter can be understood as converging around three conceptual 'agendas'. These agendas are not intended to be prescriptive, as I tend to share Sonia Livingstone's unease at attempts to present audience studies as a strict progression of 'theory-to-theory'; the reality is much more recursive, and it is often the case that efforts to 'compartmentalize' theoretical developments have then become implicated in the segregating of the research paradigm (Livingstone, 2003:8). Rather, these agendas should represent, as Pertti Alasuraati asserts, a 'storyline' in audience study, a means to follow the history of audience research in such a way that themes and patterns of inquiry are made more coherent (Alasuurati, 1999). This chapter's storyline is set out, in particular, to speak to the emergence of online audience research as a key element of current audience study, and how it has come to conceive of audience reception as an ambient, interactive process.

The first agenda of audience research identified in this review represents a preoccupation with the influence of mass media on the psyche. At the turn of the 20th century, research was centred on notions of the audience as being systematically 'managed' by mass media, which cultivated an impression of audiences as being undiscerning, vulnerable, and generally 'passive' in their interactions with media. Naturally, this work on 'passive audiences' inspired contrary perspectives: by mid-century, a reactionary echelon of research into television audiences had emerged, including studies that sought to evaluate the social complexity of audience participation (Bennet, 2014). The first half-century of audience research could therefore be characterised as the 'swinging of a pendulum' between notions of audience passivity and activeness (Katz, 1980). This first section will illustrate how the development of these polemic theoretical positions cemented the first 'breaks' in the audience research tradition. Whilst film scholars and industry officials maintained a notion of audiences as being passive 'spectators', cultural theorists moved more towards studying individual practices of consumption, and how audience members can negotiate aspects of their media experiences. The development of 'active audience' theories thus heralded the birth of audience reception studies, which is the second agenda under review in this chapter.

In its infancy, reception studies were regarded as a site of 'cross-fertilization' between subjects, intended to 'reinvigorate its mother and father paradigms' and unite audience research in a common conceptual motive (Livingstone and Das, 2013). However, as I will demonstrate in this section, this convergence between disciplines struggled to come to fruition. Film studies continued to pursue investigation of textual elements as 'designating' meaning to audiences, here typified by the rise of 'screen theory', whereas cultural studies scholars advanced more towards investigating how people's contextual experiences guided their interpretations of media. Rather than replicating the 'linear' model of media effects offered in earlier audience theories, television studies scholars proposed a more complex model of media/audience engagement, wherein social contexts, semiotic meanings and settings of consumption could be seen to impact on the audience's interpretation of media discourses. This agenda saw the rise of the 'audience ethnography' as a means of studying people's everyday encounters with media texts. This method was instrumental in uncovering the ways that social, political and cultural contexts inform audience members reception of media content. Reception studies, at this time in its development, gained a reputation for tackling 'identity politics', with the research clearly articulating how people of differing ages, genders, classes and ethnicities could have different interpretations of the same material (Morley, 1980; Radway, 1984; Ang, 1996). This preoccupation with how reception can be structured by the contexts of people's everyday media encounters has fed through into current theoretical and methodological practices.

The third agenda addressed in this chapter can be seen to have defined audience research from the late 1980s onwards to the present day. This recent agenda can be assimilated under the umbrella of 'new media studies', in that it has shown a somewhat radical reorientation towards studying forms of digital media and their pervasiveness in daily life. This paradigm focuses on the 'ever-diversifying range of activity which is said to indicate the presence of an active audience' (Takahashi, 2002:5), a process which, researchers argue, is confounding distinctions between media 'producers' and media 'consumers'. The critical focus of this new agenda is aimed at interrogating the spectrum of audience participation occurring within the current media-rich environment. Concerns have been raised whether the use of digital

technologies can problematize accounts on audience activity, as observers of new media audiences may be overestimating the power of the audience in comparison to the power of the media (Livingstone, 2018). Interestingly, then, this most recent agenda has shown a resurgence of themes since relinquished within the research canon, with notions of audience 'agency' again coming under question. Though still in development, this latest agenda of audience research has elicited calls for more reflexive and rigorous approaches to study, as offering a necessary infusion of new perspectives into the field. This final section articulates how digital platforms can act as useful intermediaries for audience research, helping to capture the practices and processes of an audience that is at once complex, contradictory, and continually transforming (Hill in Di Giovanni and Gambier, 2018:3).

## **2.1 Passive and Active Audience Theories**

This first review section explores the impacts of the Media Effects tradition on the trajectory of audience studies. This research tradition, which first took shape between the early 1900's to 1940's, was effective in establishing how the media can elicit (short-term) behavioural changes, and thus was instrumental in 'constituting a social history of thinking about the media and its impact on society' that has continued on from the early twentieth century to the modern day (O'Neill, 2011:2). Media Effects research dealt primarily with a notion of a 'passive' audience, that is, an audience that will uncritically accept messages being transmitted to them through mass media. Though it can be argued the field of audience research has now moved past notions of audience 'passivity', it is important to the critical contexts of this study to understand just how pervasive the concept of the passive audience has been, and how we can still find trace-elements of these discourses in contemporary debate. People still talk freely about the 'brainwashing' properties of mass media: currently, anxieties oscillate around 'screen addiction' and the dangers of exposure to 'deviant' material made accessible on Internet platforms (Mueller, 2019). It is possible to recognise familiar concerns over passivity in debates on how Internet usage can be a corruptive influence for younger users (Lim, 2013), or in criticisms of social media, which has been condemned for seemingly 'infantilizing' its users, convincing them they are contributing to social life more actively than they are (Harlow and Guo, 2014:4). Research on media effects essentially created the 'baseline' for how we perceive audiences in the modern day. For this reason, this study had to be attuned to the evolution of this research tradition, particularly considering the tradition's early investment in studying film audiences.

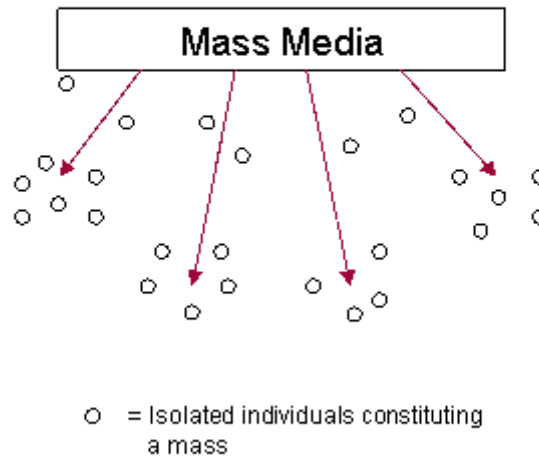
Though audience studies on television have come to dominate much of the research canon, some of the first recorded audience studies were conducted in relation to film. The turn of the 20th century saw cinema emerge as a foremost mass medium, the establishment of projector shows in permanent premises ('nickelodeons') marking the establishment of what would become a global entertainment industry (Christie, 2012:11). Early picture shows allowed audiences from all walks of life to engage - often for the first time - in a common social practice. The cinema became a sort of 'alternative public sphere' wherein audiences were able to co-mingle, sharing in their delight or dismay at the pictures on the screen (Shimpach in Nightingale, 2014:77). The sociality of the cinematic event, combined with the sensational content of the moving pictures, made cinema the perfect medium to test out assumptions regarding mass media's influence on people's behaviour. Buckingham and Jensen (2012) state that historically (particularly in times of high public anxiety), critics will zero in on the newest mass medium as a foil for civic unrest (Buckingham and Jensen, 2012). The media

often becomes a scapegoat for much wider, more structurally embedded social problems, such as 'social [control], crime, family breakdown or political apathy' (Livingstone, 2005:6). Film audiences were inevitably caught up in these 'moral panics'; the combination of cinema's 'publicness', the immersive features of the theatre space, and the affective nature of its content being said to produce an experience that could 'stimulate the passions' and induce 'herd-like' behaviours in its audiences (Livingstone, 2005). Cinema had quickly gained a reputation as a 'mesmeric' medium: movies of the early twentieth century have since been conceived of as a "cinema of attractions" for their deliberate emphasis on 'sensation, immersion, movement [and] spectacle' in their address (Gunning 1990), with Allen repeating the now infamous example of those first film viewers who were said to have 'dove under their seats at the sight of Lumiere's train coming into the station' (Allen,1990:348). Critics took observations of viewer's affective responses to cinema as evidence of a powerful - and potentially dangerous - relationship forming between the medium and its audiences. Gripssund (1998) argues, therefore, that audience research of the time was undergone in an attempt to verify 'intuitive feelings' about film's detrimental effect on the moral psyche (Gripssund, 1998:2013). Though Robert C. Allen (1990) points out that many of the reports coming forward about film audiences were anecdotal, being 'couched in terms of unqualified generalization' (Allen, 1990:348), they were accepted, in part, because they seemed to corroborate popular feeling towards cinema as being a fantastical, illusory - even 'illicit' - experience. Public discourses began to propagate impressions of cinema as immoral, and the film audience as an 'unconscious (sometimes resigned, in any case impotent) witness' to hypnotic images (Usai, 2001). Thus, the notion of audience passivity cemented itself firmly in the very roots of cinema research.

From within this flurry of public anxieties and moral condemnation, a new model for mass media transmission began to assert itself. Media Effects perpetuated a causal model of mediation known as the 'direct effect' or 'transmission' response, wherein media messages were seen as being directly received and interpellated by the audience member - much like an infusion being administered through a needle. Unsurprisingly, this theory of 'direct' audience transmission became known as the Hypodermic Needle Theory (see also: the Magic Bullet). Mass media audiences were conceived of as a passive 'subject', through which the sum of behaviours being impressed upon them by media content could then be affected.

**Figure 1: Model of the Hypodermic Needle Theory from Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955)**

## Hypodermic Needle Theory (after Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955)



It was ascertained that certain audiences, specifically 'children, women, the poor, the working class, the uneducated' (Morley, 2006:3), could be more susceptible to the interpellation of media messages than others. Attention to youth audiences, in particular, drew much of the public focus at this time, meaning a large majority of public funding for research was diverted towards studying the effects of mass media on children's attitudes and behaviours (Livingstone, 2005:6). A prime example of such research was the Payne Fund Studies, an American research project which was carried out between 1926-1933. These privately funded studies were set up to address concerns over 'the susceptibility of America's youth to motion pictures and the issue of social control they engendered' (Peterson, 2013:1). The studies were wide-ranging in their methodologies, with some utilising qualitative methods, including participant observation and autoethnography, whilst others adopted quantitative methods, including surveys and questionnaires, to examine audience members. One study even incorporated bio-technological methods, which involved 'hooking children up to psychogalvanometers and pneumo-cardiographs that monitored perspiration, respiration, and heart rate' (Malin, 2009:368). Overall, the studies produced thirteen separate volumes of reports, each of which claimed to provide a variety of evidence that proved motion pictures had behavioural influences on its viewers, particularly 'malleable' younger people, who were much more likely to impersonate the conduct and actions of the characters they watched on the big screen (Foreman, 1933:4). Significantly, findings from each of the Payne Fund studies were widely publicised in the newspapers at the time and a number were adapted into popular texts (Foreman, 1933; Dale, 1938). The findings of this project quickly made their way into the zeitgeist, promoting a popular impression of mass media audiences being vulnerable to corruptive influences. The early history of film audiences was thus intrinsically coloured by notions of viewers as 'atomized, vulnerable, exploited members of a mass group' (Press and Livingstone, 2006).

As this first example should make clear (and as discussed at length in this study's methodology chapter) the tactics used to study audiences can have long-lasting (and often



damaging) resonances on perceptions of audience activity. Continued public interest in examining media influence has kept audience research at the forefront of media study, however the methods of approaching audiences for study have been oddly self-satisfying, often prioritising cursory data over in-depth information. Take the previous example. Though influential in their time, the Payne Fund studies have since been roundly critiqued by media scholars. It is argued that the studies were not set up to be longitudinal (e.g., held over an extended period of time to chart long-term effects), so behaviours recorded only short-term effects, with many of the findings rested on the 'proficiency' of the technology available at the time and the ability of experimental research designs to be able to replicate naturalistic conditions of consumption (Malin, 2009). An overreliance on statistical data means that social factors were not accounted for in the resulting findings - there was no distinction made in race, gender or class between study subjects and there is very little discussion of any influences found in the home, social group, or school (Petersen, 2013). Livingstone argues that this makes the proposed correlation between behaviour and media viewership a 'spurious' allegation, as it essentially leaves a 'third category' of effects - the effects of social or domestic influences - unexplored (Livingstone, 2005:9). Virginia Nightingale maintains that early audience studies often produced research that subordinated broader, much more pertinent questions of social control into 'causal' effects and overly simplistic data (Nightingale, 1996: vii). This can put research work into audiences 'at odds with any political goals of de-centring dominant practices or discourses' (Staiger, 1986:21), ultimately producing a sort of 'self-fulfilling' report, which neither challenges nor unpacks the influences it was initially set out to examine. This has been an especially contentious issue in film audience research, wherein otherwise expository data is often consumed by industry interests.

Audience research is a pertinent investment for any industry, but Hollywood has, in particular, a long-established history of audience evaluation. From their earliest picture shows, Hollywood officials began producing reports of audience response to their content. This research mainly consisted of quantitative investigations, such as statistical analysis of audience demographics, corporate reports and box-office reviews (Biltreyst and Meers, 2018:24), and was conducted with a view towards producing financing for future motion pictures (Hayward, 2000:186). Livingstone argues that this meant movie audiences were often tackled with a 'simplicity' that was inappropriate to the context of the millions of individuals who made up the movie-viewing public (Livingstone, 1996). Audiences were typically approached by the industry as 'collectives, aggregates of individuals' (Reinhard, 2016), which resulted in 'top-down' analyses of engagement - e.g., an approach that works with the 'big picture' of audience activity, before working its way down to individual cases (Biltreyst and Meers, 2018:28). Reinhard details how the 'real nature' of the film audience has often been neglected by such approaches 'insofar as it has been erroneously homogenised and oversimplified' in the name of commercial interests (Reinhard, 2016: Staiger, 2005). This process of 'distilling' audience response into statistics often meant that individual responses were often not preserved in the research, 'either because they are deemed *unworthy* or unsuitable for the purposes of further commercial exploitation' (Reinhard, 2016). Historical perspectives on audience response are seen to be lacking, therefore, because this kind of information was usually restricted to the *distributors themselves* (Stafford, 2007:39). Researchers have argued that this represents the start of a systematic 'suppression' of the audience by the film industry (Miller, Govil, McMurria and Maxwell, 2002:21). Miller

(2010) expands that market research will often deny the film audience access to the products of their own labour - in this case, the 'speech acts' that constitute their response to a film (Miller, 2010:210) - as this assures that producers can continue to 'extend corporate control over the infrastructure of consumption' (Biltreyst and Meers, 2018:27). Commercial forces within the film industry were (and arguably still are) reducing audience experiences down into generic categories, which naturally overlook the nuances and complexities of audience response. With the benefit of hindsight, it seems clear that some of the first 'dislocations' in audience theory occurred because the methods being used to study viewers very often *excluded the voices of the audiences themselves*. This is a tradition that this thesis sets out to challenge, and I will start by laying forth the contexts and conditions in which audience researchers had to seek out more 'intimate' viewer responses.

As Ross and Nightingale note, changes in technology will often parallel changes in theory, as these changes prompt a need to 'refocus and reshape' the way research is undertaken (Ross and Nightingale, 2003:147). For audience study conducted from 1960s onwards, the new technology that changed the landscape of audience research in this way was television. Television was fundamental to the development of a new 'strain' of audience research because it created new contexts for mass media consumption. TV, like radio before it, was one of the first significant examples of a 'domestic medium': a technology that has a personal presence in our lives as it is often an element of our homes, providing information and entertainment from the comfort of the living room or bedroom (Morley, 2005:1). It became clear that a new framework of engagement was needed to understand practices of television viewing, particularly as media effect models, being so invested in forms of 'one to many' transmission, couldn't be as easily extended to TV viewing conditions. Attention to domesticated conditions of consumption offered researchers a more candid perspective on media engagement, a view into its 'untidy reality', wherein various texts and contexts have to jostle with daily distractions and routines for a share of the viewer's attention (Shimpach in Nightingale, 2014:77). Studies on television audiences thus shifted scholarly attention towards the possibility of audiences being discerning consumers, and therefore more 'active' in their interactions with media than first theorised. In this respect, an instrumental paradigm in the progression towards the 'active audience' was Uses and Gratifications Theory (U&G).

The U&G approach is generally recognized to be a sub-tradition of media effects research (McQuail, 1994). Though still embedded in behaviourist epistemologies, the insights this paradigm provided have been significant to the development of this study, as research conducted within this branch of media study determined the varying ways audiences 'make use' of the media they consume. The field's overarching idea has been that the media is, for its audiences, a source of *pleasure*, which is ritually or instrumentally used by viewers for purposes such as diversion, personal relation, self-identification and surveillance (McQuail et al., 1972). Katz, Blumer and Gurevitch (1974) posited five categories through which people prioritise their media use. These include:

- To be informed or educated
- To identify with characters
- As a form of entertainment
- To enhance social interaction

- To alleviate the stresses and anxieties of daily life

(Katz, Blumer and Gurevitch, 1974)

Acknowledgement of audiences having a discriminating relationship with mass media, whereby they 'pick-and-choose' their levels of engagement depending on their needs or desires, served to prescribe some agency back to the media consumer. As Halloran comments, this led media and communications research 'away from the habit of thinking in terms of what the media do *to* people and substitute for it the idea of what people do *with* the media' (Halloran, 1970, emphasis author's own). Ultimately, acknowledgement that media works *through* people, not merely *upon* them, paved the way for more 'productive' conceptions of audience activity.

Uses and Gratifications was undoubtedly instrumental in the theoretical shift from passive audiences to active audiences. U&G research showed that media effects were not ubiquitous, and that reception of the media text could differ according to the individual's desires. However, whilst this paradigm offers a useful framework for understanding how audiences negotiate their viewing activities, it does not provide a framework for understanding how audiences 'make sense' of the media they are utilising (Schroder, 2018). Uses and Gratifications is explicitly a theory of 'usage', in that it uncovers processes of audience engagement *up till the moment of interpretation*. It does not, however, offer a specific explanation of how media engagement informs processes of sense-making, which is intrinsic in establishing online audiencehood as a meaningful practice. The 1970's -1990's therefore saw a surge of scholarly work on the subject of audience reception: the study of how media messages are interpellated into an individual's meaning-making processes. Reception studies owes much to the conceptual work of Uses and Gratifications theorists because, as Reinhard points out, it wasn't until the audience was conceived of as being 'active' in their media engagements that studies into reception had much grounding, as previous notions of audience passivity assumed that media content would be interpreted by audiences in the same way (Reinhard, 2016:5). The notion that audiences are capable of making their own meaning from media content and are not reliant on the structures of the media text to 'determine' meaning for them, was therefore one of the founding principles of reception studies (Hall, 1974; Morley, 1980; Fiske, 1987).

## 2.2 Reception Studies

Audience reception research considers how "audiences differentially read and make sense of messages which have been transmitted, and act on those meanings, within the context of the rest of their situation and experience" (Morley, 1980:11). In epistemological terms, reception research was part of an emerging agenda in media studies now commonly referred to as the 'cultural turn'. This turn was symbolic of a revised research-political agenda which sought to 'rehabilitate popular culture as a legitimate object of study' (Schröder, 1992). British Cultural Studies was emerging as a foremost discipline in this regard, with the founding of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (1964-2002) representing a new institutional home for the study of media audiences. British Cultural Studies promoted a 'granular' approach to social study which sought to critique the normalised processes by which dominant cultures privilege certain 'ways of seeing' (Murdock, 1989). This agenda still maintained the view of media as an ideological force, but it gave significance to the audience's ability to challenge these hegemonic powers, rather than continuing to perceive

them as an 'exploited' collective. Reinhard further explains the significance of the Birmingham School's perspective when detailing the critical objectives of reception study:

Cultural reception studies sought to understand how the media can influence people. A key difference is that these reception studies focus on the interplay between audiences, culture, and power in trying to understand how a dominant ideology can be replicated or changed through audience reception. The importance of such work has been in a desire to find the instances of resistance to this domination, and when this domination is reinforced.

(Reinhard, 2016:11)

Importantly, this agenda for research necessitated something that was, at this point in time, still sorely lacking within audience research - perspectives coming from the actual audiences themselves (Rapp, 2019). Reception studies explicitly championed a 'bottom-up' approach to audiences: in contrast to earlier audience methodologies, these studies centred on teasing out audience members routine engagements with media, and how these individualised activities could speak to the construction of much broader socio-cultural dynamics. In the next section I will break down some of the formative theoretical works in this field and how I have adapted their lessons into the fabric of my own study.

It would be, I think, impossible to embark on a review of audience reception research without first acknowledging the work of Stuart Hall. One of the 'founding fathers' of the Birmingham School, Hall's contribution to cultural studies cuts a broad path across issues of media hegemony and cultural identity. His seminal work *Encoding and Decoding* (1974) is widely credited as the foundation of audience reception studies as we know it today. Working within a semiotic framework, which explores the intersection of 'signs' in communicative processes, Hall's encoding/decoding model was set out to deconstruct how media texts function as 'fragments of ideology' (Barthes, 1977). It is argued that media content is constructed of a series of 'sign-vehicles' - material signifiers intended to deploy specified information (Danesi, 1993:24) - that are set forth to relay a set of discursive 'codes' to their audiences (Hall, 1973). Hall's model of meaning worked with the perspective that 'producers create media texts in ways that encode a preferred or dominant reading' (Croteau and Hoynes, 2002:168), meaning each media text essentially has discourses of power 'written' into it' (Hall, 1974). According to Hall, however:

Before the message can have an effect (however defined) or satisfy a 'need' or be put to a 'use', it must first be perceived as a meaningful discourse and meaningfully decoded. It is this set of decoded meanings which 'have an effect', influence, entertain, instruct or persuade, with very complex perceptual, cognitive, emotional, ideological or behavioural consequences.

(Hall, 1974:3)

Like U&G theories, Hall's model corroborates the notion that audiences must find 'use' in the media they are interacting with in order for media messages to have any effect on viewers. Where Hall expands upon theories of uses and gratifications, however, is in providing a tertiary model of how audiences differentially process such effects, effectively producing one of the first theoretical frameworks for approaching audiences as 'active' receivers of content. Although Hall's work continues to emphasise the ideological power of the media text, he

allows for the possibility that media audiences can subvert these encoded discourses. The encoding/decoding model demonstrates how creation of meaning relies on the 'significance attaching to the patterned arrangement of given signs and symbols within a culture shared by sender (encoder) and receiver (decoder) alike' (McQuail and Windahl, 1993: 146). Hall argues that media messages are never 'transparent' in their delivery of encoded meaning as they contain multiple discursive elements, and therefore have no fixed or singular meaning. He iterated that texts are 'polysemic' in nature, meaning they possess a multitude of possible readings (Livingstone and Das, 2013:6). This essentially means that that textual meaning *cannot* be wholly 'determined' by media producers, and therefore audiences cannot be *wholly* passive in their reception of media messages, as they are implicated in the 'active' processing and negotiation of a text's various meanings. Audience reception represents a multi-tiered process that necessitates dialogic interaction between producer and receiver, both of whom occupy a shared symbolic lifeworld. Hall claimed that it is therefore not possible to employ a linear model of meaning to audience engagement, as the relationship between media text and media audience is much more *interactional* than first theorised.

Hall's research did the necessary work of identifying three fundamental kinds of 'dialogic' audience reading, which he named the *dominant*, the *negotiated*, and the *oppositional* response (Hall, 1973). The 'dominant' represents a response to the text that the audience was 'obliged' to have, as it 'typically conformed to the prevailing views of the majority culture' (e.g., "I agree with the message of the movie that the evil characters must be stopped at all costs") (Stafford, 2007:129). This reading response most closely resembles the direct transmission model, in that it represents a fairly 'straightforward' relay of meaning between producer and receiver. The 'negotiated' response, meanwhile, suggests that audiences can elect a preferred reading, and opt out of some of the meanings being offered. For example, a viewer may generally agree with the overarching messages being relayed by the media text ("the bad guys are bad and must be stopped, and the good guys are good and should be celebrated"), but on a situational level they may be working with experiences that provide 'exceptions' to these textual rules ("I know from experience that people can be a mix of good and bad, so this dynamic seems pretty simplistic"). The third kind of audience response - the 'oppositional' reading - is to reject everything about a reading and 'create [one's] own reading in opposition' ("I don't believe any of their actions are justified. All the characters are totally self-serving and often lead others into danger. I see them all as villains") (Stafford, 2007:129). This broke down the linear 'behaviouristic' model proposed by earlier media effects studies, and instead conceived the audience's interpellation of media content as being more like a 'discourse', negotiated within an interpretative framework that - significantly - can extend *beyond* the boundaries of the media text and into the audience's pre-existing social frameworks. This means, in brief, that different audience members will interpret texts in different ways, often depending on their 'structural positioning' within society. The encoding/decoding model was one of the first audience reception models that acknowledged that oppositional readings can be generated because the cultures of sender and receiver may not be the same (Sorrentino and Yamaguchi, 2008:399). Cultural factors such as class status, gender, race or sexuality will inform whether the media messages 'fits' within the audience member's pre-existing symbolic framework. The encoding/decoding model would therefore set a constant for audience reception study that this study needed to maintain: an understanding how social, cultural and political contexts are implicated in media communication (Sender and Decherney, 2016:382).

There have been many researchers who have sought to expand upon Hall's model of meaning-making. Theorists such as David Morley, Janice Radway, Elihu Katz and Tamar Liebes have each presented work that set out to identify '[sets] of cognitive and interpretative processes' (Livingstone, 2000) that affected media meaning for different people under differing social circumstances. These works are now widely recognised as formative studies within the reception studies research canon. Morley's *Nationwide Study* (1980), which adopted Hall's encoding/decoding model as theoretical framework, proved the vanguard for a new wave of socio-economic audience research. Morley set forth an ethnographic study exploring discourses around a current affairs show, *Newsnight*, which specifically evidenced how people's decoding's of the programme were contingent on their 'societal "contexts" as well as their "situational" circumstances of place and time' (Schroder, 2019). Morley's work has been heralded as canonical in the same way as Hall's because their studies were both politically framed, in that they showed how the audience's structural positioning (their class, race, language etc.) were more likely to influence normative and/or deviant interpretations of the same news content. For instance, a sample group of bank managers shown excerpts of the programme were found to align to mostly dominant readings of the material (e.g. readings consistent with given hegemonic assumptions), whilst trade union officials, Asian shopkeepers and Black higher-education students offered mostly oppositional readings (Morley, 1980). These participants would interplay their own experiences with those meanings constructed by the text to contest the supposed 'normativity' of the programme content (Livingstone, 2000). It was determined that these participants experienced 'alienation' from the text, which did not afford them a reading position that meshed with their own cultural positions. Though Morley himself has since critiqued his earlier study, acknowledging that his early work perhaps presented a 'romanticized' idea of media consumers as engaging in a sort of 'semiological guerilla warfare' with content (Morley, 2006:102), the *Nationwide* study contributed fundamental knowledge on how interpretation can be shaped by a range of social factors.

Further studies expanded on how factors of class, race, age and gender are crucial resources for reception. A significant contribution regarding 'gender' as a context informing interpretative practices was Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance* study (1984). Conducted several years after Morley's contribution to the audience reception canon, Radway's project explored the contrast between literary critics' interpretations of popular romance novels with those of 'ordinary' romance readers. She found that ordinary readers rejected the feminist criticism of the literary experts on the 'domestic fate' of the novel's protagonist by substituting an alternative (and also potentially feminist) reading that positions the protagonist's actions as embodying a subtle campaign of feminine strength (Livingstone, 1991:6). Radway summarised those conflicting readings were made by the two groups because the readers each belonged to differing 'interpretative communities'. Interpretative communities, first theorised by Stanley Fish (1976), are social-economic groupings which can be seen to have a 'guiding' effect on people's attitudes towards 'identity, participation, politics and power' (Livingstone and Das, 2013:2). The interpretative community, which is oftentimes a *literal* community that the audience interacts with in the course of their daily life, can be seen to produce specific 'reading strategies' that inform patterns of reception (Radway, 1984:11). Radway's investigation determined that the interpretative processes of her romance readers presented them as 'bricoleurs': the individuals in her study drew meaning from a host of different sources outside of the media text, often drawing on ideologies which were interspersed across

the 'terrain of [their] daily life' (Radway, 1988:364), however it was only when these subjects articulated their meanings *together*, in socially contingent ways, that a 'bigger picture' of audience reception became apparent. This is a theoretical concept I have adapted within my own study – the notable difference being that whilst Radway's bricoleurs were 'symbolically' reassembling media texts, my online bricoleurs are often *physically* reassembling them, through modes of remixing and content creation. Works like Radway's were particularly useful in paving the way for a rise in feminist approaches to audience reception (Ang, 1985; Bird, 1995; Cavalcante, Press and Sender, 2017). Feminist research was fundamental to the critical evolution of the field as these perspectives made vital correlations between 'oppositional' audiences also often being 'marginalised' audiences. I drew on this knowledge in my own research to clarify how processes of interpretation and identity-building can often be mutually constitutive (see pg. 137).

Liebes and Katz, in their reception study 'Interacting with Dallas: Cross-Cultural Readings of American TV' (1990), also provided key context for this study's model of reception. Their study investigated how cultural values could be seen to influence processes of meaning-making. This study was positioned as a response to criticisms of the 'Americanization' of daytime television, and the potential these programmes had to impose Western values on their international audiences. Choosing the popular daytime soap *Dallas* as case study, the study adopted focus groups, held in participants homes, to discuss specific episodes of the programme during and after viewing. Participants were invited to retell details of the episode, and the researcher's recorded the subsequent group 'decoding' of the episode between one another (Livingstone, 2005). Ultimately, the study found that non-Western viewers held differing interpretations to the author's own reading of the material. For instance, whilst American viewer's understanding of the content hinged on the personalities of the soap characters, Russian-Jewish viewers were much more likely to focus on the moral and political themes underlying the plot. Moroccan Arab viewers, meanwhile, were likely to relay a 'sequential' understanding which centred around themes of narrative cohesion and continuity, and Japanese viewers reported that they could not find any point of reference from which they could gain an understanding and appreciation of the soap opera (tellingly, *Dallas* was pulled from air in Japan within six months of its initial broadcast) (Rodriguez, 2018:38). The study is therefore widely recognised as deposing the notion of 'cultural imperialism' in media programming.

Liebes and Katz study not only offered vital perspectives on diversity in cultural reception, it also offered this study a vital framework for negotiating the significance of 'the text' in processes of interpretation. As explored on pg. 100, this thesis chose not to engage in textual analysis of the films studied, in order centre audience experiences. This can be a difficult ontological position to maintain, however, as the text functions as a vital source of information in the interpretative process. The 'Dallas' study devised a modal language for clarifying the text/context relationship which I was able to build upon in my own work. Liebes and Katz determined that soap opera viewers tended to move between two modes of media reception: the 'referential' and the 'critical' mode. They articulate how, when presenting in modes of 'referential reception', the viewer will seek out connections between the fictional reality presented onscreen and their own life experiences (Liebes and Katz, 1990). Though meaning is positioned as existing 'within' the text, this content is seen as being 'open' to the audience, who can then compare their own experiences with those offered by the textual

material. 'Identification' with characters and content, the ways that the material 'relates to one's own life' (Neuman, 1982:474), thus becomes a predominant context framing this type of audience response. Katz and Liebes other mode, the 'critical reading', articulates how the audience can shift between immersion in the text and objective critique of its features. This receptive mode more clearly shows the difference between audience critique of *content* (e.g., plot, characters, messages, motivations, actions) and critique of textual *construction* (editing, continuity, genre tropes etc.). This is a useful distinction to make as Carolyn Michelle (2007) makes a challenging point that Hall and Morley's models of reception fail to capture the full complexity of the interpretative process because it conflates responses to textual *form* with textual *content* (Michelle, 2007:183). That is, the audience's acceptance or opposition to the ideological message of the content is often confused with their response to the 'aesthetics' of the text. Using findings from Morley's *Nationwide* study to exemplify this distinction, Michelle elaborates how the bank manager's responses to the current affairs show as being 'just a tea-time entertainment programme, embarrassing, patronising sensationalism' (Morley, 1980:57) do not appear to pose opposition to the programme's messaging (hence why Morley designated the bank managers responses as 'dominant' readings), but they do show a particular sensitivity to, and criticism of, the show's productive form. This represents a form of meta-criticism that Hall and Morley's models of reception both take for granted, but which potentially represents a whole new category of audience literacy. Katz and Liebes 'critical response' therefore provided a more nuanced category for analysing how the audience can move between interpretation of textual content and interpretation of textual form, and thus between 'subjective' and 'objective' readings of the material. This thesis adopts these receptive modes in its own findings to help develop a common language for analysing the online audience's shifting levels of allegiance to the media text.

The research canon detailed thus far provided a useful base of knowledge from which this study could draw inspiration. However, as iterated throughout this thesis, the specificities of contemporary media consumption, which are significantly more diffuse and diverse than the mediascape of these earlier studies, required a more convergent (and indeed more contemporary) framework of reference. In this respect, Carolyn Michelle's study 'Modes of Reception: A Consolidated Analytical Framework' (2007) provided essential framing for my own reception work. Michelle consolidates over thirty years of reception research in order to produce a conceptual model for viewer interpretation that can be applied across multiple mediums, genres and content. She criticises the inability of reception scholars to agree on general principles of active audience response and suggests that this absence of a commonly accepted interpretative framework is resigning reception studies to the realms of 'anecdotalism' (Michelle, 2007:4). In doing so, Michelle aligns with my own concerns over the field's rampant pursuit of 'progress', namely that audience researchers are producing ever-increasing and divergent models of reception but facilitating very little work aimed at drawing together any 'existing understandings into a coherent, unified model of audience reception' (Michelle, 2007:3). Michelle believes that this issue can be countered by applying a working model of audience reception that helps researchers identify 'correspondences and divergences' in audience response across a wider range of social, cultural and mediatory contexts (Michelle, 2007:4). It is this integrative model that I have expanded upon in the body of my own reception work (see pg. 131).



Michelle identifies four 'consolidated' modes of audience reception, which she designates as forms of *transparent*, *referential*, *mediated* and *discursive* sense-making. Rather than falling back on unhelpful dichotomies between 'active' vs. 'passive' modes, she relays that the relationship between text, context and viewer may be more usefully conceived in terms of a 'continuum' ranging from close (and largely subjective and textually-bound) modes of interpretation to the more distant and supposedly "objective" modes of response favoured by critics and media educators. Importantly, Michelle asserts that these modes can be adopted in tandem, which I strongly believe speaks less to the differing 'literacies' of the audience members involved, and more to the diverse and often contrary nature of media engagement today. I will expand briefly on the characteristics of each mode of reception, in order to establish a context for their use in chapter six of this thesis.

**Table 1: Modes of reception from Carolyn Michelle's consolidated analytical framework (2007)**

DENOTATIVE LEVEL OF MEANING		
<p><b>Transparent Mode:</b> Text as life</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <i>Non-fiction texts:</i> perceived as a "mirror" of reality</li> <li>▪ <i>Fiction texts:</i> "suspension of disbelief"</li> <li>▪ Ideological/discursive content is <i>implicitly</i> read "straight" → dominant/preferred decoding</li> </ul>	<p><b>Referential Mode:</b> Text as <i>like</i> life</p> <p><i>Comparative sources potentially drawn on:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i) Personal experience/ individual biography</li> <li>ii) Immediate life world experience</li> <li>iii) Experience and knowledge of the wider social/ political/ economic/ cultural/ national/ international context of production or reception</li> </ul>	<p><b>Mediated Mode:</b> Text as a <i>production</i></p> <p><i>Heightened attunement to:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i) Textual aesthetics</li> <li>ii) Generic form</li> <li>iii) Intentionality               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Textual</li> <li>• Generic</li> <li>• Professional/ Industry-based</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
CONNOTATIVE LEVEL OF MEANING		
<p><b>Discursive Mode: Text as a <i>message</i></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i) <i>Analytical</i> (Comprehension of message)               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identification</li> <li>• Motivation</li> <li>• Implication</li> </ul> </li> <li>ii) <i>Positional</i> (Response to that message)</li> </ul> <p style="text-align: center;"> <i>Dominant/Preferred</i>                      <i>Negotiated</i>                      <i>Oppositional</i> </p>		
EVALUATION		
<i>Hegemonic Reading</i>	<i>Contesting Reading</i>	<i>Counter-Hegemonic Reading</i>

Close/ Subjective ←-----→ Distant / Objective  
 (Relationship between text and viewer)

The first mode of interpretation, the 'transparent mode', is perhaps the closest to Hall's 'dominant' reading described earlier in this section. This mode represents, in Michelle's words, a form of 'engulfment' in the media text, which figures for the viewer as their main source of information. Viewers reading in a transparent mode will assess and comment on the

events depicted in the text as though 'they were encountering them first-hand, rather than through the mediations of narrative construction' (Michelle, 2007:10). Importantly, viewers operating within this mode will then 'temporarily suspend disbelief and critical distance to grant fictional worlds the status of 'real life' ...an essential precursor to deriving the specific forms of pleasure and enjoyment intended by the makers of such texts' (Michelle, 2007:10). The transparent mode therefore represents that somewhat 'controversial' notion that audiences are not always critical nor discerning in their engagement with media texts, and that they may in fact exhibit superficial receptive responses. This is *not* to claim that these viewers are necessarily 'passive' – only that they are electing to engage with content in order to fulfil particular needs and demands. Transparent readings depend on a level of attachment (or 'closeness') to the media text, which is why these types of readings will most often correlate with subjective or emotional responses from viewers. Michelle asserts that these 'close', emotionally driven reading strategies have been the most maligned within the scholarly discourse, being closer to traditional models of 'direct' response than to 'active audience' practices, but that regardless of their passive connotations, this form of interpretation should be acknowledged and examined so that we might explore their ideological implications in a more conducive manner.

The second mode Michelle identifies as occurring across the canon of audience reception literature is the 'referential mode'. The referential mode is 'one step removed' from the media text, relying instead on comparisons between the text and the viewer's own lived experiences to facilitate meaning-making. This mode of reception will not only draw upon alternative (intratextual) media content to inform the audience members understanding, but also knowledge provided to them by experiences with family, friends or colleagues. These experiences will be drawn upon to contest the realism of the media text, meaning viewers will often usually offer an assessment a text's 'perceived fit, or lack of fit', within the context of their own cultural milieu (Michelle, 2007:12). This mode is comparable, therefore, to Hall's 'negotiated' mode, as well as Liebes and Katz's own 'referential' mode identified in their *Dallas* study. An interesting quirk demonstrated by participants of Michelle's study when operating within the 'referential mode' was a tendency to relay brief 'life biographies' to the researcher in order to affirm or contest their interpretation of a text; viewers in Michelle's study drew on their 'stock of experiences of childhood, adulthood and parenthood, along with personal or familiar relationships', to frame their reading of content (Michelle, 2007:12). Referential readers will therefore position the media text not necessarily as a 'reflection' of the real world, but as a text that 'stands *alongside* (it)' (ibid.). Referential readers negotiate with the ideological implications of the text and will either affirm or deny it's 'depicted reality' in relation to their own life experiences.

The final two modes, 'mediated' and 'discursive', are presented as Michelle's response to Hall and Morley's somewhat 'clunky' amalgamation of responses to textual form and content (see pg 32). Both these modes can be considered as demonstrating objective readings, as viewers operating in both modes will demonstrate a 'detachment' from the media text. This detachment is undertaken for differing means, however, often depending on the audience members own 'discursive objectives' (Michelle, 2007:13). The 'mediated' mode is intended to demonstrate the viewer's 'explicit recognition of the constructed nature of the text as a media *production*' - that is, a media text operating within formalised codes and conventions of construction (ibid.). The mediated mode is an *aesthetic* response to media content, which

usually involves some sort of commentary on the 'quality of production, generic features of the text, or the perceived intention of its producers' (Michelle, 2007:14). Michelle argues that these are not wholly 'critical' readings, in so much as they don't disrupt or challenge the ideological 'morals' of the text, however she acknowledges that this mode of reading does require specified knowledge of the media industry, which suggests that these viewers are able to draw upon sophisticated 'interpretative repertoires' when formulating their responses to the material. Mediated viewers demonstrate receptive responses that closely resemble those of the critic or scholar, in that they will often take an evaluative position on the 'quality' of the media text. The 'discursive' mode, meanwhile, tends to be more expressively critical regarding the underlying ideological connotations and 'morals' of the media text. Viewers who adopt a discursive approach are often more concerned with the machinations of the media producers and the propositions inherent in the media content than with the aesthetic features of said text. Discursive approaches can be compared to Hall's 'oppositional' reading strategy, as many of these responses will reflect a negative impression of the media text (and by extent, media producers) as having a 'manipulative intent' (Richardson and Corner, 1986). Discursive readings are more implicitly political in their operation, drawing on their knowledge of social and cultural structures to inform their interpretation of the 'intent' of the text and its producers. The discursive mode is more 'far-reaching' in its criticism than the mediated mode, which Michelle maintains is an important distinction to bear in mind when considering critical relations to the media text.

Michelle argues that in producing these 'consolidatory' modes of reception she can offer a systematic approach to meaning-making that the field of audience studies has, to date, struggled to conceive of. This study represents, to the best of my knowledge, one of the first attempts (outside of Michelle's own study) to apply these consolidated modes of reception to online interpretative practice. My hope is that utilisation of this framework for meaning will produce further 'cohesion' in interpretative responses and provide an intuitive groundwork from which studies on interaction audience reception can be fortified.

### **2.3 New Media and Audiencehood**

As reception research developed around contextualised approaches to study, a third agenda of audience research began to emerge. This most recent agenda seeks to build upon notions of audience 'mobility' by examining the frameworks within which people conceive of media as being a part of their 'lived realities' (Alasuutari, 1999:5). Audience study from the 1990s onwards have employed methods which work to conceptualise audience engagement as a type of 'flow': a succession of habitual practices, structures and habits that articulates the medium-audience encounter as an intrinsic part of everyday life. This new agenda for audience research opens up the active audience debate to include the possibility of 'distraction': this phase of research disrupts the notion of an 'adsorbed', passive media viewer, and replaces them instead with an active but 'distracted' audience member, whose media practices are intrinsically guided by the structures of their everyday life-worlds. This approach tends to be more pragmatic than previous agendas because it conceives of audience reception less as an abstracted 'theory', and more as an embedded 'process' (Jensen, 1987:22). Klaus Bruhn Jensen (1987) states that strategies for approaching audiences should offer an embedded research framework, wherein the 'interplay' between the audience, the media text and the communication system is more thoroughly detailed. This ultimately means that whilst methods for approaching audience study have become more strategic, with audience

researchers expounding upon the benefits of adopting grounded, empirical methods in their work, conceptual frameworks have become much more open-minded. The current research agenda is less inclined to box audiences into antithetical categories - 'active' or 'passive', 'subjective' or 'objective', 'textual' or 'contextual' - and is more oriented towards understanding the shifting alignments of the modern audience experience. In this way, audience theory is becoming much more responsive to the movements of the time, a development Markham (2012) claims is an altogether more 'fruitful approach to the multi-sidedness of our contemporary media scene' (Markham, 2012:438).

One of the most significant ways in which audiences can be said to have changed in light of our current digitised media landscape is that they appear to have taken a 'leap into authorship' (Rushkoff, 2003). With so much audience activity intersecting with participatory digital tech such as smartphones, tablets and other mobile Internet devices, audiences are exhibiting new practices of knowledge exchange and content production that challenge what was once a rigid divide between the media 'creator' and the media 'viewer'. In the broadcast age, it was perceived that media audiences would simply 'consume' media content. This was - at least in part - because viewers weren't privy to productive processes. Now, however, audiences can contribute and circulate media content themselves in the form of texts and tweets, blogs and vlogs, GIFs, videos, audio files and images. Frank Rose (2014) expounds on what this new dynamic means for the producer/consumer divide:

In a command-and-control world, we know who's telling the story; it's the author. But digital media have created an authorship crisis. Once the audience is free to step out of the fiction and start directing events, the entire edifice of twentieth-century mass media begins to crumble. ... [now] an author can still speak to an audience of millions, but the communication no longer goes just one way. Newspapers and magazines don't just report events anymore, they become forums for discussing them. Movies and TV shows cease to be couch-potato fodder and become catalysts for the imagination. And people (they're not just men anymore) begin to realize they need to stop preaching to consumers and start listening to them. That's what 'sense and respond' means - a dialogue.

(Rose, 2014)

The reconceptualization of the producer/audience relationship as a 'dialogue', rather than as the simplified model of transmission and response, has placed the audience in a position of unprecedented agency. It has become clear that in order to accurately address the authorial potential of the modern media audience, more complex subject positions needed to be developed. In the same way that the introduction of television facilitated the transition from an understanding of audiences as 'passive' observers to 'active' consumers, then, new media platforms such as the Internet have facilitated the reconceptualization of audiences as 'producers' (Bruns, 2008). A portmanteau of 'producer' and 'consumer', the 'produser' is a conceptual category proposed by Axel Bruns (2008) intended to encapsulate the networking and creative capabilities of digital media users. The 'produser' is a term now widely used to refer to audiences operating in interactive environments (Bird, 2011:502), meaning that this thesis can, in fact, claim to be a study of 'produsage'. Bruns conceptual category has proved to be a useful framework when analysing the online audience's participative abilities, particularly when used to frame the power dynamics implicit in online engagement. A

theorist who has worked closely with forms 'produsage', and whose body of research on digital practices has informed much of the theoretical background of this study, is Henry Jenkins.

Now very much a 'household name' in media and cultural studies, Henry Jenkins research has underscored much of the field's current understanding of online audiences. His catalogue of work is underpinned by notions of media audiences as active, participative subjects, whose creative and productive skills have been enhanced by the affordances of networked media (Jenkins, 1992; 2006). Jenkins's research has typically engaged with online fans, whose productive activities naturally cross into the realms of produsage. Fans are usually considered a 'subgroup' of the wider audience body as their practices of engagement are seen to distance them from 'ordinary' consumers (Brooker and Jermyn, 2003:167). Harrington and Bielby (1999) summarise the difference between 'fans' and 'audiences' as being a matter of private vs. public engagement: "To 'view' [media] is a relatively private behaviour. To be a 'fan,' however, is to participate in a range of activities that extend beyond the private act of viewing and reflects an enhanced emotional involvement with a [media] narrative" (Harrington and Bielby, 1999:35). Fans are therefore viewers who will typically seek out other people with whom to share their passions and enthusiasms. These interests can then be strengthened and expanded upon through interaction within diverse social communities, what we have now come to know as 'fandoms' (Booth, 2018; Bury, 2019).

The communal activities of fans, Jenkins argues, affords them a greater level of visibility in the public eye, which therefore make them desirable research subjects. Fans' subcultural capital makes them an influential market demographic, and their productive capabilities have been shown to successfully augment industry practices (see upcoming section on 'transmedia', pg. 51). As Kirsty Sedgman articulates, however, it is often the case that when media audiences are able to organize to a level that they can be considered a quantifiable 'market', they change in the industry's perception from potential 'clients' to potential 'risks' (Sedgman, 2019). There is often pushback (both inside and outside of the commercial sector) towards fans' participative activities, with fans often being 'pathologized' as excessive, infantile, and even 'deviant' subjects (Jenson, 1990:9). This represents *yet another* example of an entrenched division within the field of study. Despite audiences and fans being (essentially) two sides of the same coin, the two subject areas are paradigmatically distinct. Fan studies claims that fan discourse is 'exclusified', as it produces collaborative, creative and critical work that cannot be attributed to the wider audience population, whose engagement with content is usually more 'superficial' (Hills, 2019). Audience studies consider fans as distinct from audiences for much the same reason but will often perpetuate the negative stereotype of fan behaviour being 'excessive' in comparison to the main audience population, who should be considered an altogether more appropriate, restrained and 'reasonable' viewing body (Sedgman, 2018). Matt Hills states that academics are therefore neglecting the 'excluded middle ground of talking about 'fans as audiences and audiences as fans', positioning them not as distinct entities, but as mutual concepts (Hills, 2019). In recent years, it has become clear that dividing audience members based on their participative activities is no longer a viable model for approaching contemporary consumption, with digital media facilitating a whole new host of 'public-facing' social functions. Interactive technologies have put the participative qualities of its users at the forefront of their design: social media sites, for instance, could not function without the active selection of content and the public sharing

of information by its users. In interacting with social media, then, audiences are engaging in collaborative practices that naturally extend beyond their 'atypical' consumption patterns. It has been argued that the participative qualities of networked media have started to bleed 'fannish' practices into mainstream consumption trends (Booth, 2018). Social media has had a significant role to play in normalizing fan behaviour, and therefore a significant role to play in leveraging the differences between these two audience 'factions' (Hills, 2019). This thesis aims to challenge epistemological imbalances between the two subject areas by embellishing on the fannish capacities of online audiences.

As stressed throughout this thesis, social media has had a considerable influence on the way people interact with one another in the modern day, meaning these platforms have come of immediate significance to audience research. The ability of social media to furnish online interaction with a sense of 'liveness', and the ever-increasing mobility of online platforms have been a key element in the ongoing diffusion of our audience experiences. Though work tying social media usage and audience processes together is still in development, there are nevertheless a selection of works that engage with this subject matter in detail. These studies have been fundamental to the theoretical (and methodological) structure of this thesis. The first study that proved integral to this study's background was Victor Costello and Barbara Moore's 'Cultural Outlaws: An Examination of Audience Activity and Online Television Fandom' (2007). Based in fan studies, Costello and Moore's study discusses how audiences use the Internet to augment their television viewing experiences. The project details how chat rooms present a compelling platform for analysing the participative activities of TV audiences (Costello and Moore, 2007:128). The study found that online activity connected to television viewing functioned along a continuum of activity, from online 'lurkers' to a thriving, interpretive community of 'outlaw' fans involved in the 'consumption and production of favoured cultural texts' (Costello and Moore, 2007:128). This meant that fan activity online ranged from simple 'information acquisition', to members seeking in-depth interactions with other fans and, occasionally, media producers (ibid.). In an explicitly 'fan-based' study, however, where it would be expected to find a higher proportion of 'active audience' practices, there was evidence that not *every* audience member committed to the same level of productivity and interaction as others. This offered important grounding for online audience activity. Jenkins submit that online investigations have long had the potential to attract misleading (and often exaggerative) accounts regarding audience behaviour. As pointed out in his work on 'convergence culture' (see pg. 51), online engagement can lead to something of a 'presupposition' of active participation. As barriers to participation are considerably lower for digital audiences, it seems that contributing to the productive life of the media should be, in principle, easier than it has ever been, as the participatory affordances of the medium suggest that all users would be capable of contributing to the 'explosion' of innovation occurring online (Jenkins, 2009). However, in reality, studies show that only a relatively small proportion of Internet users contribute content to online communities (Schröder, 2019). Research from the Pew Research Center, for instance, established that only a fraction of online users (1 in 8) can be said to produce original content in the form of photos (14%) or video (12%) on social media (Pew, Anderson & Caumont, 2014). There is obviously a lapse occurring between representations of online participation, discourses on participative potential, and the realities of media use. Costello and Moore's findings supports the notion of active audiencehood being a 'variable state, as opposed to an absolute condition' of online engagement (Costello and Moore, 2007:139). This concurs with the work of

Rhiannon Bury, who in her 2019 text *Television 2.0: Viewer and Fan Engagement with Digital TV*, suggests that instead of asserting that online audiences' function within a 'culture of participation - that is, a collaborative system of behaviours and customs oriented towards creating media content - researchers should instead be iterating that audience activity operates *along* a 'participatory continuum' (Bury, 2019). Bury's research (similar to Costello and Moore's) finds that even amongst fan communities - who are very much defined by their productive activities - there is little evidence of a linear relationship between online usage and content creation, meaning that it is very likely that theorists have been conflating the conditions of the media culture with the participatory activities of its audiences (Bury, 2019). She suggests, therefore, that we disengage ourselves from the 'ideals' of 'participative culture' and focus instead on examining people's mundane activities, their intrinsic and banal acts of 'audiencing' (Bury, 2019). This study's findings were fundamental in setting forth that the fan/audience distinction is much more mutable than previously theorised, which contributes to a growing number of scholarly voices pushing for greater contextualisation of people's engagement with media within their daily routines and habits of use.

Another study that emphasised the need for embedded work on online audiencehood was Ruth Deller's 'Twittering On: Audience research and participation using Twitter' (2011). Similar to Costello and Moore's study, Deller's sets out to explore elements of 'liveness, participation, convergence and interactivity' in Twitter users' reception of news programming. As Deller's work was more recent and was also conducted in relation to a singular microblogging site (Twitter), it proved especially useful in framing the contexts and conditions of this study. What Deller's reception study highlighted was that people's interpretations of TV content would usually be interspersed with discussions of home and family life, work, the weather, current affairs and other extraneous influences (Deller, 2011). Deller suggests that social media study can therefore offer an embedded perspective on people's receptive practices because they invoke a sense of 'liveness', in that they represent a 'potential connection to our shared social realities as they are happening' (Deller, 2011:223). This not only advocates for more detailed observation of social media communication as representing people's lived experiences with media content, but it also highlights the function of social media platforms as a 'shared ritual centre' (Couldry, 2003:97-99). Deller draws upon Couldry (2003) to discuss how social media 'naturalises the idea that, through the media, we achieve a shared attention to the realities that matter for us as a society. This is the idea of the media as social frame, the myth of the mediated centre' (ibid.). Sites such as Twitter act as a 'hub' between differing media forms, texts and users (Deller, 2011:223), meaning that the sharing of experiences and interpretations is as much a part of the makeup of social media communication as it is in 'real life'. This work shaped my own conception of social media as 'nexus' (see pg. 11), as a site in which various texts, contexts, audience demographics and readings can converge, and from which it can be possible to 'make visible' receptive processes.

Deller's work brings up significant implications regarding the way we engage as 'public' subjects when interacting online. This ties into the recent theoretical work of audience scholar Sonia Livingstone, whose contributions in 'summarizing' the evolution of audience studies have been noted throughout this thesis. Though primarily invested in studying young people's engagement with online media, Livingstone's current research revolves around paradigms of online participation and their connection to public life, in specific: 'the modes

of participation that are afforded to people by particular media and communication infrastructures which then mediate social, cultural or political spheres of life' (Livingstone, 2013: 1). Livingstone's work maintains that media and cultural scholars should turn their attention to the increasingly mediatory quality of people's relation to public life, and how this is producing forms of participation centred around traditionally 'civic' concerns, including 'identity, belonging and lifestyle' (Livingstone, 2005:19). Livingstone claims that as the act of making something 'public' in the modern day often involves representation in online media, it can be argued that distinctions between online activity and civic work are beginning to collapse into one another, as the possibility of engaging within an 'unmediated' public sphere becomes less and less likely (Livingstone, 2005:26). She expands:

Where once people moved in and out of their status as audiences, using media for specific purposes and then doing something else . . . in our present age of continual immersion in media, we are now continually and unavoidably audiences at the same time as being consumers, workers, citizens and publics.

(Livingstone, 2013:22)

This has significant implications for audience activity, as any association with the democratic sphere could afford a 'long sought-after value' to audience analysis (Livingstone, 2005: 26). There are, however, persistent arguments *against* uniting audience activity and 'civic' work: concerns in particular have been raised whether 'media culture...with its emphasis on consumption and entertainment, [would] undercut the kind of public culture needed for a healthy democracy' (Dahlgren, 2003, p.151). Critics seem to agree that collapsing definitions of 'audience' into that of the 'public' would undermine the effectiveness of civic activism and would open the door to 'inauthentic, motivated and divided' discourses on social participation (Livingstone, 2005:26). Somewhat understandably, as arguments against consolidation are tied implicitly into issues of citizenship, inclusivity, and social mobility, audience scholars have found themselves (once again) having to defend the field against cries of triviality, anecdotalism and populism. Indeed, Livingstone notes that such remarks seem to be teasing the possibility of a new wave of 'passive audience' critique - a strangely contrary result, when we consider this agenda first came to light in relation to claims of audience members being significantly *more* agentive in their interactions with new media. Livingstone joins media scholars such as Andrea Press (2006) and Elizabeth S. Bird (2011) in highlighting the 'cyclicity' of public impressions of 'audience'; the ongoing recurrence of themes of passivity, of concepts and approaches to study that have since been 'put to rest'. Rather than rising to challenge these critiques, however, they assert that audience researchers should instead invest in producing 'more complex explorations of audience practices, that take into account the vast range of online participation, remembering that *much audience activity may remain superficial*' (Bird, 2011:505, emphasis author's own). Livingstone proposes that rather than continue to produce critical discourses that would further entrench the field's polemic nature, we should work instead on addressing the existence of a mediating domain between 'the public' and 'the audience' - a 'civic culture' or 'civil society' that bridges spheres of identity, experience, and collective action (Livingstone, 2005:17). This current agenda for audience research should seek to avoid 'woolly' overgeneralizations on participation - instead, it is maintained that audience researchers should continue to do what they do best, exploring in-detail those 'fuzzy, ambiguous phenomena grounded in the civil society and the lifeworld - the row over gender politics in the living room, the heated



conversation in the talk show, the incipient new social movements mobilising online' (Livingstone, 2005:32) that bring to bear 'the central questions of public communication ... [which are] essentially questions of culture' (Silverstone, 1990:173). It is important to iterate that audiences are made up of people who, in their capacity as social actors, are attending to, negotiating the meaning of, and oftentimes participating in the framing of culture. Hence, a greater stress on the 'minutiae' of mediation is called for. Researchers working within the 'participation paradigm' of audience research have emphasised a need for granular investigation of routine audience practices, to ensure that both the *intensities* and *superficialities* of audience work can be appropriately accounted for.

New information and communication technologies have broadened the scope of audience research. Confusion remains amongst audience researchers, however, whether this new phase of media audience enquiry requires a 're-definition' of the object of study or a 'revitalisation' of some of its foundational findings. On one side of the debate, scholars such as Gauntlett (2011) have defended the need for a radical departure from the established research canon, arguing that 'both the methodology and theoretical underpinning of media studies are obsolete, as they were elaborated to understand media conditions of traditional broadcast media' (Gauntlett, 2011). Indeed, new conditions of media consumption have led some to argue that the concept of 'audience' itself is no longer applicable (Rosen, 2006); the 'audience', after all, only seems to refer to people engaged in the acts of watching or listening, whereas today's consumers are involved in much more dynamic practices of playing, posting and 'producing'. Livingstone claims that there is a growing sense of impatience with the terms inability to express the sort of productive things people can do with media in the current day, and this has led some to argue that there is no longer an 'audience' out there to study - there are now only 'users' (Livingstone, 1999). Whilst I share these scholars' frustration at the lack of definition surrounding contemporary audience work, I tend more towards the other side of this debate, which argues that we shouldn't scrap over 100 years of research history because new practices and procedures prove difficult to accommodate. Joke Hermes (2009) proposes that instead of making an unnecessary break with this subject's research past, researchers would be better suited to move instead towards establishing an 'audience studies 2.0' (Hermes, 2009). In much the same way that Web 2.0 was adopted as a term to signal to both the *material* and the *sociological* transformation of the Internet, audience 2.0 represents a similar evolution of the research field, with the intent that researchers should be able to reflect upon these new and dynamic conditions of audiencehood within the context of prior research (see also upcoming sections on 'post-cinema', pg. 44). This needn't indicate a radical change in the nature of the audience, as many of the themes and patterns alluding to audiences have been shown to be recursive, it is more a 'broadening' of the audiences' conceptual parameters. I maintain that audience studies have much to gain by inviting in interdisciplinary perspectives and by working to build bridges between disparate scholarly factions. This study therefore seeks to address this issue by exploring processes of audiencehood through a new intersectional audience position - the online audience.

### ***Conclusion***

The rapidity of theoretical and methodological developments in the field of audience research means that the landscape of audience studies seems to be ever-changing. As Livingstone claims, however, this same rapidity means that there is an accumulation of issues within the research canon that have yet to be resolved, the impetus of study being aimed towards

'development and expansion, rather than on confrontation' (Livingstone, 2005). The ubiquity of audience experiences in the current moment means that the theoretical 'schisms' created by prior research approaches are pulling in concepts of audience that would otherwise transcend these divides. We are left with a sort of pendulous space where the concept of an active, convergent audience should rightfully be. It is now vital to the continued progression of the field that we develop integrative theoretical and methodological approaches that can exist in the 'middle ground' between approaches. There are significant benefits to be found in tuning in to the mutual influences of these disciplines (Mesch, 2009) - locating their 'heart notes', if you will - and building upon those fundamental ideas have underscored any ontological differences and disagreements (Mathieu, 2015). This study is not unique in its attempt to bridge paradigmatic divides, but it does represent one of a select few studies that have leveraged prior frameworks of meaning in order to work towards an empirical understanding of the habits, practices, and meanings inherent in online audiencehood. Modern audience study requires an inclusive and nuanced theoretical approach - this study should be considered a reaction to that need.

### 3. Media in the Digital Age: A Review of the Literature

Over the last two decades alone, significant changes have occurred in media production and distribution which have irrevocably altered the media economy. The turn of the millennium coincided with the widespread distribution of digital media technologies such as the smartphone, DVD and mp3, technologies which merge imagery, video, audio and text into a series of ‘zeroes and ones’, making it possible to access multiple media texts at any time and in any location (Buckingham, 2016:4). This new media ecology makes new demands of the audiences that engage with it, as audience activity now involves a range of productive practices (such as content creation and remixing) which promote notions of audience agency that, as detailed in the previous chapter, the field of audience research has struggled to accommodate. As stressed in the introduction to this thesis, audience research has had to undergo rapid changes to keep pace with the demands of the interactive climate. The aim of this second review chapter, then, is to contextualise some of the issues that have arisen in the field through exploration of the changing technologies, texts and temperaments surrounding film viewing and social media usage. The argument is made that rather than abandoning the concept of ‘audience’ in the face of an accelerating landscape of participative media, audience studies would be better served by highlighting the ways that viewers have continuously *assimilated* and *adapted to* social and technological change across the years. To further assert this studies commitment to radical contextualism, then, this review will draw attention to media scholars whose academic work details how digital media have become an intrinsic part of everyday life. This review draws in specific on the interdisciplinary work of media scholars Francesco Casetti, Henry Jenkins and danah boyd, whose combined body of literature can be said to elaborate on the ‘diffusive’ nature of our current media eco-system.

Firstly, and in order to set appropriate context for this study’s expression of intersections between film and social media engagement, I expand upon concepts considered in the previous chapter regarding how researchers should address digital media evolution as a ‘socio-historical shift’, rather than as a ‘break’ in media theory and practice (see pg. 44). The first section of this review section introduces the concept of ‘post-cinema’, a fledgling body of work from film scholars Francesco Casetti, Julia Leyda and Shane Denson, that addresses how cinema has continuously adapted itself in response to technical innovation. Despite repeated cries as to the ‘death of cinema’ (Sontag, 1996), these scholars argue that cinema has always been a ‘transformative’ medium, capable of adapting to new modes of consumption in innovative and metamorphic ways. This philosophical tenant is compared with applications of ‘mediation theory’ in social networking study, which is championed by scholars such as danah boyd as a means of addressing digital platforms as ‘integrated structures’ (Madianou & Miller, 2012:174): that is, systems wherein the affordances of each new generation of communication technologies will build on the properties of the past. The concept of ‘post-cinema’, as well as ‘integrated structures’, emphasises the relationship between old media and new media, not necessarily as a relation of ‘displacement’ or ‘imposition’, but as a matter of ‘symbiosis’, wherein each medium helps gives form and meaning to the other. These works were therefore integral to the fortification of this study’s ‘inclusive’ philosophical background.

The next section of this review builds upon phenomenological links between film and social media by addressing the 'cultural logics' of media convergence (Jenkins, 2004; 2006). Jenkin’s work on ‘convergence culture’ offers a summation of the ongoing ‘diffusion’ of

media texts as they circulate in and amongst the sharing spaces of the Internet. This body of work further articulates how otherwise 'distinct' mass mediums such as film and social media can be connected through the migratory behaviour of their audiences, therefore offering a practical perspective on the ways traditional and digital media co-exist in the current climate. This section should provide useful information regarding socio-economic strategies adopted by the film industry, as well as breaking down the intricacies of text and contextual relations in online communication. Lastly, research on social media is reviewed. This includes a discussion of communicative trends and online behaviours and a review of previous research carried out on Tumblr. This chapter draws significant inspiration from work on social media use undertaken by danah boyd (in collaboration with Nancy K. Baym, Alice Marwick and Nicole B. Ellison), whose research explores trends in communication on social networking sites (SNS's), and how these reconfigure (and repurpose) existing social norms and etiquettes. This literature framework offers a route to understanding online mediation that stresses the interlocution between platform affordances and socio-cultural contexts (boyd, 2007; Hjarvard, 2013). As suggested in the previous chapter, it is crucial to the critical aims of this study that I am able to consolidate online audiences' interactive activities within a wider interrogation of the structural powers of new media, to ensure that this audience analysis remains grounded and true to audience nature (see pg. 40). This assessment should include, therefore, an acknowledgement of the material characteristics of social media sites and how these also shape modes of audience engagement (Peng, 2017:25). The hope is that the consolidation of this diverse literature on the relationship between social contexts and media affordances will offer an overview of some of the features of the digital landscape most pertinent to this study, and how they are now implicated in shifting patterns of audience transition, restructure, and transformation.

### 3.1 Post-Cinema

Our concept of 'film' has a very fixed point of cultural reference. 'Film' is very often synonymous with 'cinema'; to utter it brings to mind clear images of the dark auditorium, the bright screen, perhaps even the smell of popcorn and rumble of the speakers. Over the past few years, however, film has undertaken something of a transitive shift. It has started to move away from the 'big screen' and towards the small, with online streaming capabilities and advancements in home viewing technologies allowing us to watch films on our televisions, laptops, mobile devices, and tablets. Films are now readily available for consumption in shops and museums, on buses and airplanes, or from wherever else happens to have disc players or Wi-Fi availability. Slowly, but surely, our concept of 'film' is becoming untethered from that of the 'cinema', with Francesco Casetti suggesting that modern media audiences are now having to orient themselves to the features of a 'transitive cinema' (Casetti, 2015:10). In his text *The Lumiere Galaxy* (2015), Casetti addresses some of the key characteristics of this 'migratory' cinematic experience:

Today, sites of viewing take on a more complex status.... In these sites, cinema is no longer an exclusive presence, but rather is placed alongside other points of interest; it is not a permanent presence, but often closely tied to specific occasions; it is thus not something that we can rely on finding consistently in the same place, but rather something that seem to 'take place' from time to time. These changes overturn the traditional dimensions of cinema. If the darkened movie theatre implied that I would literally *go to* the cinema, in these new environments it is as if the cinema *comes to*

*me.* Moreover, if, in the movie theatre, cinema allowed us to travel to other worlds, in these new environments it makes these worlds available wherever I happen to be, placing them in my hand, so to speak.

(Casetti, 2015:12, emphasis author's own)

These new 'roving' features of film consumption are testing the boundaries of cinema as we know it. Film in the modern day is an altogether more migratory experience, and as such it has inspired a slew of criticism heralding the 'death' of the cinematic tradition as we have come to know it. In her now infamous New York Times article on the 'Decay of Cinema', Susan Sontag condemned the 'disincarnated, lightweight cinema' that we have created, as undermining the 'standards people once had both for cinema as an art and for cinema as popular entertainment' (Sontag, 1996). Casetti maintains, however, that despite the agreed-upon image of what cinema is (or should be), cinema has always been a transformative medium, capable of 'going beyond its boundaries, yet [remaining] recognisable' (Casetti, 2015:8). He claims that it is an 'essence' of cinema that has defined it - an essence derived not from conditions of viewing, nor from the quality of the production, but from the nature of film's *sociological address* - and that despite the mounting cries of cinema's decline, film - as a medium - will 'live as long as its way of engaging us does, whatever the device that it takes as its support may be' (Casetti, 2015:5). This more positive conception of cinema has led to an emerging faction of film studies research that is engaging with the notion of cinema as a historically 'adaptive' medium. This is of critical significance to this study, as it was necessary to begin to approach the epistemological history of film studies from a perspective that welcomed notions of mediatory change and assimilation. This research also clarifies how it is that film audiences might migrate to social media to participate in audience activities now that the cinema space is no longer fixed as the 'nodal point' of the filmic experience. Notions of 'transitive cinema' have thus provided vital conceptual grounds from which I was able to build my own exploration into film engagement.

I would argue that one of the fundamental difficulties of producing a study concerned with analysing film engagement in online spaces is that we lack an embedded understanding of film *as it exists outside of the cinema space*. Both popular and academic discourses about film have emerged from (and been sustained by) an understanding of the movie theatre as the primary seat of film consumption (Allen, 1980; Staiger, 2005; Andrew, 2009). It seems that there has been a 'fundamental ontology' built up over the years that has privileged the cinema as a site of 'transcendence', unparalleled amongst other mass media formats (Van de Vijer, 2017:142); a 'glowing backdrop' against which cinema stood out afresh against the mundanity of other media (Andrew, 2009:880). Robert C. Allen and Douglas Gomery, in their book *Film History* (1985), argue that film studies have pursued a 'masterpiece tradition', a sustained series of critiques that argue that the cinema produces sensory experiences akin to those of the 'high arts' (e.g., literature, art, music). Despite cinema being very much implicated within the spectrum of mass media, there nevertheless has been an effort from within the discipline to make film 'distinct' amongst the annals of popular culture. Scholars such as Reinhard and Olsen (2017) have suggested, therefore, that film studies - particularly in its earlier years of scholarship - appeared to exhibit a sort of 'theoretical narcissism' (Bird, 1992:250), in that the discipline was underscored by a formalist tradition which 'sought to elevate film as an aesthetic piece separate from reality' (Reinhard and Olsen, 2017:3). Though obviously helping to bolster the relevancy of film study, this tradition has had long-lasting

(and detrimental) effects on the position of the audience within the research canon. The course of the masterpiece tradition naturally diverted scholars' attention away from film audiences, who became 'irrelevant' to understanding the aesthetic structures of cinema and was directed instead towards the prowess of the cinematic 'auteur' and their delivery of the film text. There thus developed an implicit agreement amongst film scholars that any sort of situated analysis of the social aspects of cinema viewership, as representing cinema's 'everyday realities', should be 'subordinate' to the development of the textual canon (Allen and Gomery, 1985:68), as anything other than the study of cinema's aesthetics presents as an 'obstruction' to the rarefication of the medium (Biltest and Meers, 2016:13). As hinted in the previous review chapter, the film audience have therefore found themselves 'shut out' of discourses that specifically concern them, ultimately meaning that in film studies, the audience 'exists nowhere; it inhabits no real space, only positions within discourses' (Allor, 1998:228). As addressed in this thesis's theoretical aims, this study hopes to address the imbalances in film studies approach to audiences by empirically centring audience perspectives, providing an in-depth and textured account on the means by which viewers come to read, interpret and engage with film texts when online.

It has been recognised by scholars within film studies, particularly those undertaking explorations into 'new cinema history' (Maltby, 2011), that the cultural rhetoric of the masterpiece tradition has reached a point wherein the 'practicalities' of film viewership are crashing up against an entrenched notion of cinema as 'cultural artefact' (Denson and Leyda, 2016). In short, the difficulty in maintaining a 'masterpiece' perspective on cinema is that the cinema is no longer the only means by which audiences now view film. Scholars attempting to undergo the critical work of deconstructing contemporary film viewing are finding themselves caught up in a difficult theoretical bind: how does one acknowledge the realities of contemporary film consumption without destabilising over a century of research that has been linked - both spatially and conceptually - to the cinema space? As is the case with audience research, film scholars are turning their attention back on the history of the discipline, attempting to retrace and untangle those discourses that have insisted on the irrefutability of the masterpiece tradition, and in doing so, are inviting in much more 'open-minded' and versatile perspectives on film engagement. The contextualised work being carried out in relation to film viewing in the modern day is helping to loosen the ideological grasp of the cinema in discourses on film, which is making room for critical perspectives on the 'adaptability' of the medium – a niche in which this study aims to situate itself. Interest in the ongoing changes occurring in moving-image media, and their resonance within the cultural history of the medium, are now starting to be formalised under the concept of 'post-cinema' (Leyda and Denson, 2016).

The term 'post-cinema' seems to suggest that we have reached some sort of 'limit' to what cinema entails. Contrarily, this is not the intention of the designation, which Shane Denson and Julie Leyda (2016) introduced with the intention of making scholars think more intently about the relationship between traditional film consumption and the digital media regime. 'Post-cinema', Denson and Leyda claim, is not meant to be thought of as being 'after cinema', nor is it necessarily intended to denote the 'new'; instead, it is meant to embody a transformative moment in the modern sensibility:

Post-cinema is a summative or synoptic notion... It is the collection of media, and the mediation of life forms, that "follows" the broadly cinematic regime of the twentieth

century—where “following” can mean either to succeed something as an alternative or to “follow suit” as a development or a response in kind... post-cinema asks us to think about new media not only in terms of novelty, but in terms of an ongoing, uneven, and indeterminate historical transition.

(Denson and Leyda, 2016)

Like the 'postmodern', then, post-cinema is intended to encapsulate a socio-historical transformation, characterised by recognition of the digital media environment *as a cultural landscape*, rather than simply perceiving it as a 'jumbled collection of new media formats, devices, and networks' (Denson and Leyda, 2016). Post-cinema needn't mark a 'caesura' in the history of the medium, they argue, but can instead represent a period of transition that 'alternately abjures, emulates, prolongs, mourns, or pays homage' to the cultural form that went before it (Denson and Leyda, 2016). Scholars such as Casetti, Denson and Leyda are choosing to investigate the 'trajectories of relocation' occurring around modern-day cinema and how these processes can be seen to *continue* traditions of cinematic engagement, rather than 'displacing' them. This theoretical framework therefore seeks to illustrate how cinema is as much the 'progenitor' of new media as computers and their technological predecessors (Rodowick, 2007:95). This philosophy gels with this theses aim of 'carrying through' frameworks of film and cinema theory that they might help contextualise (and thereafter make sense of) the varied audience processes occurring in the current media stratosphere. Post-cinema offered a perspective from which I could explore how the creative and aesthetic properties of cinema are extended to other mediums, as well as offering a language to help articulate how this 'confluence' between mediums is representative of the current cultural moment.

### 3.1.1 Mediation Theory

This study sets out to identify possible continuities between traditional audience processes and forms of online audiencehood, as a means to develop a 'cohesive' account of contemporary audience practice. As explored in greater detail in section 3 of this chapter, this meant building up a background of information that would help contextualise the vast number of 'normalised' social practices that went into social media use. In this regard I found danah boyd's work of particular import, as her research offered an approach to understanding that accommodated both the material 'affordances' offered by social media sites, and the 'active' nature of the subjects who are engaging with them. boyd's work embodies, in specific, a 'mediation' approach to online social norms (boyd, 2008; Hjarvard, 2013), which I maintain shares some compelling ontological ties with concepts of 'post-cinema' and 'media convergence'. Mediation theory articulates the role of digital communication technologies in moderating social cultures. Verbeek (2015) suggests that mediation is a theoretical approach to 'interaction design', this being the relationship between 'humans and things', wherein the 'action-in-between' the media platform and the audience member becomes the nodal point of meaning (Verbeek, 2015:26). Like many of the theories integrated into this study's conceptual framework, mediation theory emerged from an understanding of 'polarity'; it was recognised that discourses on technology use were split between separate poles of 'technology-effect' (McLuhan, 1964), which offered mostly 'deterministic' views on tech as social effectors, and 'socio-cultural effects' (Hjarvard, 2013), which often (consciously) disregard the material functions of the medium in preference of examining the social contexts

of usage. Whilst this study does align itself primarily with a contextualised perspective on media use (e.g., how the audience's own experiences and contexts inform their practice and meaning), I find it would be irresponsible not to consider the material conditions of social media use, particularly as the critical aims of this study are rooted in uncovering the dynamics of power operating in and amongst social media use (see pg. 18). This approach can therefore speak directly to the expository aims of this study, as it articulates the ways that 'meaning-making' can be both socially constructed and materially 'shaped' (e.g., informed by platform structure, format and content). This proved especially helpful in formulating an approach to Tumblr, as the distinctive nature of the site's architecture produces a number of unique affordances that inform user's audience practices. These affordances are detailed at length in Chapter Five of this thesis (pg. 103). Another useful capacity of mediation theory is that it's attention to material conditions (as well as social contexts of use), has helped synthesize how older media technologies (and norms of use) have fed through into the development of new digital platforms. Yuzhu Peng (2017) offers as example the symbolic formulation of e-mail, and how it drew on existing communicatory norms around letter drafting, such as using 'Dear .....' to begin a conversation, signing off with your name, customizing emails with e-signatures and other personal touches. It is important to note that though e-mail is an advancement on this 'traditional form', it has not yet replaced this original mode of communication; letter writing still exists as its own alternative form of communication, embedded within its own social and material contexts (Peng, 2017:26). This indicates a cyclical relationship between old media and new media affordances. As with work on 'post-cinema', adopting 'mediation' frameworks when analysing and presenting data helped to articulate the ongoing relations between old and new media forms, and the social 'etiquettes' that bind them. I explore some compelling examples of continuities between film and social media use in Chapter Five (see pg. 103).

### **3.2 Media Convergence**

Nick Couldry, in the introduction to *The Extended Audience: Scanning the Horizon* (2005), states that 'the diffused nature of media today maybe the most important place to start in understanding the contemporary audience' (Couldry, 2005). My concept of the online audience has been undoubtedly influenced by poststructuralist definitions of the 'self' as fluid and fragmentary (Giddens, 1991; Butler, 1990); the picture I hold in my head of who the digital audience could be is diffuse, transitive – a tumble(r) of fast-moving faces. This image of the audience is also, in many ways, a reflection of the current state of the media text, which has become scattered and segmented by the introduction of 'individualized' modes of media distribution. Today's audiences are dealing with a substantially different system of content delivery than those consumers that went before them. In the broadcast age, each media text had its own specific mode of delivery - print for news, cinema for film, the home TV set for television, and so on - whereas *now*, there is certainly no longer any technical reason for a text to be separated by medium, as all content can now converge for the viewer within a singular device (Meikle and Young, 2012:79). The media text is thus 'diffused', not only in regard to the multiplicity of platforms it may be transmitted through, but also in regard to the lack of a definitive spatial/temporal context in which it may be consumed. This diffusion has made the media-audience encounter even more difficult to 'pin down', given that digital audiences may now be engaging with multiple media texts concurrently; for instance, 'second screening', the act of using one's smartphone whilst viewing other media



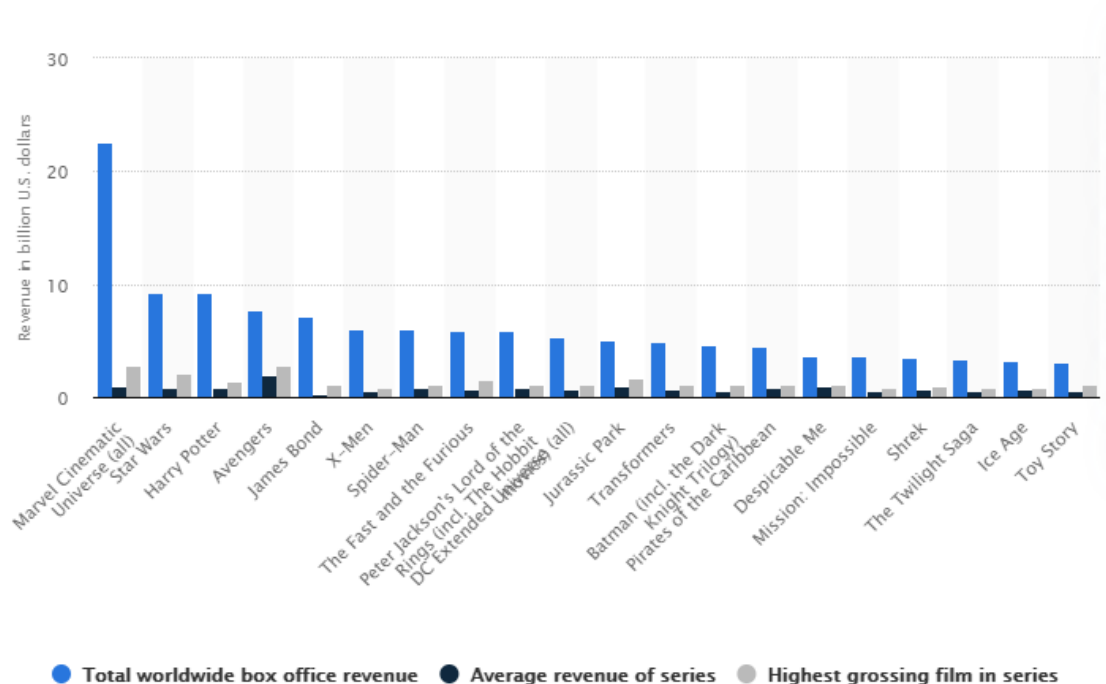
content, has seen a sharp rise in popularity over the past few years, particularly amongst young viewers (Nee and Barker, 2019). Kim Christian Schröder (2011) suggests that understanding the audience experience as a 'cross-media' encounter is integral to the modern media experience, as our 'sense-making' processes (e.g. reception) have become dependent on an 'intertextual web of meanings harvested from other media forms, and the whole mediatized world we live in' (Schröder, 2011:7). This review sections seeks to investigate this 'web' of meanings through the concept of 'media convergence' (Jenkins, 2004; 2006), which represents the ongoing intersections between digital media platforms, the 'diffusion' of mass media texts, and the current upsurge in modes of audience participation.

Henry Jenkin's convergence theory offers a critical reflection on the state of media production and consumption after digitization, detailing, in specific, 'the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behaviour of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want' (Jenkins, 2006:2). As suggested in the previous chapter, following the 'flow' of usage may be the most constructive way for researchers to break down the ubiquity of our current mediascape, as it allows the researchers to account for the individual practices that make up the 'bigger picture' of digital media usage. Jenkin's theory of convergence therefore advocates for an understanding of the current media ecology as one of 'consolidation' and 'conglomeration'. Media convergence is not intended, however, to represent an 'end state' of technological transformation, wherein all media become integrated into a unified system – nor it is meant to signal to the displacement of 'old' media in favour of the 'new' - rather, convergence is intended to be understood as an ongoing process of mediatory consolidation which manifests in profound, historically-contingent ways. Jenkins draws parallels, for instance, between the invention of movable type and the subsequent birth of the Renaissance and suggests that we are at the precipice of a similar cultural transformation; the rapid evolution of digital technology necessitating the development of 'new skills for managing information, new structures for transmitting information across channels, and new creative genres that exploit the potentials of those emerging information structures' (Jenkins, 2001:93). This 'digital renaissance', he theorises, will fold traditional media forms into a new ecology, to persist as 'layers within an ever more complicated information and entertainment system' (ibid.) – a distinctly formed 'convergence culture' (Jenkins, 2006:2). In this regard, Stavroula Kalogeras (2014) reiterates that convergence should not be understood as a process 'unique' to new media, but rather a recurrent practice existing throughout narrative culture in which people have sought out 'greater levels of participation' in cultural production (Kalogeras, 2014:11). As with theories of 'post-cinema' and 'mediation', then, theories of media convergence build upon concepts of audience participation as a continuing tradition, and of people's online usage as a natural extension of these behaviours. This next subsection further details how film consumption has become a 'convergent' practice by deliberating over structural elements of contemporary film production, in specific, the popularisation of film 'franchising'. This section should not only offer context for some of the popular film texts identified in observation of the Tumblr community, but also briefly summarise the 'lateral move' the industry has made in embracing streaming services – and similar digital platforms – as lucrative models of distribution.

### *3.2.1 Franchise Film*

Franchising is a corporate structure designed to facilitate 'ongoing management of a property across time and various markets' (Johnson, 2013). Hollywood, which to date maintains its position as the world's leading film industry (Kiprop, 2018), has evolved to favour productions that can exploit the value of narrative 'continuity', meaning that recent focus has been given over to properties capable of sustaining audience attention across time, such as the sequel, prequel, remake or 'reboot' (Sperb, 2015: 36). The last two decades of Western cinema have been overrun by film franchises, such as the continuation of the *Star Wars* saga, The *Harry Potter* series, Disney's recent live-action remakes and the reinvigoration of the *James Bond* series, to name but a few. In particular, the 'superhero movie' can be said to have dominated the landscape of franchise film over recent years (Gray and Kaklamanidou, 2011:1). Marvel and DC Comics have seemingly struck 'cinematic gold' in adapting their comic book properties into a series of high-action blockbuster films (Kim, 2016). I found that films within the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) proved especially popular amongst this study's research population - though this is perhaps unsurprising, given that in 2019 the MCU was declared to be one of the highest-grossing film franchises of all time, with over 22.55 billion dollars taken in box-office revenue across its 23 features:

**Figure 2: The highest grossing film franchises and series worldwide 2019 (Statista, 2020)**



Production of 'narrative universes' such as the MCU have established greater demand for serialized pictures, wherein audiences can follow plots and characters across multiple properties, and intertextual clues ('easter eggs', bonus elements, post-credit sequences) hidden amongst the narrative give cause for audiences to engage with content long after they have left the movie theatre (Beaty, 2016:322). These features seem to be handmade for audience participation, as they rely on the attention of their consumer base to continue the symbolic 'spreading' of the narrative. Johnson (2015) argues, therefore, that film producers placing greater emphasis on serialized storytelling is having a trickle-down effect on cinema's aesthetic structure, in that these 'horizontally-integrated' narrative features are giving film an

increasingly 'televisual quality' (Johnson, 2015). Given the recent boom in popularity of video-on-demand (VOD) platforms such as Netflix, and the normalization of 'binge-watching' as a popular mode of content consumption (Horeck, Jenner and Kendall, 2018), it's incredibly likely that the film industry will seek to further forms of serialised audience investment by eliciting further effacement between movie content and digital platforms. The next section expands on this industry trend by discussing the significance of 'transmedia narratives' in the production and distribution of modern film texts. This subject emphasises the diffusive nature of current movie content, highlighting, in particular, how contemporary distribution practices rely on audience intervention in instances of 'textual indeterminacy' (Michelle, 2007:27).

### 3.2.2 Transmedia

In Jenkin's words, transmedia represents 'a process whereby integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and co-ordinated entertainment experience' (Jenkins, 2007). Transmedia campaigns are relevant to the background of this study, then, as they demonstrate how film content can be strategically dispersed across multiple mediums, ensuring that people's experience of film extends far beyond the initial viewing event. Social media sites have become vital to the success of transmedia content, as these narrative strategies depend on the communality of the network to generate interest and foster audience participation. Transmedia thus embodies the convergent connection between film texts and social media, representing Hollywood's first (tentative) forays into 'co-creation' with its audiences.

People's experience of media content in the current day is often augmented by a host of subsidiary material: filmic releases, for instance, will produce official guides, novelisations, toys and more, each of which build further dimension to the viewing experience (Boni, 2017:10). Transmedia campaigns attached to movies will most often revolve around logics of 'world-building', with each piece of extraneous content offering new information that will add to the comprehensibility to the fictional world depicted onscreen. Thomas Austin, in his research on the 'dispersible text', suggests that Hollywood will now favour movie packages that are 'strategically open to multiple [audience] readings', as this has been proven to be helpful in extending a picture's cultural reach (Thomas, 1992:29). Each of these fragments of narrative function as 'extensions' of the original film text, inviting a greater sense of immersion and investment in the fictional world amongst audiences. Kalogeras (2014) draws a fascinating link, therefore, between narrative folk cultures and transmedia, both of which she claims play on instances of 're-enactment, retelling and 'participatory drama' to enhance the reception of a particular text (Kalogeras, 2014:19). Kalogeras's suggestion is that transmedia is working within a long-used 'playbook' of narrative enactment, once again illustrating the social continuities that can exist between old and new media.

One of (if not *the*) most successful examples of multi-platform storytelling is the *Star Wars* franchise - a series that has particular significance to the findings of this study. As addressed in this thesis's findings chapters, movies set within the *Star Wars* universe proved to be especially popular amongst the Tumblr userbase, often appearing in community dialogue and featuring in a high-proportion of user-generated content. The SW franchise (as it is abbreviated on Tumblr) currently consists of nine 'canonical' live-action films centred around the exploits of the Skywalker family and their attempts to train in the ways of the Force, a

mystical energy that, when harnessed for good, will allow them to stand against the might of the Galactic Empire. The SW films have since spawned three animated series, a Christmas special, a number of upcoming live-action television shows, as well as a veritable cornucopia of ancillary material, including comic books, video games, toys, licensed fictionalisations and clothing (Rose, 2012). These transmedial objects have all become an integral part of *Star Wars* commercial success, sustaining audience interest in the films in the (often long) intervals between each motion picture release (Martins, 2018:35). Particularly as the film series has stretched across several decades (the original trilogy first aired between 1977-1983, with the latest instalments of the franchise concluding in 2019), this commercial material essentially acts as vital 'entry points' for younger audiences to become involved with the Star Wars universe; Dan Hassler Forest (2018) remarks that SW toys and action figures often figure as a 'gateway drugs' for young people first coming into contact with this series (Guynes and Hassler-Forest, 2018:17). *Star Wars* transmedia content is therefore implicated in what Matt Hills has termed 'generational seriality'; that is, the 'cross-generational transfer' of products such as games, toys or clothing, as well as the 'symbolic' transfer of the narrative (Hills, 2018a). Much like a folk tale, the Skywalker saga is passed down by word-of-mouth from one generation to the next, each story being furnished with a host of memorabilia and symbolic material. I explore this phenomenon in Chapter Six of this thesis (pg. 131). In Jenkin's mind, there's little question that George Lucas should be considered the founding father of transmedia storytelling, as he states that 'no other science fiction property had so totally saturated a generation's media experiences' to the extent that Star Wars has (Jenkins in Guynes and Hassler-Forest 2018:17).

Understanding the prominence of *Star Wars* to the cultural landscape of cinema is significant to this study because it explains – in part – why Tumblr users might be so invested in these films, but it is also significant in that it underscores the authoritative position that audiences have long-occupied in relation to this series. Jenkins suggests that transmedia storytelling is the ideal aesthetic form for an era of 'collective intelligence' (Jenkins, 2007), that is, an era in which audiences are able to pool their respective resources and expertise to enhance their experience of media content. The audience is very much at the front and centre of *Star Wars*' global success – and don't they know it. As John C. Lydon claims in his paper 'Whose Film Is It Anyway? Canonicity and Authenticity in *Star Wars* Fandom' (2012), online fans renegotiation and revision of Lucas's text across the years have resulted in heated dispute between filmmakers and fans about 'what should constitute canon, and who has the authority to define it' (Lydon, 2012:780). As a vanguard of transmedia distribution, *Star Wars* made room for audience participation in such a way that audiences feel they have authority/ownership over the text and are highly resistant to change. Transmedia activity is reliant on 'grassroots' audience distribution more than it is on corporate measures (Jenkins, 2006:2). The success of such strategies (*Star Wars* is currently the 5<sup>th</sup> highest grossing film franchise in Western cinema) (Figure 1) means that audience productivity has moved to the forefront of industry's commercial priorities. The endurance of features such as *Star Wars* have impressed upon Hollywood executives the economic benefits of media consolidation, what some have since called 'synergy', offering incentive for media conglomerates to expand their 'brand' and spread their properties across as many different media platforms as possible (Johnson, 2013). Transmedia, therefore, can be seen as a prelude to a new host of media-industrial practices, wherein the audience will take on a more profound role in the productive life of entertainment properties. Whilst popularisation of transmedia narratives in film will

inevitably place more agency in the hands of the viewing audience, who will be able to it does pose troubling questions as to the ongoing 'labour' the audience will be expected to produce. In the next section I briefly look at how changes in media distribution can prompt fears over audience exploitation – work that, again, should be a key critical consideration when analysing the participative 'limits' of online audiencehood.

### 3.2.3. Audience Labour

With media institutions restructuring along convergent dynamics, it is perhaps understandable that the subject of media convergence has reignited anxieties surrounding the subject of 'media power'. As suggested in the previous chapter, media research often indulges in periodic 'panics' over audience agency, a trend that has only been only exacerbated in light of the increasing conglomeration of media institutions (Livingstone, 2003). We may soon be faced with a landscape where distinct mediums and texts merge into one another with more regularity in order to facilitate faster, more intuitive information transfer for their audiences. Bolter and Grusin, in their seminal work *Remediation* (2000) suggest that digital media aspires towards such a state of 'transparency', in that the levelling of differences between mediums represents an active attempt by media powers to remove mediatory structures from our consciousness:

A transparent interface would be one that erases itself, so that the user is no longer aware of confronting a medium, but instead stands in an immediate relationship to the contents of that medium ... the transparent interface is one more manifestation of the need to deny the mediated character of digital technology altogether.

(Bolter and Grusin, 2000: 23-24)

As audience experience has inevitably been pushed to 'centre-stage' by this new re-mediatory dynamic, it is understandable that concerns are mounting about what media producers are doing now that they have been forced further 'backstage'. Media scholars such as Elizabeth Bird (2011) have voiced concerns about how the 'transparency' of digital media structures often does the (contradictory) work of obscuring the 'ever-increasing' influence of the media industry (Bird, 2011:502). By downplaying the power of media producers in favour of a renewed focus on audience activity, she argues, critics are misjudging how quickly media producers have learned to co-opt audience activity to generate viral media (ibid.). She maintains that this 'co-option' of the audience is a much more insidious employment of media power than previous systems, as these strategies are centred on creating a 'feeling of magnanimity' between producers and audiences, who are encouraged by their perceived 'agency' to further engage with favoured media products, create content promoting these products, and spread information amongst their social networks (Bird, 2011). Reinhard (2009) clarifies that in order to capture audience interest, producers will 'create ways in which the consumers can feel they are making a difference for the object of their affection, even if that impact is minor' (Reinhard, 2009:11), with Terranova (2005) volunteering that 'this type of labour is increasingly compensated through 'affect', such as a sense of fun and fulfilment' (Terranova, 2005: 35). In the new media ecology, then, lines between labour and leisure are becoming increasingly blurred, to the extent that audience 'work' is coming to look almost exactly like 'play' (Ross, 2000:11). Concerns over audience labour are pertinent to the critical contexts of this study as they speak to the 'products' of online audience participation, particularly in regard to how media producers may be utilizing the audience's affective

labour in the 'construction and circulation of a trans-media presence' (Wessells, 2011:69). I seek to exemplify this fraught relationship between producer and audience in Chapter Seven of this thesis (pg. 153). Jenkins argues, however, that whilst observers should not underestimate how 'low' the barriers to participation are in the digital media economy (see previous, pg. 54), audience 'power' has always come from a position of *productivity*, in particular from the ways viewers appropriate, or 'poach', mainstream media content, 'writing over it, modding it, amending it, expanding it, adding greater diversity of perspective and then recirculating it, feeding it back into the mainstream' (Jenkins, 2006:268). The next section therefore expands on the audience's practices of 'creative resistance', articulating how the 'scraping', 'splicing', 'wrecking' and 'remaking' of content undertaken in online spaces can count towards the development of a resistive audience counter-cultures.

### *3.2.4 Bricolage and Textual Poaching*

As audiences begin to breach the boundaries between media production and consumption, new productive dynamics have emerged across social media that suggest the rise of a burgeoning DIY culture. One such instance of productive practice emerging amongst online communities is 'remixing' (Lessig, 2007). A term more usually referenced in relation to music composition, remixing is a process by which an artist alters a composition by introducing new elements to the original score. Remix artists are able to create completely unique pieces by combining elements of pre-existing material. In this sense, then, 'remix culture' denotes an environment (or community) in which 'imagery, sound and text are remixed into a new whole, following the logics of selection and compositing' (Fagerjord, 2009:14). Remixing has emerged as a popular practice within digital mass culture; Fagerjord (2009) gives the example of the 'copy and paste' function as an example of just one of the many ways online users are able to assemble texts into new works (Fagerjord, 2009:5). Lev Manovich (2001) designates this practice as 'creativity as selection' (Manovich, 2001:13). In this study, I articulate a particular form of interpretative remixing the Tumblr audience undertakes, suggesting that the communities' propensities for fragmentation and re-organisation of media content positions them as textual bricoleurs (Levi Strauss, 1962). 'Bricoleur' is a French loan-word that roughly translates to 'tinkerer' (Markham, 2017). The primary identifying element of the bricoleur is their ability to make something with whatever tools or materials are at hand (Weick, 1995:352). The term has a long history in cultural studies both as a theoretical construct and as a process of praxis: in both instances, this construct is intended to denote the 'mashing up' of pre-existing material to make something new (either a new product, or new knowledge) (Markham, 2017). My study acknowledges bricolage both as a physical product, as seen in the 'memic' works evident amongst the Tumblr community (pg. 127) - and as an interpretative process (pg. 147). Markham (2017) suggests that bricolage can be a fundamental form of 'sensemaking' in the digital realm, the negotiation of people, things, and messages being 'writ large' (Markham, 2017). In this respect, this subject has been integral in mediating forms of reception work, offering a construct which could help articulate the illusive (and often contradictory) processes of audience interpretation. The purpose of adopting bricolage is in order to articulate how Tumblr users are engaged in a sophisticated process of content remaking and assemblage, and how they will often negotiate the 'swarm' of possible interpretative options open to them by appropriating, fragmenting, and reassembling the media content to suit their 'preferred readings'. Significantly, and as will be expanded upon in this study's findings, the 'bricolage'

work audiences are undertaking when using sites such as Tumblr represents a process by which audiences are 'flexing their muscles against the power of media producers to define the terms of their engagement' (Bird, 2011:506).

The conflict between productive powers and audience is at the heart of Jenkin's most popular academic text, *Textual Poachers* (1992). This work is centred on theorizing the 'cultural artefacts' of media fans who, it is argued, have long adopted a 'cross-media' sensibility when it has come to picking and choosing their preferred pieces of media content. Fans look across different media forms to build creative content around their favourite texts, with Jenkins summarising that their pleasure in this 'reassembling process' comes from the juxtapositions they are then able to create between entertainment content and other (diverse) cultural materials (Jenkins, 1992:37). Having 'neither access to the funds and technical resources for professional media production nor the legal control over the narratives and characters that are near and dear to their hearts (due to the often fierce protection of copyrights by producers)', fans, like the 'poachers of old, [operating] from a position of cultural marginality and social weakness' (Jenkins, 1992:26) will actively scavenge content from media powers, and will therefore build their own 'outlaw culture' around the raw materials the media provides (Jenkins, 1992:49). I argue throughout the body of this thesis that Tumblr is an ideal site on which to witness such processes of content 'reinterpretation', as the online community will frequently appropriate visual content, especially that of film and TV texts, in the presentation of their own self-identity, as well as in imaginative 're-imaginings' of popular culture content. This is explored in more detail in Chapter Seven of this thesis.

It is clear that today's audiences are facing a radically different landscape of distribution than those that went before them. Jenkins suggests that there is a 'a new kind of cultural power emerging' from this digital economy, an interactive audience driven by their abilities to 'bond within larger communities, pool their information, shape each other's opinions, and develop a greater self-consciousness about their shared agendas and common interests' (Jenkins, 2007:362-363). Ultimately, media convergence makes the audience a collaborator in cultural processes, placing them in a unique position of influence within the new media eco-system. This study therefore plans to address how audience's both use (and occasionally abuse) these new powers, by honing-in on the productive and participative aspects of Tumblr use.

### **3.3 Social Media**

To conclude this literature review chapter, this section will detail how social media sites are positioned as vital sources of information on social and cultural life, engaging with literature that explores (and challenges) how this medium is uniquely positioned to offer insight into people's 'everyday' experiences. David Mathieu, in his paper 'The Continued Relevance of Reception Analysis in the Age of Social Media', maintains that social media platforms have become a crucial hub for 'the circulation of meaning in society, including political meanings in both its broad (all meaning is political) and narrow (societal debates and issues) senses' (Mathieu, 2015:14). Social networking has therefore been credited with 'laying bare' the complex undertakings of social life, by drawing our attention to the variety of ways in that 'life functions as a continuous information exchange' (Rose, 2012:202-204). Mathieu clarifies by detailing how people's public posts on social media can make their tastes, preferences and standards more readily available to others, claiming that (to a certain extent) social media can then allow researchers to 'read off' receptive meanings from people's online activities

(Mathieu, 2015:25). Examples of how this 'reading off' of reception can be carried out are presented in the upcoming chapters of this study. However, it is important to acknowledge that social media - like any form of mass media - has its own set of challenges that can subsequently reflect upon the information produced. It is important that this study is able to carefully deconstruct the notion that that digital media are 'windows to people's social life-worlds' (De Ridder, Vesnic-Alujevic and Romic, 2016:387) by reflecting on the ways social media might also 'confound' accounts of audience activity. 'Authenticity' has arisen time and time again as a significant issue surrounding social media interaction, with boyd (2008) pointing out that the altering of content in networking spaces is both 'easy and common' (boyd, 2008). This reflected a need to keep a close critical eye on the processes being analysing, at the same time that it necessitated producing a reflexive account of the social media site studied. It is for this reason that this study has positioned the microblogging site Tumblr at the forefront of this investigation. This is by no means the first study to investigate processes of online participation (Costello and Moore, 2007; Bury, 2019), nor is it the first to use Tumblr to study forms of audience behaviour (Monk, 2011), however, I feel confident that it will contribute to a growing body of research concerned with analysing convergent audience processes and interpretative modes. Before I address some of the studies that have informed my understanding of social media in general, then, I wish to lay down some previous work carried out on Tumblr, to highlight some of the features and qualities of site use that this study has not had the scope to analyse for itself. The research set out in this section has formed a critical 'backdrop' against which I have based my analysis of Tumblr, and therefore provides an initial theoretical entrée to this distinctive community base.

### 3.3.1 Tumblr

Early in 2017, I was scrolling through my Tumblr feed when I came across something that stopped me in my tracks. As it was not long after the passing of actress Carrie Fisher there was more than the usual concentration of *Star Wars* content on the user dashboard. As I scrolled down the dash, I came across a simple greyscale image: a still of Fisher in *The Empire Strikes Back* in her role as Princess Leia, beneath it a candid of the actress laughing on the set of *The Return of the Jedi*. To my amazement, the images began to move. Subtly, but brilliantly, a constellation was dancing across the picture, twisting, undulating, sparkling like real starlight. I was struck by the simple grace of the image and the skill that must have gone into making it.

**Figure 3: Tumblr user's GIFset of actress Carrie Fisher**





*Image used with permission from creator: [otterandterrier.tumblr.com](https://otterandterrier.tumblr.com)*

Whenever I try to describe Tumblr to others I tend to go back to that moment, as a prime example of the ingenuity of this online community. Tumblr was chosen for this study for one specific reason: it presented as a ‘vibrant’ community, which appeared to offer particularly creative (and therefore *emphatic*) forms of audience participation. The importance of Tumblr’s creative content to the foundations of this study cannot be understated, as it offered opportunity to discern patterns and themes of audience engagement with ease and clarity. The community’s attention to popular culture content, in particular film, TV and music, produced engaging new trends of media consumption that I believed would be especially helpful in creating a formative account of online audience practices.

Tumblr was first launched in 2007 as a short-form ‘tumblelog’ – the original title of the ‘microblog’. The site has since been through several significant acquisitions in its thirteen-year history, the most recent of which was in 2019, where it was acquired from Verizon by

WordPress's parent company, Automattic (The Washington Post, 2019). Primarily, attention to Tumblr has focused on the creativity and multimodality of site content, as well as the 'subcultural' connotations of its mostly young, ethnically diverse, urban population (Bourlai and Herring, 2014). Tumblr's site architecture has made for an intriguing case study. The platform design makes use of several communicative features shared by other SNS, such as chat and messaging functions which allow users to communicate synchronously or asynchronously, tagging functions which allow user posts to be aggregated for easier searchability, and follower counts intended to connect users and allow them to manage their own personal stream of content. Following another blog on Tumblr means that all that user's posts, whether these be text posts, images, videos or more, will appear in chronological order on the follower's dashboard, ensuring a continuous stream of content which the user can like, comment, reblog or - most recently - share via permalink, email or more. Where Tumblr tends to differ from other SNS is in regard to its customisability. The site has held onto 'old-school' blogging formats, by allowing for 'full aesthetic customization' of its blog pages (Renninger, 2015:1519). Resonant of the earlier MySpace page, Tumblr blogs are made fully customisable through HTML, and though the site does offer premade blog templates, the ability to customise everything from font style, hyperlink colours and layout means that each Tumblr page is, in some way, bespoke to its individual user. Tumblr offers opportunity, then, to further investigate young people's utilisation of media and ICT for creation of 'personal space'. This notion is commonly attached to early social media sites that associated user's 'customization' of their online blogs as an extension of youth 'bedroom culture' (McRobbie and Garber, 1976; Stein, 2018). The theory of 'bedroom culture', when applied to the contexts of social media, regards networking sites as being spatially similar to young people's bedrooms, in that they represent an 'individually owned and controlled space' (Hodkinson and Lincoln, 2007:2), in which the user can 'display' or otherwise 'protect' their emerging identity formations. Like the posters of boybands plastered around teen girl's rooms, content creation on social media can represent a 'marking of territory' that encourages the individual's negotiation and exploration of their self-image. This concept was useful in expressing how Tumblr blogs could represent a 'safe space' through which users could experiment with identity (Hodkinson and Lincoln, 2007:4). I further explore the 'spatial' connotations of Tumblr use in Chapter Five of this study (pg. 104).

Another notable aspect of Tumblr's user design is its anonymity. Though all Tumblr pages are made public by default, the lack of a typical 'profile page' means that pseudonymity is a common feature of engagement on the site. Users will typically only provide sparse autobiographical information (such as first name, age, gender and preferred pronouns), and have come to communicate with other users using their blog URL as identifier - which again is distinctive to each user. Identities on Tumblr are therefore often 'closeted, collective, obscured, or evanescent' (Renninger, 2015:1523). As a result of this there are very few algorithms at play capable of 'scraping' information from the user feed. Tumblr, like many microblogging sites, is monetised through advertising, however a 'lack of demographic data on users, difficulty counting users, and very little control over user content' (Miller, 2015:15) means advertising on the site is generally indirect and ineffective. Miller's 2015 thesis on memic discourses on Tumblr determined that the lack of 'intrusion' from commercial properties was largely welcomed by the user base. Users' awareness of the site's 'lax policies for regulating posts' (Miller, 2015:15) promotes a sense of autonomy about the user experience and encourages continued use, particularly amongst a younger userbase whose

search for privacy protection has been well documented (boyd, 2007; Young and Quan-Haase, 2013). Due in part to its anonymity, the platform has cultivated a strong subcultural presence; communities who value the confidentiality that Tumblr affords as an opportunity to present their 'authentic selves' (Hillman, Procyk and Neustaedter, 2014). As numerous scholars have noted, Tumblr is a platform regularly used by urban youth, queer, and trans people to communicate with others, exchange information and organise (Cho, 2011; Fink and Miller, 2013; Thelandersson, 2013). Angela McCracken points out that in comparison to other social media sites, Tumblr's anonymity ensures that the origins of posts are often obscured, meaning users can engage online with some sense of ontological security (McCracken, 2017). Previous studies on the site have emphasised the intimate, 'disclosive' nature of the community, with researchers such as Hart (2015) reporting that, in contrast to trends of use on other popular SNS's, Tumblr users invest significantly more energy into inviting people in their private 'backstage areas' than in maintaining a 'socially-acceptable front region' (Hart, 2015:201) (more on this on pg. 63). Initial findings from Hart's pilot study on youth intimacy on the site suggest that a 'warts and all' approach to expression is a social norm on Tumblr, as site users place emphasis on 'emotional authenticity' over social standing (ibid.). Findings from Hillman, Neustaedter and Procyk's 2014 study on fandom practices on the site corroborate this. Hillman's Tumblr users unanimously claimed that they were better able to present their 'authentic self' on Tumblr, with participants stating they found they were 'more themselves on Tumblr than 'real life'' (Hillman, Neustaeder and Procyk, 2014:1). This study describes how the 'Tumblr experience' affords users a 'sense of support, friendship, and community', with the community culture being built around the sharing and articulation of common interests (ibid.).

Tumblr has attracted attention (both inside and outside academia) as attracting a 'youthful' userbase. Statistical studies by the PEW Research Centre (2015) concluded that Tumblr was particularly popular with young adults: 'young people are especially likely to use Tumblr: 20% of online adults ages 18 to 29 do so' (PEW Research Centre, 2015). As seen in the table below, the higher percentage of Tumblr users are typically of high-school and university age and come from urbanised areas. The interview sample for this study fell neatly into these pre-existing demographic parameters: participants were aged between 18-28 years of age, with 46% of the sample declaring themselves as being in higher education at the time of interview.

**Table 2: Demographic information on the Tumblr userbase (PEW Research Centre, 2015)**

## Demographics of Tumblr

*Among internet users, the % who use Tumblr*

	Internet users
Total	10%
Men	10
Women	11
White, Non-Hispanic	9
Black, Non-Hispanic (n=94)	15
Hispanic (n=99)	15
18-29	20
30-49	11
50-64	5
65+	2
High school grad or less	10
Some college	13
College+	9
Less than \$30,000/yr	16
\$30,000-\$49,999	8
\$50,000-\$74,999 (n=98)	4
\$75,000+	11
Urban	16
Suburban	8
Rural	3

Source: Pew Research Center, March 17-April 12, 2015.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

The site shows uncommon ‘equalities’ in its demographic base, producing mostly equal numbers of male and female users and – overall – conceiving of a userbase that is ‘proportionally less white and more urban’ than users of other major platforms (McCracken, 2017:152). I took this as contextual boon for this study, as this seemed to suggest that I might be able to source a more equitable demographic participants than might be possible on other networking sites. I discuss the significance and potentials of this study’s user sample in the methodology chapter. Tumblr’s diverse userbase has lead to a population that tends to eschew normative social roles, with Alison McCracken describing how Tumblr users are more likely to forego typical gender norms and identify across spectrums of sexuality (McCracken, 2017: 152). Keller (2019) maintains that Tumblr users are especially likely to be socially and politically minded in their interactions within the community, a trend which has produced a new (digitalised) political identity termed the ‘social justice warrior’ (SJW) (Keller, 2019:4). It is suggested that young people are able to define and reflect on their social and cultural standing with more efficiency on sites such as Tumblr, which might produce possible ‘micro-territories’ for youth political engagement (Harris and Wynn, 2009). McCracken argues that for many young people, Tumblr has come to represent an ‘alternative, tuition-free classroom,

a powerful site of youth media literacy, identity formation, and political awareness' that she points out will more often than not reproduce scholarly methods of media analysis amongst the site's young adult population (McCracken, 2017:152). McCracken maintains that, in general, young Tumblr users are sophisticated media consumers who are accustomed to being exposed to a variety of identity categories and political positions when engaging in online discourse, and that they are therefore more likely to eschew narrow definitions of identity production and champion alternative social norms (ibid.). She maintains that as a result of their exposure to a variety of identity categories, many Tumblr youth have become sophisticated media consumers and producers who are 'critical of and resistant to existing institutional norms, social and cultural hierarchies, and narrow definitions of identity and behaviour' (McCracken, 2017:154). Tumblr should prove an especially fruitful 'base' for this audience study, as it embodies an inclusive user base of young people 'grappling with issues of identity through participatory reinvention of popular culture' (Miller, 2015:176). In the next section, I foreground this study's inclusion of 'generation' as social categorizer, discussing what Tumblr's 'young adult' userbase can offer in terms of representability and nuance.

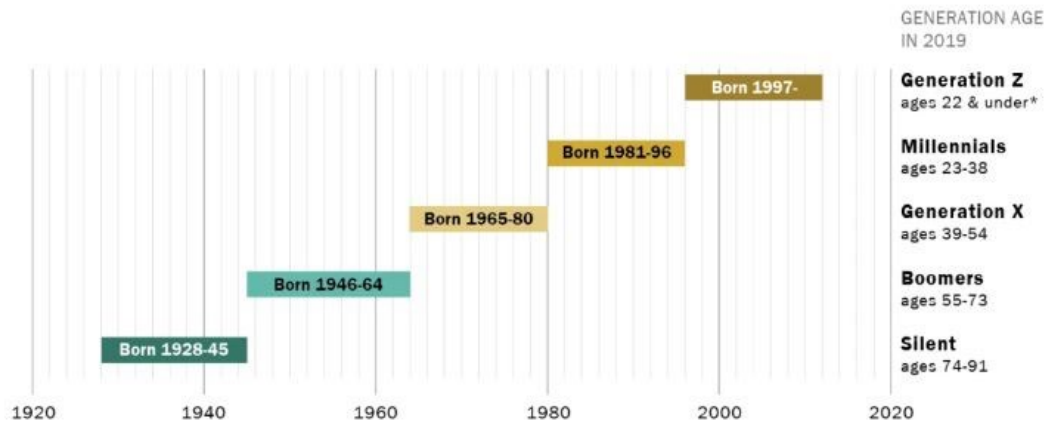
### 3.3.2 *The Digital Generation*

In Western society, the rapid accumulation of digital technologies over the past two decades has been repeatedly characterised as a sweeping generational change (Jenkins 2006; Olsson and Dahlgren, 2010). The concept of 'generation', once a vague and mostly irrelevant identifier of age cohorts, has since risen to the forefront of Western cultural consciousness as a means of evoking the stark differences between pre-and-post digital society (Miegel and Olsson, 2012:487). Generation and technology have often been studied in tandem. Roger Silverstone (1994) discusses how technology is often considered to be 'symptomatic' of a particular generation: consider the formative presence of the TV set in the childhood of the post-war 'baby boomers', the introduction of portable music tech such as the Walkman and its connection to Generation X, and now the home PC and Internet for millennial users (Silverstone, 1994). This link between media technology and social life has its roots in a long history of perceiving material objects as forms of 'habitus' (Bourdieu, 1984; Bennetts and Robard, 2014). Matt Hills clarifies, however, that it is not necessarily the technologies themselves but their social *effects* that tend to be generationally specific. He explains: 'Generational identities can be theorized as having an "eurythmic character" where rhythms of the life course, age cohort, wider sociohistorical changes, and developments in media technologies/content can all resonate harmoniously at specific historical moments' (Hills, 2017:312). Vittadini et al (2013) posits that designation of 'generation' is therefore contingent on 'collective memory': the telling and re-telling of experiences and the recognition of having shared the same formative events (Vittadini, Siibak, Reifova and Bilandzie, 2013:65). 'Generation' is less a definite age grouping as it is a cultural construct meant to mediate narratives on life experience. 'Shared experience' is central to identity as members of a particular generation, meaning that generation can be stratified in ways similar to social class, race, gender or sexual orientation (Miegel and T. Olsson, 2012:488). Though Bolin maintains 'the notion of definite cut-off points (e.g., particular years) existing between generations remains highly artificial and academically contested' (Bolin, 2017:33), 'generation' has nevertheless emerged in recent social study as a useful nexus for managing the patterns and themes of cultural life. I explore the significance of 'generation' as mediator of life

experience throughout this study's findings chapters, detailing, in particular, the socially stratified relations between social media use and 'millennial' identity.

As suggested previously, the sample of Tumblr users recruited for this study represented a generationally contingent grouping; users that participated in this study fell within the broad parameters of Generation Y, indicated on the chart below as 'Millennials' (PEW Research Center, 2019). This age cohort is significant to the online contexts of this study as this age group was the first to be identified under the banner of the 'digital generation'.

**Figure 4: Chart of generational difference (2019)**



Broadly speaking, the digital generation is a young adult grouping whose development during the 'Internet boom' meant that learning to use digital technology became an assimilative process of their everyday lives (Tapscott in Helsper and Enyon, 2009:16). As a result of a close interaction with digital technology since their formative years, this age grouping has come to be known as the 'native speakers of the digital language, computers and the Internet' (Prensky, 2001:1). As early adopters of the Internet, these young adults are 'effective stakeholders in online interaction and community' (PEW Research Center, 2010).

Livingstone's 2010 study on 'Interactivity and Participation on the Internet' indicates that young people's eager adoption of social media derives from a feeling of 'ownership': 'it is their medium, they are the early adopters, the most media savvy, the pioneers in the cyber-age, leading rather than being led for once' (Livingstone, 2010), a trait that longitudinal studies predict will ensure they will be 'ambient broadcasters' for years to come (PEW Research Centre, 2010). Not all perspectives on the digital generation are so positive, however. The interlocation between the Internet and young people's everyday lives has been argued to have a destabilizing effect on the development of social norms (Miegel and Olsson, 2012:488). As explored in Chapter Seven of this thesis, this has inspired divisive public commentary over the perceived naivete and entitlement of this age cohort (see pg. 160).

Other than encouraging generational dispute, an issue with these discourses is that they are rarely inspired by empirical research into the ways in which young people actually make use of and understand new ICTs. They are instead most often based on hearsay or loosely stratified statistics (Miegel and Olsson, 2012:347). This study should offer more in-depth findings on this subject, perspectives which (importantly) come from the accounts of the young people themselves. In this thesis, I aim to offer a nuanced generational analysis of young adult's social media usage. There is an opportunity, here, for this study to present a

formative study of generational response to media content, as well as a further contribution to studies on how social media figures in wider patterns of sociological change. In order to appropriately contextualise how social media has affected the patterns of social life, the next section will break down some pertinent theories meant to address fundamental aspects of the audience experience, including communality, publicness, affect and performance.

### 3.3.3 Identity Performance

Identity performance has been recognised as a ‘strategic activity’ social media users undertake that allows them to ‘reinforce, reproduce and contest’ conditions of their self-presentation (Rambe, 2013:316). The ‘disembodied’ nature of identity in online spaces means an individual must constantly display and ‘perform’ their identity to others in order to construct some sort of salient presence (boyd, 2008:129). Profile generation and blogging are just two actions undertaken as means of ‘writing oneself into being’ in the digital environment (boyd, 2008). It has been found that for young people in particular, the affordances of being able to negotiate the conditions of their identity presentation has proved particularly beneficial. For example, Valkenburg and Peter’s 2011 study argues how key features of Internet use, including ‘anonymity’, ‘asynchronicity’ and ‘accessibility’, stimulate self-representation, ultimately affecting young people’s psychological development. They conclude that online devices enhance the ‘controllability’ of their self-presentation (Valkenburg and Peter, 2011:122). Similarly, Katie Davies study ‘Youth Identities in the Digital Age’ showed that adolescents have a keen understanding of how self-identity is more manageable in the online world in contrast to ‘real life’. She reports how participants had a reflexive awareness of how they could control the impressions that others formed of them online by ‘tinkering’ or otherwise manipulating aspects of their online presentation. Whilst this does open up online identities to questions of ‘illusion’ and ‘artificiality’ (Nusselder, 2009; Hurley, 2019), there is an emergent body of work that argues that, in the case of young people, the sociological benefits of performing identity in online spaces can offer more affirmation than their ‘real world’ encounters (Hart, 2015). In her book *It’s Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teens* (2013), danah boyd posits that young people are feeling increasingly excluded from public life and are consequently seeking new places to develop their sense of self. For these young people, online spaces represent a means of connecting with their peers in a way that is ‘meaningful to themselves and each other’ (Hart, 2015). This has generated amongst youth users a perception of social media as a ‘shared space’, a place for them to reflect on their lives in relation to others. The socialising affordances social media offers therefore has potential to enhance their civic engagement and define their place in the larger social universe (Friedman, 2006:606).

I would maintain that these theories of ‘performative’ identity relates to Giddens’s ‘project of the self’ (Giddens, 1991). Giddens claims that self-identity ‘is not something that is just *given*, as a result of the continuities of the individual’s action-system, but something that has to be routinely created and sustained in the reflexive activities of the individual’ (Giddens, 1991: 52). Giddens work, not unlike the research referred to in the previous section, focused on how the self is articulated through the sharing of self-narratives (ibid.). This theoretical work is now frequently extended to the social network, especially in relation to the autobiographical properties of the ‘blog’ (Zhao and Biesta, 2012; Takahashi, 2016). Long term, the management of identity on social networks can also cause these sites to ‘take on the character of a long-term identity ‘exhibition’ (Zhao et al, 2013:1). For example, Hogan’s 2010 paper

'Presentation of Self in the Age of Digital Media' and Zhao et al.'s 2013 article 'The Many Faces of Facebook: Experiencing Social Media as Performance, Exhibition, and Personal Archive' consider how digital traces of performativity preserved through social media in the form of photos, comments and status updates offer users opportunity for identity 'exhibition'. This concept is explored in depth in Chapter Five of this thesis (pg. 103). It must be stated, however, that the focus of prior studies on online identity performance has most often been on how different functions of digital media *control* identity formation (De Ridder, Vesnic-Alujevic and Romic, 2016). There are still only a few examples of prior studies that prioritise user accounts of usage over analysis of site design - this is a gap in the literature which this study is working to fill.

### 3.3.4 Context Collapse

The concept of 'context collapse' is integral to the understanding of this study's findings because it helps communicate how personal communications are articulated online as public modes of interaction. As explored in the previous review chapter, the articulation of identity on social media will inevitably involve the online user renegotiating the boundaries between personal information and public content (Chambers, 2013:61-62). Social networks are designed to ease information sharing between individuals, which scholars have pointed out has the consequence of 'conflating' normal social boundaries (Strauß and Nentwich, 2013; Papcharissi and Gibson, 2011). Davis and Jurgenson (2014) suggest that online interaction can stimulate a sort of 'contextual porousness', in that one should anticipate that the 'norms' of social contact that have been built up to facilitate real-world interactions will not be in evidence, and that the individual must therefore be prepared for their online information to be shared (and potentially misinterpreted) by a much wider social 'public' than the subject is likely to come across in their everyday life (Davis and Jurgenson, 2014:479-480). Croteau and Hoynes (2002) articulate how networking sites will combine characteristics of 'mass' communication with 'one-to-one communication' (Croteau and Hoynes, 2002:150), meaning that conversations that would have usually been personal discussions shared between friends or family can now be 'broadcast' to any number of people. It is this very 'collapse' between public and private communication that I argue has made audience reception all the more visible, as it tracks that data which would usually be 'private' would become observable under such conditions (see methodology chapter for further discussion on the ethical dimensions of using social media content). Bennet and Segerberg argue that social media sites have given rise to a new form of sociability, a mode of socio-cultural interaction they have named 'connective action' (Bennet and Segerberg, 2012). Connective action acknowledges that the contextual collapse that occurs in online spaces mediates forms of individualized participation in such a way that personal practices can coalesce into a much broader forms of social participation. This is integral to understanding forms of audience participation and is helpful in critically analysing the 'limits' between audience practice and public participation. As shown throughout the course of this thesis, the breakdown of boundaries between 'self' and 'other' is integral to the nature of online audience engagement, meaning context collapse and it's associated 'public' behaviours is intrinsic to the theoretical groundwork of this thesis.



### *3.3.5 Imagined Audiences*

In order to articulate how processes of online audiencehood may relate to ‘real world’ audience practice, this study engaged with boyd and Marwick’s concept of the ‘imagined audience’. This work seeks to elaborate on how online audiencehood is informed by the positioning of identity in relation to an imagined social ‘other’ (Mathieu, 2015:28). Expanding on her earlier work on context collapse, boyd and Marwick discuss how social media use produces a sort of ‘double subjectivity’ amongst its audiences - an understanding that you can be both the ‘consumer’ and the ‘consumed’. They argue that because online users might never know who their communications are being received by, they must put on a sort of ‘public performance’, whereby they can manage and restrict the presentation of their identity (Marwick and boyd, 2011). In this regard, Marwick and boyd’s work aligns with that of Goffman (1959), whose work concerns the ‘situation-specific’ nature of identity. Goffman’s symbolic interactionist approach determined that people have an innate desire to control the impression that others form of them, and so will go to certain lengths to ensure their conduct meets established social norms (Goffman, 1959). They do so by maintaining ‘front-stage’ and ‘back-stage’ identities which work to meet social conventions. People’s ‘front -stage’ identities are acutely informed by awareness of the scrutiny of others: these performances follow a ‘social script shaped by cultural norms’, which ensures that the subject will not do anything to disturb or discredit their self-presentation (Cole, 2019). Front-stage performances therefore involve a strict routine, whereas people’s ‘back-stage’ identities are generally more relaxed and inhibited, usually only glimpsed by family or close friends. The public functions of social media, which effectively ‘broadcast’ personal updates to networks of strangers, can be seen to break down the front-stage/back-stage dichotomy, meaning online users have to undergo a sort of prolonged ‘balancing act’ in order to project an appropriate representation of themselves. Online users, they claim, must ‘cognitively create’ a conceptual audience in order to negotiate an appropriate representation of themselves, much like a writer will when envisioning writing for a ‘target audience’. Marwick and boyd name this conceptual collective the ‘imagined audience’ (Marwick and boyd, 2011; Litt, 2012). My study incorporates the concept of ‘imagined audiences’ to understand how consciousness of an imagined ‘other’ guides Tumblr users’ modes of reception. This study describes in detail how online audiences face the challenge of managing personal boundaries and identities across a challenging new spectrum of social, cultural and material norms.

### ***Conclusion***

This is the world that we inhabit now. We access and experience media content over a multitude of platforms, many of which are personalized and integrated into our day-to-day lives. Media technology such as smartphones and VOD barely existed twenty years ago, yet even these platforms will appear outdated in the face of more up-to-the-minute digital tech. Distinctions between the real world and the world presented by the media are more tenuous than ever before. And as a result, we are formulating an environment of ‘easy’ information exchange and interactivity which has potential for significant cultural and generational change. This review chapter has charted a challenging course through several elements of this new media ecology, moving across theories connecting to media convergence, filmic distribution and social networking platforms. The work set out has offered ‘routes to knowledge’ that can accommodate the understanding of the digital media landscape as a ‘convergent’ entity; in particular, attention has been drawn to how the film industry is

continuously adapting to media change, and how this has informed this study's conceptual understanding of online audiencehood as a 'post-cinematic' experience. Similarly, the research undertaken on 'convergence culture', and the new creative dynamics that are emerging from this melding of mass and individualized media, has directly informed my understanding of key aspects of online media use, including content creation and remixing. These theoretical works have been instrumental to the 'framing' of this study as an integrated conceptual approach to questions of online audiencehood.

It is useful to build an understanding of the significance of our current cultural moment as a time of constant adaptation and innovation. Our visual and networking technologies are still transforming, and our communication practices are constantly being redefined from one year to the next. The importance of this period of transition cannot be overstated, as the patterns of sociability that we exhibit now will no doubt be carried forward as the standard for future generations. As we move forward into a period of increasing media ubiquity, however, it is more important than ever that we are able to put contemporary media developments in perspective of the technologies and social practices that have come before them. As Buckingham (2013) states: 'Technology does not appear from nowhere: what it means, how it is used, and the effects that it may have, all depend upon much wider processes of historical and social change' (Buckingham, 2013:2). It is my hope that by pinpointing some of the productive and consumptive changes occurring in the online environment, I might be able to develop a situated understanding of our current convergent landscape, which will hopefully work towards the historicizing of our transient media moment. As stressed throughout these two literature review chapters, it is incredibly helpful to locate patterns of in their embedded social context, as this provides a 'practical' perspective on how we assimilate media technologies within the course of our everyday lives. However, it is also essential that this study acknowledge the material structures of the new media environment, in order that the agentive 'structures' of new media are made visible. This study's contextualised approach seeks to move beyond 'linear' perspectives on media as simply 'transmitting' messages to its audiences and aims instead at conceiving of contemporary audiencehood as a complex negotiation between digital affordances, social, historical and cultural contexts.

## 4. Ethnography Online: Research Methodology

This chapter details the methods used to generate data and the specific ethical and epistemological factors that had to be considered when undertaking online audience research. As outlined in the introduction to this thesis, reception research already has an established history of methodological approaches, most prominent amongst which has been ethnographic enquiry. However, as has been the case for most of this study, adjustments have been made in order to align this research within a developing paradigm of audience research that calls for a more integrative and reflexive approach to praxis. The first section of this chapter considers the epistemological priorities of undertaking constructivist research, reflecting on the delicate balance that needs to be upheld between embedded study and objective practice. Traditional ethnographic methods are then evaluated in relation to online ethnography, a more recent iteration of the anthropologic method which involves observation, interview work and document collection carried out within online communities. Adoption of online ethnography (OE) served to augment the aims of this thesis by putting into practice some popular logics concerning audience engagement. The second section of this chapter details the specific research design set forth for this project, and how this methodology approaches this study's research questions, which I will reiterate again here:

- *How do social networking sites such as Tumblr figure in young adult's daily media use? How do Tumblr users engage with film content when interacting online?*
- *How are Tumblr users utilising the site in their reception of film texts? What are the forms of receptive work taking place online?*
- *How does the audience interpret and reflect on their online activity? What do these practices reveal about the nature of online audiencehood?*

As discussed in the introduction, an audience study involving reception research poses a methodological incentive: a means to address how the audience is *reading* texts when online, the *context* within which these readings take place, and the *meanings* the online audience ultimately draws from their media encounters. These three factors, when synthesised in data analysis, offer a well-rounded perspective on processes of reception, which allows the researcher to make inferences as to the nature of online audience engagement. The upcoming section on research design provides a step-by-step account of how this approach played out. The structure of the research design is broken down in reference to the organisation of data collection, starting with participant observation, which involves a form of 'prolonged engagement' in a research environment. The section discusses how online observation made it possible to distinguish the specific trends and practices that defined the site's 'community culture'. Interview work, which was then conducted via online tools such as email and Skype video calling, offered an opportunity to better understand participant's motivations of use, as well as delving into the ways audience members conceptualised their own reception practices. The process of data analysis is broken down in the section after, including a reflection on coding and the challenges of combining multiple datasets. Lastly, the ethical implications of an online ethnographical study are examined, and delimitations of the study are closely considered.

## 4.1 Epistemological Background

This study is qualitative in design, adopting a multiple-method ethnographic approach to address the social, rhetorical and contextual factors that inform online audience practices. The methods used for this study privilege the input of participants as offering a grounded, realistic description of the phenomena under study. I felt it was important that the actual experiences of the audience - their 'lived realities', as Nandini Ghosh states (Ghosh, 2012:11) - were carefully represented, and that the work done concerning interpretation was drawn directly from the audience's own accounts. This meant engaging with audiences, talking to them in-depth, and having them frame their own responses to media content. This conception of a methodology quickly found its feet in ethnography; however, as I'll address throughout this chapter, a significant challenge that had to be addressed when adopting ethnographic methods is that though the analytical process is intended to be a product of 'co-creation' (Hutchinson, 2013:106) between researcher and participant, it is the researcher who inevitably controls the 'narrative' of the data. Adopting an ethnographic approach for reception research essentially means grappling with multiple levels of interpretation: those meanings reported by the participants, but also the meanings drawn by the researcher, whose interpretative input dictates what data is reflected in the eventual report, and what information is excluded. Though my intention was to produce an 'unfiltered' account of audience processes, the nature of analysis can work against the researcher in this regard. Ethnography can often be a messy process, producing a large amount of extraneous data, and so it *is* necessary for the researcher to impose some level of order on the information gathered, however, this should be carried out reflexively, with respect to the testimonies of the population under study. As explored below, this is one of a number of reasons this study adopted a radical contextualist framework, as a means of addressing the 'unruly' nature of qualitative analysis. It was imperative that before beginning data collection, previous ethnographical work was reviewed in order that I might build an understanding of the ways other studies had successfully (or in some cases, unsuccessfully) addressed the researcher's influence on the outcomes of the study. The forthcoming sections therefore depict previous studies that were instrumental in constructing this study's research design. Before launching into a discussion of the specificities of design, however, I would like to further foreground some of the ontological aims that guided this study, and how they have championed forms of critical self-analysis in social study.

### 4.1.1 Radical Contextualism

Radical contextualism, as it is understood within the context of Cultural Studies, is a theoretical and methodological perspective that reflexively challenges the researcher's ability to adequately represent the 'messiness' and complexity of everyday reality. Though most qualitative studies carried out within this research field will take as their subject of focus the representation of conditions of everyday life – an acknowledgement, as stressed in Chapter Two, of the field's ontological categorization of culture as 'ordinary' (Williams, 1958) – researchers interested in pursuing contextualism will often find they must adopt a critical perspective as to their own intervention in the research process, which may be inadvertently 'colouring' the methods, orientations and analyses produced. Audience scholar Ien Ang claims that our 'curiosity' towards the subjects we choose to study is 'never innocent', in that

specific material and intellectual orientations will come to shape the kinds of knowledge we produce (Ang, 1996:56). In this way, cultural studies tap into its political-intellectual upbringing to articulate how knowledge may be ‘represented, industrialized and communicated’ (Striphas 2010:18) in self-serving ways. A radical contextualist approach must therefore seek to:

1. Resist reductionism, essentialism, and universalism;
2. Appropriately elicit and develop conceptual abstractions out of the empirical conditions of particular contexts;
3. Embrace the contested, constantly changing, complex multiplicity of socio-historical conditions; and
4. Maintain a critical self-reflexivity about the knowledge we produce, the conditions under which it is produced, and the implications of its production

(Grossberg, 2006)

Davis (2019) stresses that this approaches radical rejection of ‘objective knowledge’ is not intended to suggest that cultural studies scholars should adopt a relativist position to study; rather, it is an attempt to acknowledge the mechanisms of power that work through all contexts – including on the researcher themselves (Davis, 2019:49). Radical contextualism has gained prominence in this field not only due to the ‘unapologetic’ stance the method takes in developing ‘rhetorics of complexity’ (Helfenbein 2003, p. 12) surrounding everyday life, it has also gained import as a form of ethical commitment, a reflexive undertaking to uncover the ways we position ourselves, as researchers, to relations of power (Grossberg, 1998). Throughout this study I have made efforts to be transparent about my analysis, including those (inevitable) instances in which the data has run counter to my own intentions or understanding. As explored in this chapter’s section on ethical considerations, a ‘transparent’ approach to study is of particular import when engaging in social media study, as the ethical norms regarding social media research are still very much underdeveloped, meaning it would be even easier for the online researcher to obscure their own intervention in data collection and analysis. This study has required the articulation of a deliberate, self-reflexive account of the data collection and analytical process, so that the accounts presented remain grounded and responsive to the realities of audience activity. Ultimately, it was found that the ‘critical recursivity’ (Grossberg, 2011:426) this approach tracked well with the current epistemological priorities of audience studies. In the following section, then, I draw together a brief epistemological background of ethnographic study, focusing in specific on the ways this method meets expectations for complex, embedded audience study.

#### *4.1.2. Ethnography*

Ethnography is widely used in the social sciences as a method meant to detail ‘the organisation and politics of community’ (Evans and Stasi, 2014). Karen O'Reilly remarks that an ethnographic approach seeks to understand social life as being an 'outcome of the interaction of structure and agency' (O'Reilly, 2012), sustained and informed by everyday habits and traditions. Ethnography thus ties into constructivist approaches, which stress the significance of local actions in reproducing dominant social structures (Garfinkel, 1967; Holstein and Gubrium, 2008). The typical features of an ethnographic approach include: an

extended period of time in the field spent participating in the everyday life of a community, use of interviews or focus groups to engage with members of the community, as well as the collection of relevant artefacts that can 'cast light' on the focus of inquiry (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007:3). The primary task of the researcher undertaking ethnography is in 'listening, participating, witnessing, and reflecting' (McGranahan, 2014:23) on the practices of a given culture. Ethnography is a socially oriented methodology, to be short, and this has specific affordances relating to reception study. I have discussed in previous chapters how reception research has emphasised the 'contexts' of media engagement as being fundamental to audience meaning-making e.g., the environments in which audiences consume media, the social pressures that can shape certain readings, the modes of production of the media text, the individual's daily habits of use etc. Silverstone concludes that ethnography's role in describing the patterns of everyday life is able to 'account for the fact that the audience uses the media and creates and/or recreates its meaning from within its social context' (Silverstone in Takahashi, 2002:202). Ethnography therefore presents itself as a vital method for exploring audience experiences on a 'first-hand' basis, through immersion in the audience member's everyday life. Producing an ethnography is a complex task that requires the researcher to address both the fine details and the big picture in one breath, weaving specifics of localised audience activity around broader patterns of interaction to produce a coherent picture. The ethnographer must remain open to all levels of interpretation, constantly stepping back to see the forms that may be emerging from the milieu. One of my first reflections on my own work is what was going to be needed in terms of self-discipline for this project to be carried out successfully. It gradually became clear that I would need to operate with a greater level of introspection in order to maintain an objective focus on my own research practices. This drew attention to the amount of 'self-reflexivity' that is needed to undertake ethnography in a responsible manner (Bruner, 1984).

One of the issues of adopting ethnography as a methodological approach is that the theory informing the researcher can often reflexivity for granted. Ethnographic methods are (in general) designed to be unobtrusive and objective. Though current trends for 'participant observation' usually involve the researcher immersing themselves in everyday activities within a community, the ethnographer is still expected to maintain a 'disconnect' from the subject/s under study, in order that they might present an objective account (Kawulich, 2005:43). This means (in theory) that data should not be manipulated by the researcher and should therefore represent an authentic depiction of the given culture. However, scholars such as James Clifford and George E. Marcus (1986) have rightly illustrated biases of the researcher can often influence the eventual presentation of information. Clifford and Marcus's text *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* throws doubt on the purported authority of ethnographic accounts, by breaking down the contrived nature of the ethnographic 'vignette'<sup>2</sup>. Their work specifically details how ethnography's anthropologic base has tended to valorise an ideology of 'transparency of representation and immediacy of experience' (Clifford and Marcus, 2010:2) to such an extent that any reference to the creation of the descriptive account is often dismissed or eluded. By incorporating poststructuralist and feminist critique of ethnographic accounts, Clifford and Marcus illustrate how ethnographers

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<sup>2</sup> Vignettes are narrative descriptions of scenes observed during ethnographic observation. They make up much of the detail and texture of the ethnographic account, sharing the experiences of the researcher and offering instances of insight into their tenure 'in the field'.

have cultivated an ontology which works to obscure the 'narrativity' of the ethnographic account. Their work therefore challenges the 'covert' position of the researcher in ethnographic research, addressing them as someone with agency – and therefore potentially bias – on the outcome of the data collection. The advancement of a critical foci in methodological practice has allowed for the perspectives of those from marginalised communities to come through more clearly, thus tying ethnography more explicitly into cultural studies ontological goal of 'redressing intercultural power relations' (Marcus and Fischer, 1986). Work such as Clifford's engendered a call for a critical focus on how ethnographic research is being conducted.

The call for reflexivity in ethnographic practice is symptomatic of the 'writing cultural debate' which took place during the 1980's and 1990's (Pink et al, 2015:12). A renewed focus on the construction of the 'text' in the wake of poststructuralist debates prompted a call for 'greater reflexivity with respect to the contexts of knowledge production' (ibid.) in qualitative inquiry. Qualitative research has often come under criticism for its lack of generalizable (read: statistical) data but concerns truly began to manifest when publications such as Clifford's and Marcus's - and before them Clifford Geertz's *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1977) - threw light on the 'inescapability' of representation when formulating qualitative accounts (Coffey and Atkinson, 1999:108). With much of qualitative work involving the construction of some sort of interpretative description, qualitative researchers began to question the veracity of their scholarship. The discipline lapsed into a state of 'meta-jeopardy' (Sandelowski, 2006:10), with scholars becoming seemingly hyper-conscious of the 'virtual lack of difference' that lay between 'reality and representation' (ibid.). This period of anxiety is now commonly referred to as the 'crisis of representation'. Though Thorne (2016) maintains that 'interpretative description seeks access to important knowledge about human subjective experience', and this requires a depth of understanding which makes conventional methods of measurement inappropriate, it became clear that qualitative researchers needed to develop a set of 'quality criteria' in order to enhance the social responsibility of their interpretive accounts (Thorne, 2016). It is true that wherever there is a crisis of thought, methods will often undergo significant changes in order to adapt to new epistemological requirements. In the case of ethnography, the crisis was offset by a renewed focus on critical readings of research reports, and the addition of multiple/mixed methods to improve analytical rigour. It is now widely recognised that an ethnographic methodology should invite reflexivity as standard, by acknowledging the specifics of the researcher's role in constructing the 'narrative' of the data (Bird, 1992:252). This has proved significant to the contexts of this study, as reflexivity in practice signalled a need to better understand the audience's lived experiences with media (Livingstone and Das, 2013: 2).

The crisis of representation had notable 'ripple effects' on numerous subject areas within cultural studies, audience studies included. S. Elizabeth Bird suggests that the taking up of a more 'deliberate' critical focus in ethnographic practice was a timely move for the discipline, as it prevented audience studies from 'dissolving into the same ever-increasing abstraction that is affecting the concept of audience' (Bird, 1992:252). As the sophistication of media technologies leapt forward and mass media content began to be dispersed across numerous facets of everyday life, audience studies began to pursue ideas of a 'New Audience Research' (Corner, 1991) with a dogged intensity. As stressed in previous chapters, efforts to claim the current research tradition as 'new' have often had a contrary effect, as this tends to impose an

intransigence on a subject that is a) constantly evolving and b) still very much repurposing traditional audience methods, theories and concepts. Inevitably, a heady mix of new media practices and methodological possibilities led researchers to claim that they were reaching the 'limits' of customary approaches to audience (Press, 1996:2), and that it may be necessary to 'make the break' with outdated traditions (Livingstone, 1998:14). As stated in Chapter Two (pg. 48), these calls have often had the effect of confounding audience study, as they have diverted the research canon away from tried-and-tested methodological practices. Jensen thus argues: 'digitalization does not necessarily change certain essential characteristics of human communication, nor does it invalidate the methodological lessons learned from half a century of communication research' (Jensen in Patriarche et al, :227). Audience studies has therefore had to 'find its way back' to ethnography in order to reclaim some of the legibility lost in chasing the 'new'. The following section explores how this 'new' criteria for ethnographic practices have expanded the scope and applicability of the methodology, therein providing opportunities to extend ethnography to new fields of investigation.

#### *4.1.3 Online Ethnography*

In Chapter Two of this thesis, I related the ways in which audience research has evolved since the introduction of reception studies. I noted how the presence of online communication and networking platforms have redefined the parameters of audience research, allowing for more 'interactive' approaches to audience consumption. It's important to note that for many people, online interaction is now a significant part of their everyday routines. People turn to online networks to communicate with others, source and disseminate information, and even participate in organised events. There is a distinctly digital 'edge' to modern life, an edge that is becoming 'familiar, mundane, taken-for-granted. Normal. Natural. The latest technologies, it seems, have become natural, even 'human nature' (Kozinets, 2015: 17). Online ethnography has therefore rapidly grown in popularity as a method that acknowledges how 'digital technology has become a mundane aspect of everyday interaction' (Evans and Stasi, 2014:16).

The Internet has become a significant element of contemporary research practice, both as an object of study and as a methodological *tool*; researchers are able to utilise the 'technologies and languages of the Internet and its complex cultures' to facilitate the collection of in-depth social data (Salmons, 2012). In this way, the Internet can either present as a means of relating online and offline behaviours, or it can be studied as a research phenomenon in its own right (Salmons, 2012). Audience studies is one of many disciplines to utilise social networks in methodological practice, as scholars have recognised the advantages in entertaining online platforms as means of 'direct barrier-less communication' with their subjects (Bury et al, 2013:313). As Proctor, Voss and Lvov lay out in their paper 'Audience Research and Social Media Data': 'Social media platforms often provide 'built-in' access to data available at the level of individual interactions with a single piece of text, image or video posted by a user. Such naturally occurring data at a population scale in near real-time allows researchers to shift back-and-forth between an individual-level view and an aggregate view of a target population' (Proctor, Voss and Lvov, 2015). This facilitates the ethnographer's task of producing an objective analysis, whilst also accounting for the finer details of audience engagement. In this way, OE methods generate information that is both specific to particular contexts and also 'amenable to [wider] analysis beyond those contexts', therefore producing findings that can be valuable to fields extending beyond media and cultural studies



(Livingstone, 1998:15). This is instrumental in the continuing applicability of the methodology in a time where 'big data' analysis is prolific (Ytre-Arne and Das, 2018:2). Proctor, Voss and Lvov see the study of social media as a 'logical extension of audience research methods, as being deeply interwoven with understanding new media, their audiences and the media market' (Proctor, Voss and Lvov, 2015). Positives of this form of study therefore allow for a methodology that is current, socially responsive and thorough, able to sample from a boundless number of users and apply analysis to globalised frameworks.

In practice, OE is not too dissimilar to traditional ethnography. Fundamental aspects of the ethnographic approach can still be retained. The online researcher can observe an online community and write up an account of their activities within a situated context in the same way a traditional ethnographer would. Online researchers can still conduct interviews or focus groups on a face-to-face basis, particularly now that online conferencing software (webcam, audio-video calling) is becoming more sophisticated and accessible. This means the affordances of ethnographic methods are not devalued in translation to online contexts - in fact, it points to increased opportunities for participant engagement, which builds further depth and diversity into the data collected. With 'access' being a time-honoured issue in ethnographic study, particularly in more conventional studies wherein a researcher would have to physically travel to participate in a particular culture, online ethnography allows for ease of access and reduction of researcher costs. OE can therefore prove valuable in studying 'difficult to reach populations' (Evans and Stasi, 2014:15), who may not have had the opportunity to present their views before (AlKhateeb, 2018). Markham (2007) points out that online research can be 'unbound' from restrictions of proximity, geography or propriety, therefore producing an account of social behaviours that is cross-cultural in its operation (Markham in Denzin and Lincoln, 2007:257). Escobar suggests that the Internet offers itself up as a 'unique territory' for the study of human interaction (Escobar, 1994). Recent work on audience research methods suggests that interactions between researcher and participant(s) can be significantly alleviated by use of online tools (Brown, 2017; Ytre-Arne and Das, 2018; Hills, 2019). Options for conducting online focus groups and interviews include the possibility for both face-to-face and text-based interactions, which affords agency and options for anonymity to interview participants (Janghorben, Roudsari and Taghipour, 2014; Ianco, Symonds and Brown, 2016; AlKhateeb, 2018). Text conversations, such as those conducted over email and DM, do lack the 'directness' that face-to-face interviews enjoy, however what text conversations lack in instantaneity, they make up for in *documentation*. Text conversations provide a ready 'record' of the conversation between researcher and participant, which opens up possibilities to revisit conversations, an affordance Crichton and Kinash suggest facilitates greater reflection and revision (Crichton and Kinash, 2003). This ultimately aids in constructing a more reflexive report wherein 'the audience's notion of themselves as audience' is firmly incorporated in the findings (Livingstone, 2003:4).

Though online ethnography is proving valuable to audience research, the transition towards online research methods is proving difficult to negotiate. This is not least because audience research methods have been built upon '*ceteris paribus* assumptions' that cannot be sustained in the online environment (Karpf, 2012). For example, Hine (2000) argues that a fundamental aspect of ethnography - the 'prolonged presence of the researcher in the field' - is destabilised in online approaches (Hine, 2000:43). Researcher membership within the online community is often transient, as the researcher can 'log in and out' of the community as they choose

(Markham in Denzin and Lincoln, 2007:258), which seems to suggest that methods of online observation may be more disengaged - and therefore less 'invested' - than conventional methods. This appears to tie into recurring criticisms of the Internet as a disembodied, ambiguous space, lacking in 'co-presence' (Hutchinson, 2013:110). Though Hine's criticism does hold weight, as the authority of the ethnography account is centred on gaining an embedded understanding of a culture, it also perfectly exemplifies the discrepancies that can occur when applying 'atypical' approaches to the online environment. Whilst researcher co-presence and visibility would have been significant to the standards of a conventional ethnographic approach, these are not applicable markers of rigour in an online context. Hine's criticism is working within a temporal and spatial framework that differs starkly from that of the Internet, wherein time is much more distorted and the 'field site' lacks any tangible boundaries (Karpf, 2012). Indeed, whether the online space can accurately be called a 'field' at all is up for debate. In previous ethnographic studies, the 'field site' is usually defined as a bounded territory including a group of local households, communities or 'tribes'. However, because the 'distance-collapsing capacity of the Internet' allows participants to engage online from a wide range of global locations, 'location' is less of a reliable anchor than it would be in a typical ethnographic study (Markham in Denzin and Lincoln, 2007:257). Markham clarifies: 'In contexts where the boundaries of self, other and social world are created and sustained solely through the exchange of information, 'being' is therefore relational and dialectic... Boundaries are not so much determined by "location" as they are by "interaction"' (Markham in Denzin and Lincoln, 2007:259). Locality is therefore of less significance to online ethnographic approaches, as there is more accuracy to be found in following 'intensities' of user interaction (Ingold, 2008). Caliando (2018) suggests that online researchers have more to gain in 'mapping practices [of interaction] of around a focal subject' (Caliando, 2018:1).

First highlighted in this study's literature review, Ruth Deller's study of audience practices on Twitter demonstrated how this study might go about 'mapping' forms of interaction occurring social media. In her study she utilises tweets from Twitter users, collected through several months of online observation, to 'exemplify' the relationship between media producers and consumers, and expand on how the social media site posits itself as a 'democratising space' within this dynamic (nbd.). Deller's work draws attention to the phenomenological nature of social media as a place to 'circulate' information, drawing on Jenkin's earlier notion of audience work as constituting 'knowledge cultures' (Jenkins, 2002:80). She advocates social media use in future audience research as being integral to understanding contemporary audience interaction and mobilization. Deller's work precedes several other studies which have emphasised the methodological potential of social media sites. These include danah boyd and Kate Crawford's work on 'Critical Questions for Big Data' (boyd and Crawford, 2012), John Postill and Sarah Pink's definitive text 'Social Media Ethnography: The Digital Researcher in a Messy Web' (Postill and Pink, 2012) and more recently, David Mathieu's paper 'The Continued Relevance of Reception Analysis in the Age of Social Media' (Mathieu, 2015). Mathieu's work offers a framework for understanding how the text-context relationship is altered by new media environments, and what social media can offer to investigation of the increasingly 'effactive' media/audience encounter. Mathieu states that audience research methods are being challenged by shifts towards 'individualisation, diversification, convergence, cross-media use' (Mathieu, 2015) and that social media, which in many ways acts as a 'nucleus' for these new forms of synergistic

audience activity, has now become - in Procter, Voss and Lvov's words - a 'crucial enabling platform' for the study of 'new, multi-nodal relationships' between media and consumers (Procter, Voss and Lvov, 2015:472). Similar to Deller, Mathieu suggests that social media offers opportunities to '[gather] a diversity of audiences under a common umbrella' and that the gravitational pull of the social network as a place to 'intersect audiences and texts' facilitates the researcher's task of engaging with elements of text, context and meaning. In regard to reception, Mathieu also makes a pertinent point that the centrality of online discourse allows researchers to 'read-off' audience reception from user's content (Mathieu, 2015). By following patterns of user communication, online researchers can convert 'ephemeral and hard to record aspects of daily life' into researchable phenomena' (Hines, 2011). Online audiences therefore often 'make visible' many of the aspects of their interpretative work. Jensen and Sorenson (2014) offer that the 'reading' of online content 'echoes the once prescriptive recipe to combine a detailed textual analysis of the mediated content (such as a soap opera, or a news bulletin) with the ways audience members made sense of this textual content' (Jensen and Sorenson, 2014). The key difference between a traditional and a social media approach to audience interpretation, however, is that readings are primarily produced by the audience themselves. This would seem to provide, then, a key ingredient missing in former studies of film reception: the interpretations and experiences of *actual audience members*. Social media thus offers a significant platform for facilitating audience praxis.

However, as Mathieu rightly cautions, just because something may resemble 'reality' on social media, does not mean that is necessarily so. The online world, whilst very close to 'real life', is still mediated by differing contexts of communication and production. As explored in the previous chapter, for instance, there is strong evidence to suggest that online interaction follows a logic of performance and exhibition (Bakardjieva, 2014). Research therefore points to an environment that 'reflects its own agenda and way of being' (Mathieu, 2015). This mirrors concerns posed by Hammersley (2006) about qualitative researcher's only "knowing" respondents through their textual claims. As the audience I am examining in this study are, for the most part, 'unseen', existing mainly as pieces of text or images on a website, it would be all too easy to lose sight of the 'real person' behind the computer. This helped me understanding that 'reading' of online content alone could not accurately account for processes of audience reception, and I must incorporate other methods to enhance rigour. This study therefore incorporated participant interviews to augment online observation; in this way I was ensuring that I'm bringing context to bear on representation and not repeating common mistakes wherein the researcher's own biases and assumptions were superimposed over the responses of actual audience members.

The task of analysing online spaces in research is complicated by several conceptual and practical factors, not least those addressed here. A number of these challenges are detailed in the upcoming section on ethics, the participative nature of online interaction bringing up a selection of issues surrounding researcher conduct and influence. Online environments have their own distinctive characteristics and therefore their own distinctive challenges, so this subject requires the researcher to think more intently about the nature of their methodological design. As qualitative researcher Janet Salmons asserts: 'Digital qualitative approaches require the researcher to do more than simply repurpose real-world data collection techniques' (Salmons, 2016: xiii). Study of online audiences requires a framework capable of

responding to the distinctive features of the online setting. This means that despite providing affordances of access, easy communication and instantaneity, it is a methodology that requires more deliberation, self-reflection and discipline than first anticipated. The following sections break down this study's research design in greater detail, highlighting, in particular, those instances wherein I had to challenge my own intervention in the research process.

## **4.2 Research Design**

In this section, I set forth the methodological design of this study, which has been constructed to detail receptive processes in such a way that the contexts, meanings and processes of online audiencehood are made clear. This study executed a multimethod ethnographic approach in order to foster deeper understanding of online reception as a distinctive cultural process. The initial data collection method undertaken in this study was online, or 'netnographical', observation (Kozinets, 2015). As commented on earlier in the chapter, the aim of adopting this method is to observe the online community within its natural habitat. For a social media study, the 'natural habitat' is the online space. An OE approach offered an opportunity to not only identify habits and trends of audience behaviour but allowed for a period of immersion within the online environment. This offered insight into nuances and subtleties of online interaction that might not have been picked up in casual usage (Fowley, English and Thouesny, 2013:257). Observation formed the necessary 'groundwork' of this project, as it helped to distinguish the characteristics of the site, form an understanding of the nature of the online community, identify themes and/or patterns that emerged from interaction around film, and generally get to grips with the various ways in which reception was taking place online. After preliminary analysis to highlight emerging themes in the data, key users identified within the Tumblr community were then approached for interview. Participants were offered the option of a Skype interview, which allowed real-time synchronous communication with interviewees (much like a face-to-face interview) or the option of an email interview. Interview participants were asked a series of semi-structured questions intended to explore their habits of use, their impressions of Tumblr as the main site of investigation, and their own perspectives on film reception. All Skype interviews were transcribed via NVivo, and all interview material coded in order to develop a thematic analysis. The overall direction of the research evolved significantly during this stage of the methodology; enquiry moved away from what could be seen as an 'insular' investigation, wherein impressions of the audience community were framed mainly from the researcher's own perspective, to become something more 'audience-led', wherein users could articulate and expand upon their own experiences. In combining the merits of these two ethnographic methods, this study can offer a more complex and rigorous account of online audience practices.

### *4.2.1. Pilot Studies*

In this section I aim to show the process by which I began to adapt this study's theoretical aims into methodological practice. It was important to the success of this study that theory could be married with empirical methods, so data uncovered could provide substance and rigour to otherwise 'illusory' concepts of audience activity. I felt the aims of this study were well reflected in ethnography, however, the process of 'testing' the methodology showed that not every ethnographic method was appropriate for this subject of investigation. Here I will

show how conducting pilot studies helped refine both the approaches used and my own understanding of this study's parameters.

My interest in this subject was first sparked when observing social media users' interactions around film, and how their online discourses seemed to 'make visible' aspects of audience reception. Because of this I knew observation of an online community would be a core element of my methodological approach, as this method would allow me to collect the data necessary to develop a detailed account of the online culture. As detailed earlier in this chapter, the literature on ethnographic observation was unanimous in its recommendation to incorporate alternate approaches that would 'enhance the explanatory power of [this] theory-driven fieldwork' (Schroeder, Hasebrink, Holig and Barker, 2012: 645). I therefore decided to include an additional qualitative method to improve the depth and detail of the findings. I was initially drawn towards focus groups as a means of engaging a broad spread of potential audience members. I hoped that by gathering a group of people together I would be able to replicate audience interaction in an everyday setting and see what comparisons could be made between online and offline interpretation. I felt strongly that social media was a vital platform for audience engagement, and that in comparing and contrasting online and offline interactions, I would be able to present a reception study that '[folded] virtual and real-world inquiry into the same set of interpretative practices' (Denzin in Johns, Chen and Hall, 2007:1). However, given that my initial interest in this subject was specific to *online* practices, what I found when piloting these focus groups was that the information collected lacked enough specificity to online interaction to accurately respond to forms of online engagement. As is the case for many focus groups, convenience sampling was used to recruit group members (Barbour, 2007), meaning that respondents had to meet a set of basic 'practical' criteria in order to take part: participants had to be in local proximity, be willing to participate in the study and available on certain days and times to conduct the sessions (Etikan, Musa and Alkassim, 2015:2). As described in more detail in the section on sampling, I also included my own conceptual criteria to the call for participants, namely that respondents should be active Tumblr users and be willing to engage with film as the subject of textual focus. I found that the 'broadness' of the participant sample attracted by convenience sampling invariably meant that one (and sometimes both) of the conceptual criteria necessary for this study went unfulfilled: for example, despite it being explicitly stated in recruitment material as a key feature of this study, respondents to the public calls reported interchangeable use of Tumblr - some did not use the site at all. Because I was not sampling directly from the online community I simply could not be assured of the specificity of the responses. In an attempt to ensure more representability in my audience sample, I had unintentionally lost some of the specificity of this study, which was the unique practices taking place *within this particular environment*. Ultimately, what the focus group highlighted was that I did not have a firm grip of my own subject matter. In formulating a focus group approach, I had made assumptions about online processes being comparable to 'real-life', and what the pilot study demonstrated was that there were specific circumstances dictating online usage that I was not considering. Whilst this study will go on to demonstrate that online interaction is undoubtedly an embedded aspect of people's daily lives, and that because of this audiences invariably follow similar routes to meaning as they would in 'real-world' situations, online communication has its own contexts and modes of engagement and is therefore guided by different logics. Essentially what I was attempting to do in incorporating focus groups was build a comparative account without any of the necessary contextual 'groundwork' that would

have established how an online audience operates in the first place. It became clear at this point of the research process that this thesis could not be a 'study of audience reception using online methods' but must be a study of 'online audience reception', as a phenomenon in its own right. From this point on I began to invest solely in producing an initial conceptual framework for understanding people's everyday interactions with Tumblr, and how these interactions translated to audience practice.

Conducting pilot studies made it clear that methods used needed to originate in, and work responsively to, online spaces and communities. For this reason, I adapted my study to include the use of online interviews and altered my sampling approach to purposive sampling. I briefly considered carrying through with conducting online focus groups but quickly found, after trying a few tentative approaches, that online recruitment was a much more complicated process than first imagined. Tumblr's 'anonymity' worked against me in this regard, as expectations for user privacy meant participants were hesitant to engage with a group of online 'strangers', and therefore I did not think it would be possible to gather an appropriate amount of people to form a focus group. This again demonstrated how the method used had to be adaptive to the specificities of the online environment. I changed my approach instead to online interviews. Interviews provided a more personal perspective on online engagement, which fleshed out the 'everyday contexts' of social media use. Interviews allowed participants to 'speak their minds' in regard to the content they saw (or created) on Tumblr, and to do so in confidence that their opinion was limited *only to the two of us*. Interviews ultimately made participants more comfortable in speaking to me about their experiences because they were more assured that their privacy would be upheld (for more on the significance of Tumblr 'anonymity', see pg. 117). Interview participants were even more forthcoming than anticipated because of this, and interview work ultimately proved more fruitful. This procedure of having to navigate around specific conditions of the online environment allowed me to begin to build upon ideas about publicness and privacy and how these were intimately positioned within processes of online reception. This became a crucial factor in understanding the nature online audiencehood (pg. 113). Through this preliminary work I got a sense of what approaches and tactics were going to work best when undertaking my fieldwork and how these could be consolidated into a 'multimethod' qualitative approach.

#### 4.2.2. Multimethod Approach

This study adopts a multimethod approach, incorporating both observation of an elected online community (Tumblr) and online interviews with key users. Distinct from mixed method approaches, which involves a combined use of qualitative and quantitative methods, multimethod research involves using several methods belonging to the same epistemological paradigm (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2018). The choice to incorporate two forms of qualitative data was ultimately down to the type of in-depth and inclusive information qualitative work generates, as I felt this data would be vital in helping to build up an embedded account of online audience practices, once again fulfilling this study's epistemological aims of producing a grounded, 'routinized' account of audience activity. Qualitative data is usually championed for its holistic qualities; Janet Salmons (2016) regards online qualitative research as generating three distinct types of data: extant, elicited and enacted data. Extant data is data that is 'available for anyone to read, copy, scrape or download' from online sources. What is unique about this data is that it 'exists without any intervention or influence by the researcher', meaning the researcher has an opportunity to

collect naturally occurring data without being concerned about any undue influence on the content (Salmons, 2016:7). Textual and visual data can act as 'evidentiary material' – documents that offer tangible evidence of what it meant 'to be alive at a particular time or place' (Kovala, 2002) - that work to furnish the ethnographic account. Inclusion of documentary evidence offers more dimensions to analysis and ensures that the contexts of the phenomenon under study are adequately (and realistically) represented in the findings. Observation is a primary research method for collecting this type of data, as the method involves surveillance of interactions that occur between participants in their natural habitats (Salmons, 2016:7). The use of Internet functions such as screenshots or scraping tools enhances the reliability of any evidentiary material collected, as these allow for 'real-time' data capture. The online researcher is able to synthesise this documentary evidence in analysis with any fieldnotes to ensure a fully rounded rendering of the community under study.

Salmons (2016), Hines (2011) and Hastings (2010) all point out that whilst extant data is valuable in establishing representative material for the investigative process, it is often best utilised as a compliment to other forms of data collection. As addressed earlier, this is likely due to concerns over the replicability and representability of qualitative work. Salmons is specific in addressing how the nebulous nature of online content can easily reflect on the specificity of any extant findings. There will always be content missing, or context excluded, when dealing with samples of online content because the nature of online content is simply more diffusive and transient than 'offline' material. By combining multiple methods of enquiry in order to address the nebulousness of online content, the online researcher is able to 'enhance the credibility of a research study' (Hastings, 2010) and ensure triangulation of data, by making sure that the weaknesses of one approach can be offset by the strengths of another (Reinhardt, 2016:21). Combining extant and 'elicited' data, which Salmons defines as information collected through direct interaction with online users, allows the researcher to ask questions of research subjects, and therefore affords 'the opportunity to experience embedded cultural understanding' of the subject under study (Kozinets, 2010:75). For this reason, I elected to build upon observational work by setting up a series of online interviews, wherein I could address contexts of engagement, habits of use, and processes of film interpretation directly with Tumblr users. Table 3, below, demonstrates the typical stages of investigation in an online approach that uses extant data with elicited methods.

**Table 3: Multimethod approach - using extant data with elicited methods, from Janet Salmon's *Doing Qualitative Research Online* (2016)**

<b>1. Unobtrusive observations:</b> Observe interactions over a period of time to learn about issues. Identify key players.	<b>2. Online materials review:</b> Researcher reviews well-liked texts, images and videos from group members.	<b>3. Plan interviews:</b> Contact key players and request consent for 1-1 or group interview.	<b>4. Semi-structured interview:</b> Conduct interviews; ask for explanation of posts/discussion on SNS.
Social networking site	Social networking site	Social networking site messaging or email	ICT selected by participant(s)

Here, the analytical approach to data collection begins with a review of the extant material in order to identify key concepts and themes, therefore creating a solid foundation on which to devise a series of semi-structured interviews, wherein ‘key players’ in the online community were identified for interview. Combining these two methods - though proving itself a lengthier affair than a solo-method investigation - ultimately offered a more complex, multi-dimensional perspective on processes of online audience reception.

#### 4.2.3. Setting

As detailed in this study’s introduction, I chose Tumblr as case study for this project due to the rich nature of audience interaction present on the site. Sites such as Tumblr offer a suggestion of ‘liveness’, in that they demonstrate ‘a potential connection to our shared social realities as they are happening’ (Couldry in Deller, 2000). This makes the site a promising platform for audience study, as it essentially ‘captures’ audience interaction within a given moment. From a mediation perspective (see earlier, pg. 47), Tumblr offered some unique characteristics that made it a prime choice for qualitative study. Tumblr’s assimilation of traditional ‘long-form’ blogging with synchronous posting and direct messaging functions combines the instantaneity of the social network with the descriptive affordances of the blog, ensuring collection of detailed extant information. It’s high-quality visual format and integration of animated GIFs produces some interesting parallels with filmic content, making it a useful platform for exploration of multi-media engagement. The predominant reason for choosing Tumblr was, however, because I myself had been an active user of the site since 2009. This meant I already had a clear idea of how the site operated, where relevant posts could be found, and what the general trends of interaction were. I was therefore able to sample from the community with more ease and confidence than if I’d approached the site ‘blind’. According to Hetland and Morch (2016), this should be an important consideration for online researchers, as the process of familiarising yourself with an online environment can be more time-consuming than anticipated (Hetland and Morch, 2016:6). Prior knowledge of the site meant early identification of ‘key users’, namely, those participants who would be able to advance discussion on film reception practices. This form of sampling approach is commonly known as ‘purposive sampling’, meaning that participants were selected in relation to a set of criteria formed from the research objectives. These criteria are discussed in more detail in the following section.



#### 4.2.4. Sampling

In this section I will break down the form of sampling used for this project and the unit of population under study. This thesis adopted purposive sampling, as a recognised sampling method for undertaking qualitative research (Ritchie et al, 2013; Huri, 2011; Gentles, 2015). Purposive sampling involves selecting 'information rich' cases, with the intention of 'yielding insight and understanding of the phenomenon under investigation' (Patton, 2001:104). The logic of purposive sampling therefore lies in detailing a context or phenomenon in-depth. This form of 'selective' sampling stands in contrast to quantitative sampling procedures, which seek to generalise findings by applying sampling to wider study populations (ibid.). Purposive sampling often relies on the researcher's situated knowledge of the field (Barratt, Fennis and Lenton, 2013), meaning - once again - that prior knowledge of the Tumblr community was instrumental to the success of this study's methodological design.

Purposive sampling within an online community is not without its challenges. Chris Mann and Fiona Stewart comment that sampling when online can feel like 'fishing in a very big pond' (Mann and Stewart, 2000:80). The large number of online users, combined with a lack of demographic data, makes identification of relevant subjects more difficult, which therefore means the online researcher must be purposeful in how they go about sampling. Criteria had to be developed in lieu of the theoretical purposes of this work and choices had to be made on the most appropriate subjects for study. This study explores processes of film reception on the social networking site Tumblr. Two criteria were therefore already distinct in this enquiry: film (as the subject of reception) and Tumblr (as the site of study). For these reasons, sampling of participants for observation and interview took place through Tumblr itself. As made evident by pilot studies, I needed to locate participants who could understand Tumblr's terrain: it's quirks, characteristics, etiquette and particular processes of interaction, and so it became necessary to look for participants who had experienced, observed or contributed to the Tumblr community. This was the first criteria established for this study's sampling approach: a) participants must be active Tumblr users (e.g., users who are currently participating in the community). Following this study's theoretical aims, the second criteria was b) users who were blogging about film or who had identified themselves as part of Tumblr's film community, commonly referred to as 'Film Tumblr'. As suggested in the thesis introduction, this was in order to 're-introduce' film reception into the wider schema of empirical reception work, as this work is necessary for the continued progress of the research canon. Use of Tumblr's tagging system made it easier to locate relevant posts and users from within the wider community. I used the search function on the site to monitor the following hashtags: 'film' 'movie' 'cinema'. Within this sample I was able to record trends of user interaction - and the specific forms film reception was taking - in a more purposeful manner. On occasion, if noticing a recurring user in the feed, or a post that had amassed a large number of 'notes' (cumulative likes and user reblogs - the number of notes appears as a counter at the bottom of each post), I would follow the 'trail' back to the initial poster, thereby observing key characteristics of individual blog pages and content. In this way, despite the wide range of the population under study, 'units [were] deliberately selected to reflect particular features of or groups within the sampled population' (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003:78). Altogether, there was a total of 150 Tumblr users identified through purposive sampling. Though by no means generalizable, the sample selected here is somewhat larger than the average participant sample for a typical ethnographic study. A larger participant

sample was necessary to increase the validity of the findings, as the conditions of online interaction could not be applied to conventional frameworks of analytical rigour; Saunders, for instance, iterates how the ambiguity of the online community tends to make prospects of data 'saturation' (read: equivalency) an even more uncertain and inconsistent marker than it may already be (Saunders et al, 2018:1893). I also found that in increasing the size of the observation sample I was able to increase the size of the participant recruitment pool, as interview participants were also recruited from within this purposive sample of Tumblr users. Having used Tumblr for a number of years, I was aware that anonymity was a defining characteristic of the community culture, and it was therefore highly likely I would receive a high percentage of non-responses to interview, as there can be little accountability amongst a mostly 'unidentifiable' userbase. A large participant sample seemed necessary in order to combat user 'unresponsiveness': if participants were impassive to approaches for interview, or dropped out from participation in the study, it had no detrimental effect on the sample population, as it was possible to simply move on to another user. A larger participant sample proved more useful in the long run, particularly in regard to participant recruitment.

Conducting interviews required a more stringent approach to the sampling criteria. As stated before, I had intended to sample from the pool of participants identified during observation and was aiming for 30 interview participants - the maximum in previous qualitative studies of the Tumblr community being 17 subjects (Hillman, Procyck and Neustaedter, 2016:1). There is already a precedent for small interview samples in work around Tumblr, as researchers have highlighted how the 'exclusivity' of the community can bring up issues of 'gatekeeping' and researcher access (ibid.) Indeed, recruitment for online interviews was much harder than even I had anticipated, with a number of ignored interview requests and drop-outs. I had to adapt my sampling approach slightly at this stage of the investigation in order to approach a wider range of users. I posted calls for participation over social media and even asked previous participants if they had any recommendations for users to interview. In this way there were elements of snowball sampling incorporated in this study - however it must be noted that this style of sampling attracted only a very small percentage of interview participants (12%). This was the first, but by no means the last instance, wherein my sampling criteria was adjusted. It is often the case that if certain themes or issues arise from the data collection process, the researcher may 'purposefully look for new research participants who can confirm it or raise questions about it' (Salmons, 2016:105). This is typical of a constructivist study, wherein the data collected is used to fortify the theory being developed. After noting a tendency towards discussion of films within the following franchises: *Star Wars* and *Marvel*, I deliberately looked for participants within the observation sample who were reblogging or creating content associated with these two franchises. This included users who were discussing the films in detail, or who could otherwise expand upon their engagement with popular film. Thus, an additional criterion was added to the research design for the interview process: d) users who show an interest in the *Star Wars* and *Marvel* film franchises.

The interview sample generated for this study was small, totalling only 24 participants. Though this is augmented by the observation sample, I recognise that it is still is not a generalizable user sample. A representation sample would only be essential, however, if I was conducting a mixed methods study, incorporating quantitative epistemologies. Quantitative studies have typically considered sampling as a means of producing 'statistically

representative' findings. These studies use large groups of participants chosen at random so the sample may be generalizable to the population at large. This is known as probability sampling (Arber, 2001). This allows the researcher to essentially prove or disprove hypotheses in relation to a broad representational group. Qualitative studies, by contrast, are more likely to adopt smaller sample sizes, wherein the research participants are chosen according to the 'needs of the study' (Coynes, 1997). It is argued that there is little need for sampling strategies that offer 'proportionate relationships', because the logic of qualitative work lies in a nuanced understanding of social life, which naturally goes beyond 'appearances and manifest meanings' (Crouch and McKenzie, 2006:483). As highlighted in this study's literature review, statistical work employed in regard to audience reception would often result in superficial impressions of audience activity; though this data can offer a 'generalized' read-out of audience reception to a film, it also offers no real insight into the particulars of interpretation, thus having the consequence of 'homogenizing' audience opinion (see pg. 25). Given the issues highlighted previously regarding approaches to audience study, it is important that this study not set a precedent for online reception research that reproduces the issues of some previous studies. This was one of the reasons I chose to pursue a qualitative approach rather than incorporate quantitative methods, as I felt the complexities of audience engagement were best captured through qualitative investigation. Qualitative sampling is small-scale in relation to quantitative sampling methods, but they present a more detailed exploration of the phenomenon under study. Overall, purposive sampling presented as the most appropriate method for ensuring appropriate detail in the audience data.

#### *4.2.5 Online Observation*

The observation work for this project took place over a 12-month period and was focused on the interactions of Tumblr users around the subject of film. Observational data collected during this stage of investigation consisted of extensive fieldnotes, imported user posts and similar user-generated content, analytic memos and excerpts from a research diary maintained throughout the course of the study. Each diary entry was drawn up on the computer, dated, and downloaded immediately to computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software - or 'CAQDAS' for short. Adoption of CAQDAS systems to aid data collection have become widely recognised platforms for qualitative data collection, which tends to produce an unruly amount of 'extraneous' data. Qualitative data was referred to by Miles as 'an attractive nuisance' (Miles, 1979); this is an understandable critique once immersed in the process of data collection, as a qualitative researcher can soon amount scores of fieldnotes, transcripts, documents and files, each undoubtedly engaging in their own respect but still presenting, on the surface, as a 'voluminous' and 'unwieldy' hoard of material (Ritchie and Lewis, 2009:202). Analysis software allows for quicker and more efficient data coding, as well as providing a 'repository' for any key sources, notes, research diaries or files that the researcher has gathered in relation to their investigation. CAQDAS software is capable of procuring more prolific samples than the manual ethnographer, and whilst there has been criticism over whether the breadth of computer-generated data samples can obscure research focus (Kozinets, 2015:98), the capacity of such software to provide a more efficient and systematic approach to qualitative data analysis is widely agreed upon. For this study I utilised the data analysis software NVivo, which is intended for analysis of unstructured qualitative data. As this study takes place predominantly online, it made sense to adopt a program that was capable of capturing online material, as this allowed for instantaneous data

collection and, importantly, negated the possibility of losing data (and meaning) in the transition from online post to printed source. Use of NCapture, an associated browser extension, allowed me to 'capture' user posts and content in PDF format, enabling me to import observational material directly to NVivo, to assist in easier collection and coding of evidential material. The facilities of NVivo allowed me to make notations and track codes directly onto the imported posts and sources, meaning I was able to manage and collate all my data quickly and efficiently. Observation work on the Tumblr pages of the 150 individuals selected for study produced over 290 examples of documentary evidence, all of which was stored and coded through NVivo. Each post was coded according to the emerging 'themes' observed in the data. These posts, which included a range of media texts including images, GIFs and the like, were approached from a 'multimodal' perspective (Miller, 2015), wherein all possible 'signifiers' of meaning were included in the coding; this included pictures, biographies, URLs, GIFs, hashtags, titles and more. This documentary material was relevant to my study as it enhanced the authenticity and reliability of my ethnographic observations. As I knew my interview sample would likely be small, it was important that my observational data was able to provide a solid foundation on which to base my interview work. Though, once again, it should be stressed that this study is not aiming towards a generalizable sample, I am confident that the combination of extant and elicited datasets provides a more rigorous and 'fully-realised' account than previous work conducted in this area.

Observation work conducted online can be carried out in an unobtrusive manner, as the lack of a tangible 'presence' in the field affords unrivalled access to people's everyday social encounters and communications (Hine, 2011). However, as established earlier in this chapter, it was important that I was able to account for my own intervention in the research process, and part of this involves acknowledging that knowledge production cannot be adequately achieved without co-participation between ethnographer and subject (Tedlock, 1991:69). During the course of the data collection period I maintained a Tumblr blog of my own under the URL [spectatorsandco.tumblr.com](http://spectatorsandco.tumblr.com). This blog was distinct from my research diary and was created in order to maintain an active presence within the Tumblr community. On this blog I would record reflections on my academic journey and reblog content relating to film and social media - subjects I see as being the two core focuses of my research work. When I sent out calls for participation or requested to include a user's content in my study, I did so through this account. In this way I tried to be explicit about my role as a researcher and candid about my reasons for being present on the site (this is explained in more detail in ethical considerations). The choice to run my own blog was inspired by the work of M.Z. Newman, who similarly maintained his own research-based blog when engaged in study of the Tumblr community (Newman, 2015). Newman used the page to reblog images and quotations that he would later go on to analyse for his reception work, thus providing other users some transparency as to the content he was engaging with, as well as helping to organise his documentary data. Overall, creation of my own Tumblr blog worked to bridge the gap between covert observation and participative practice.

#### 4.2.6. Online Interview

The introduction of interviews was essential to the success of this study for one reason: it offered an opportunity to represent the realities of online audiencehood as set out by *actual audience members*. As highlighted in the literature review, this is of significance to a study

on film audiences, as precedence has previously been given to audience metrics and ratings over actual audience testimonies. To this end, interviews offered an opportunity to ask some candid questions about the participant's audience experiences, which led them to speak more reflexively on the nature of their audience activities when online. Pilot interviews for this study took place in May 2016, after which I was able to reframe some of my interview questions and refine my approach. The second wave of interviews took place between January and March 2017. Transcription was carried out from March - May of the same year. A final third wave of interviewing, wherein I sought to clarify some key issues, as well as thank the participants for taking part, was carried out mostly via direct messaging, and concluded in January 2018.

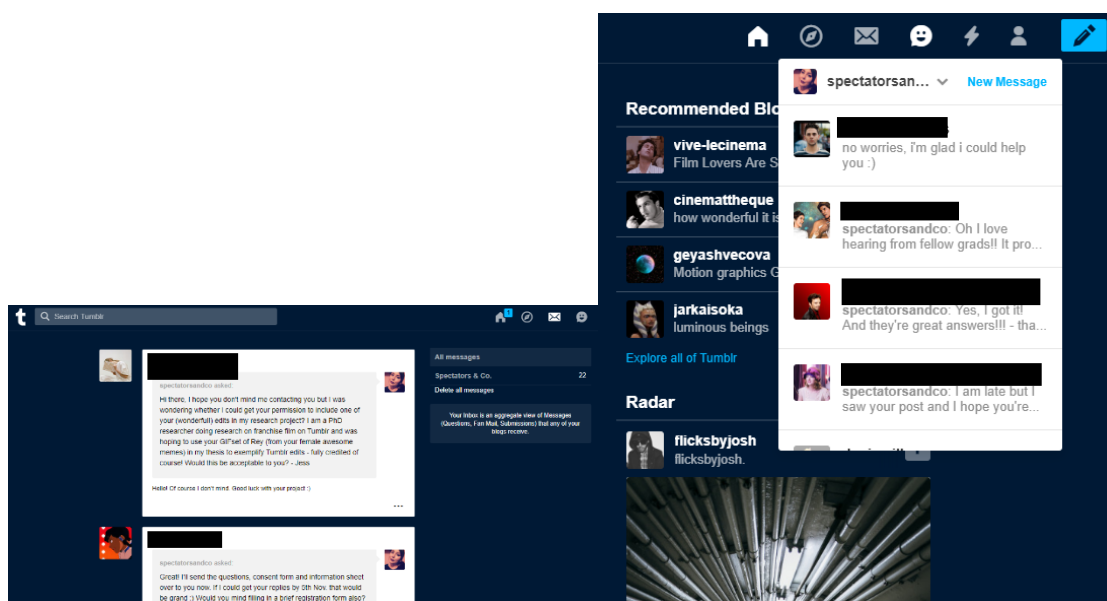
Interviewing is one of the most commonly used approaches within qualitative enquiry (Deacon and Wakefield, 2014:603). Interviewing offers the researcher opportunity to engage with research subjects directly and share a more nuanced understanding of their experiences. Face-to-face interviewing is seen as something of a 'gold-standard' of enquiry in terms of its methodical rigour and validity (Deacon and Wakefield, 2013:4). Interviewing is not without its difficulties, however, as 'time constraints and logistical considerations' are considerable impediments to participant recruitment (Deacon and Wakefield, 2013:4). As the potential participants of this project were located through the Internet, options for (conventional) face-to-face interviews became just short of impossible. Tumblr's user base, like any form of social network, is diverse, hosting users from a wide range of global locations. I would have to travel widely, ensuing huge cost, if I were to pursue this course of action. Similarly, I did not want to include the option of a telephone interview, as this would prompt unnecessary charges for both the participant and the researcher. Part of the phenomenological aspect under study here is that internet audiences are intrinsically multinational, spanning a range of different countries, languages and cultures. Whilst your typical audience event will invariably introduce you to new people from different walks of life, there is still a 'locality' prescribed to such an event. Online, there is very little spatial/temporal limit to audience interaction. The interview approach used for this study needed to be responsive to this aspect of online engagement. I therefore pursued online interviewing as a more amenable means of engaging online users.

Online interviewing, in its broadest sense, involves the use of online tools to facilitate participant recruitment and interaction. It is not an approach separate from the main body of qualitative interviewing but is instead - much like online ethnography - an extension of the typical interview process, where facilities such as email, direct messaging (DM), social media and text are used to communicate with participants. Online methods often elicit synchronous data, e.g., information occurring at the time of investigation, which make them valuable as ethnographic resources. Flick (2009) maintains that the synchronous nature of interaction online is the closest thing to face-to-face interaction outside of the standard interview format (Flick in Hanna, 2012:241). This quote was given in relation to internet chatrooms, so you can perhaps imagine his reaction when faced with a software such as Skype, which allows users to video chat live, enabling the researcher to pick up on all the gestures, body language and tonal changes that make up the nuances of a face-to-face interview. Skype is a free software, making it inexpensive to use. Despite its ease of use, however, Skype interviewing is still considered a somewhat 'new-fangled' methodological approach, and it is therefore my hope that adoption of this form of interviewing in my study will contribute to a growing body

of research into internet-based interviewing (Deacon and Wakefield, 2013; Seitz, 2015; AlKhateeb, 2018).

Recruitment for online interviews was a complex process. Again, I wish to stress that without prior knowledge of the site and the obstacles I would likely be facing, online recruitment would have been much more time-consuming process than could have been foreseen. Interview participants were recruited via email/DM, although some (12%) volunteered in response to public calls sent out via Tumblr, Facebook, Twitter and other personal social media (Appendix D). The aim of announcing a call for participants over social media was to attract a larger participant population, therefore ensuring a more diverse spread of interview participants. Most of the participants, however, were derived from the purposive sample hosted within Tumblr itself. Recruitment was carried out using the messaging functions available on Tumblr, which include 'ask' boxes available on user profiles, where users may submit a question directly to the blog owner, and direct-messaging 'chat' boxes, again linked to individual profile pages.

**Figure 5: Ask box and direct messaging functions on Tumblr**



'Asks' function much like an email system, forwarding all messages into a user inbox accessed via the home page. Tumblr direct-messaging (DM) allows for a more synchronous form of communication, allowing users to connect in real-time. Each of these forms of messaging have customisable privacy settings that can be adjusted to the specifications of the user, so email and DM approaches varied per respondent. As shown in the recruitment material (Appendix D), I set up a private Google document which listed the project details, my institutional affiliation and other necessary information; participants who were sent the URL link shown in the recruitment material were then able to access this information immediately. To maintain transparency, I linked my Tumblr page to my public social media, including my Twitter page and LinkedIn profile. Participants were also given my institutional email address, in order to verify my university affiliation (I expand on the measures that had to be taken to confirm identity in the section on ethical considerations). This process required some adjustment, however, as the 'ask box' feature has a designated word count (500

characters) and does not enable URL links. This made it difficult to present more in-depth details of the project to those users who had direct-messaging disabled. I had to have an adaptive approach for each participant, which required more forward-planning. I therefore drafted my approaches beforehand and copy and pasted them according to need.

Response rate for interview participants was 16%: of the 150 users approached, 24 took part in the online interviews. Respondents were offered an option to undertake an email interview if unable to commit to Skype interview. Out of the 24 participants, 9 opted to take part in a Skype interview with the majority electing for email correspondence. All participants were directed to fill in an online registration form prior to undertaking the interviews which collated basic participant information (email, age, nationality), as well as giving a brief overview of some of the social networking sites the user was active on (Appendix A).

Participants were asked to confirm their age and nationality. As explored in greater depth in the section on ethical considerations, interview participants were required to be 18 years or older in order to take part in this study. The resulting interview sample spanned in age range from 18 to 28 years old (23=mean age). As boyd (2008:3) points out, there is no 'good term' to reference this sort of age grouping. A reference to 'youth' users might seem condescending to those in their late 20's, who undoubtedly will have a set of different experiences, attitudes and behaviours from those in their late teens. I could call them 'students', as the majority were currently in further education at the time of study, but again this was not consistent across the sample – several users (as identified in the chart below) relayed that they were in full time work. The diversity of this participant group is one reason this study has adopted 'generation' as a social categoriser (pg. 159), as this became one of the most pertinent ways in which to address this particular age cohort. Throughout the study I elect to call these subjects either 'young adults' or 'millennials' (their own preferred misnomer) in order to express the range of ages included in this participant sample.

As I was sampling from a diverse online community, I felt it was crucial to the contexts of the study, and to the discussion that followed, to begin to build a picture of the multi-national nature of the online space. Participants were therefore asked to state their nationality in order to gauge the 'range' in audience response. Though all participants who took part in the Skype interviews were English speakers, nationalities of the respondents ranged from Lebanese to Mexican, from my home country of England all the way to Australia. By asking for their age, gender and nationality, I was attempting to mirror a traditional online greeting that asks for a user to disclose their age, sex and location - 'asl', for short. Requesting a user's 'asl' is common tactic for distinguishing identifying characteristics in an environment in which identity would otherwise be obscured (Hutchinson, 2013). This ensured that even if participants were not willing to talk face-to-face over Skype, I would be able to ascertain some basic demographic information on my interview subjects. This helped to add further dimension to the audience account.

Skype interviewees were asked to state a convenient date and time for interview, or otherwise select from a list of potential options. Once user information was submitted, an email was sent to participants containing a detailed project information sheet (appendix A), participant consent form (appendix B) and, in the case of those who opted for an email interview, the list of interview questions (appendix C). Email participants were asked to send the completed consent and interview sheet back to the researcher within a specified time frame. These

interview questions were also used in the Skype interviews however, due to the semi-structured nature of these interviews, questions were added to further expand upon issues that were brought up in the course of the interview. The interview sheet found in appendix C was later revised in light of themes that emerged during initial pilot interviews. All participants were active Tumblr users for two years or more and all had regular access to the Internet. Names of participants will be kept confidential and user numbers will be used instead to refer to the participants:

**Table 4: List of Interview Participants**

	Age	Gender	Nationality	Other Information Provided
*User #1	21	Male	British	Student (UG)
*User #2	21	Male	Chinese	Student (UG)
*User #3	22	Male	American	Student (UG)
*User #4	24	Female	British	Student (PG)
*User #5	22	Female	British	Student (PG)
User #6	23	Female	Romanian	Student (UG)
User #7	25	Female	British	Lab Assistant
User #8	26	Female	British	Student (PGR)
User #9	26	Female	British	Editor
User #10	18	Male	Lebanese	Student (UG)
User #11	26	Male	British	Student (PGR)
User #12	23	Female	British	•
User #13	23	Male	American	Student (PG)
User #14	18	Female	Dutch	Student (High School)
User #15	26	Male	British	Student (PG)
User #16	27	Female	Australian	Teacher



User #17	24	Female	British	•
User #18	28	Male	Mexican	•
User #19	27	Female	Mexican	•
User #20	21	Female	French Canadian	•
User #21	20	Female	French	•
User #22	22	Female	New Zealander	•
User #23	23	Female	Irish	•
User #24	18	Female	Australian	Student (High School)

\*Pilot interviews

Interview questions were compiled prior to participant recruitment and drew on themes that emerged from online observation and from initial pilot interviews. Interview questions were developed along four ‘stages’ of questioning: *introduction, establishing, exploratory* and *conclusion*. This is a standard framework for qualitative interviewing, as each stage of enquiry builds complexity into the participant's responses. My own intention in adopting this interviewing framework was to engender more reflexive answers, as this question format prompted participants to dwell more specifically on their impressions of the online community and their place within it. The first stage of questioning - the 'introduction' - can best be described as an ‘icebreaker’. These questions sought to clarify participant details, such as age and nationality, and establish some propriety answers about habits of use, which I was then able to develop upon in the upcoming stages of the interview. Specifically, however, participants were also asked a ‘characterising question’ that has become typical in qualitative interviews: characterising questions require the participant to creatively engage with the subject they are discussing by characterising the subject in an abstract manner. Participants were asked the question: ‘If Tumblr was a person, what sort of person would they be, and why?’ The nature of the question prompted the participant to think more creatively about the subject we were discussing, which in turn emphasised an expectation for detailed answers.

The second stage of questioning built on questions of Tumblr usage. Carrying on this strand of enquiry from the initial round allowed the participant to relax into the ‘flow’ of discussion, therefore making it easier to delve into more complex interpretations as the interview progressed. What this stage of questioning delivered was an idea of the everyday usage of these young adult users, which was fundamental in developing discussion about Tumblr’s integration in day-to-day communication practices. Firstly, detailing how the user went about the process of logging into the site built up an itinerary of use. Asking the participant to describe, in their own words, their step-by-step movements allowed the participant to frame the details of the response, which in turn allowed me to make comparisons to my own

observational notes on the processes of the site to see whether there were any correlations. This essentially ‘cemented’ some of my observational interpretations, ensuring that the representations I was setting up of participant usage were not purely derived from my own interpretations (and therefore, altered by my subjective purposes). Other questions asked the participant to discuss what they ‘blog about most frequently’, which helped develop a list of content that the user was interested in, and whether the user had ever created their own content, which set the foundations for later questions into audience participation. At this point in the interview, I began to develop some of the ‘themes’ of the research work. First I enquired about interaction with other users: ‘Do you communicate with other users? If so, how often?’. Understanding how often, and to what extent, users communicated with one another offered a more intrinsic understanding of the site ‘community’ – namely, how integral interaction was to the user base and what typically motivated communication. I was able to juxtapose their responses (again) with later deliberations on their own ‘activeness’ as users, in order to build up a more nuanced understanding of audience self-awareness. I followed up this question by asking whether the participant used Tumblr more as a ‘public platform’ or a ‘private platform’. My intention was to get participants thinking more intently about the parameters of their audience interaction on Tumblr. Laying down initial groundwork for more ‘introspective’ questions helped frame more reflexive responses in the long run. After establishing what I saw as the ‘contexts’ of usage, I moved on to explore user ‘content’ in more detail. This round of questioning zeroed in on motivations of use, topics of discussion, favourite films and/or other entertainment material, and interpretations. This was a crucial stage of the interviewing process as it was intended to get participants to speak in detail about their engagement with film. Again, this allowed me to make assertions as to the form and nature of audience reception practices. Participants were asked to expand on the films highlighted by online observation: *Marvel* and *Star Wars*. Alternate or expanded questions were usually asked of the participants in this case, as deliberation of these franchises varied from participant to participant: some would talk in great length about the characters and plots and even the controversies surrounding certain films, whilst others would express only a vague interest. It should be noted, however, that whatever their depth of discussion, almost all the participants stated that they considered themselves ‘fans’ of at least one of the films within each franchise. I expand on distinctions being drawn between ‘fans’ and ‘casual viewers’ in Chapter Five (pg. 103) and Seven (pg. 153) of this thesis.

The third stage of questioning, the ‘exploratory’ stage, allowed room for the participant to expand on their impressions of the site, the online community, and their own audience practices. These questions were framed in an open-ended manner, often asking participants to detail, in their own words, how they conceived of the online community and their own involvement in it, rather than introducing closed ended, yes/no questioning, that would have unintentionally privileged the researcher’s point of view over the participants. This stage of enquiry produced more detailed responses, which were summarised in the concluding stage of questioning. The explorative round of questioning was concluded by some frank questions about audience agency. Participants were asked to relate – again in their own words – what the term ‘active audience’ meant to them. This allowed me to judge whether the participants had a prior knowledge of the field I was working in – as active audience is not a widely known concept – and whether their conception of audience theory was pre-established. Most of the participants articulated a fundamental knowledge of audience activity as some form of participation, however I found that only 2 of the 24 participants had any prior knowledge of

audience research. I found that in comparing similarities in interpretation between the online material and the online interviews provided more rigour to the findings and helped affirm that similar modes of reception exist within both social contexts. This interview work was fundamental to the triangulation of this study's data, providing some diverse and compelling responses, and ultimately helping to 'map out' audience processes as they occurred in the subjects' everyday lives. The final sections are concerned with modes of analysis that needed to be undertaken to synthesise this rich data, and the ethical considerations that needed to be foregrounded throughout the research process.

### **4.3 Data Analysis**

This section will address the analytical strategy used to synthesise the extant and elicited data. The aim of a data analysis strategy should be to 'ground' the data collected within the wider body of work in a given research tradition, thereby providing a cohesive link to the theoretical and epistemological works that have gone before it. This is not a strictly 'linear' process: data analysis will often bring up new findings or contradictions that will take the analytical process in various different directions. In this way, analysis becomes a 'recursive process' (Salmons, 2016:162). Very often the analytical process will not start at the denouement of data collection but will be an integrative part of the collection process; analytical findings are rarely a matter of cause and effect, then, but of a more prolonged evolution of core concepts and themes. This is particularly true when analysing ethnographic data, as the participative role of the researcher will undoubtedly build upon layers of meaning during the time spent immersed in a community (Suter, 2012). Before detailing the specific data analysis strategy used for this study, I will briefly outline the analytic tradition of ethnographic data and how this had developed in light of issues posed by cultural researchers.

Traditionally, an ethnographic analysis has meant production of a descriptive account of the 'way of life of particular individuals, groups or organisations' (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003:200). This is derogative of ethnographies anthropologic base, wherein detailed narratives or 'vignettes' are often used to recount events that occurred in the researcher's travels. Descriptive accounts of observations, wide-ranging in their focus, are gradually channelled into more 'focused', and then 'selective' observations relating to the phenomenon under study (Jacobsen, 2014). However, as previously explored, issues with researcher bias and representability means scholars in the humanities and social sciences have looked to other, more 'verifiable' analytical strategies (ibid.). Ethnographers have since moved to construct a more 'transparent and structured approach to data analysis', which involves creating a 'well-documented audit trail' to clarify how they have recorded and synthesised their data (Jones and Smither, 2017:99). Recent trends for ethnographic analysis have tended more towards methods that produce a co-ordinated route of data 'classification, coding and contextualisation' (Bowler, 2010:3). The strategic nature of the 'coding' process, which assigns symbolic, summative or, as Saldana states, 'essence-capturing' values to elements of visual and textual data (Saldana, 2009:3), is instrumental in organizing the otherwise 'unruly' ethnographic data into manageable units. Coding not only highlights themes or 'continuities' in the body of the data work, but strategically refines the body of the data into a smaller set of conceptual categories that the researcher is then able to infer meaning from (Lockyer et al, 2004). This process, whilst undoubtedly more 'systematic' than previous analytic approaches to ethnographic material, still requires a reflexive approach. Spencer, Ritchie and O'Connor say it is crucial that data analysis remains 'rooted within the data, rather than simply

superimposed' (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003:210). This does not mean having to 'skirt' around analysis for fear of imposing too much subjective opinion on the data – rather, it emphasises researcher attention to the 'basic language' of the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006:5). There were certainly a number of instances during the coding process where I had to think carefully about how I was labelling the work, why it was I felt compelled to use a particular term, whether or not I was accurately recording the data as it was or whether I was creating categories based on my own prior assumptions. Close attention was given to the coding of the extant and elicited data, as it was important that codes were fair and faithful descriptions of the data collected. However, it was similarly important that the analysis of the ethnographic material should still retain some of its 'descriptive' edge, particularly because this study is doing the work of describing a 'new' cultural process that has not had much exposure in the research canon. Therefore, instead of following a typical grounded theory approach, I elected to undertake a thematic analysis of my datasets, as this offered an opportunity to 'narrate' new conceptual ground for study.

#### *4.3.1 Thematic Analysis*

Thematic analysis is a way of 'identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) found in data' (Braun and Clarke, 2006:6). It is a useful approach to use for analysing ethnographic data, as it maintains a focus on 'rich detail' in the analytic result. The coded data for this study was refined and synthesised into representative themes as per the thematic framework developed by Braun and Clark (2006) (Table 5). This scholarly framework was adopted as it stands as one of the defining examples of thematic analysis in practice, mainly due to the attention given to the finer epistemological differences between thematic analysis and more 'popular' methods of enquiry, such as grounded theory and discourse analysis. Thematic analysis can be best understood as a branch of grounded theory work as it shares a similar constructivist base, however as an analytic method suited to exploration of phenomenon, it is less preoccupied with ascertaining links to pre-existing theoretical frameworks than it is in gaining an inductive understanding of the existing material. Braun and Clarke's model compartmentalises the analytic process into six practical steps: familiarisation, identification, searching, reviewing, defining and producing. (Braun and Clarke, 2006:35).

**Table 5: The six phases of an effective thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006)**

Phase	Description of the process
1. Familiarising yourself with your data:	Transcribing data (if necessary), reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas.
2. Generating initial codes:	Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code.
3. Searching for themes:	Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme.
4. Reviewing themes:	Checking in the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (Level 1) and the entire data set (Level 2), generating a thematic 'map' of the analysis.
5. Defining and naming themes:	Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells; generating clear definitions and names for each theme.
6. Producing the report:	The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back of the analysis to the research question and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis.

The popularity of Braun and Clarke's approach is due to the explicitness of their thematic framework, as well as their acknowledgement of the 'conscious processes' that need to be made and clearly defined by the researcher when undertaking the analytic task. The transparency they promote in undertaking thematic analysis is what drew me to this particular analytical method, as it not only offered a way of better organizing manifest and latent themes occurring in the data (Boyatzis, 1998: vii), but of acknowledging my own intervention in the research process (Braun and Clark, 2006:6). As highlighted in earlier sections, this has become a necessary caveat of contemporary ethnographic work and so it seemed to me that the study methodology and analytical strategy were well matched.

Coding for thematic analysis was carried out in recursive stages. As highlighted previously, data collection for this project was a multiple-method process involving two distinct datasets: observational data and interview data. These methods were adopted to gather the information needed to address the research questions, and as a consequence were divided by particular aims and contexts of enquiry. The aim of collecting observational data was to initially record and identify audience practices on Tumblr. The aim of the interview data was to expand on the 'surface-level' descriptions recorded through observation by exploring audience use and context, reflection and meaning in greater depth. Each dataset, then, had to be first analysed separately, as each had a different pragmatic motive. I began initial analysis on the observational data after collecting a viable sample of user text posts and other content. This involved coding the data very generally, so I did not begin to impose unnecessary 'mandates' on the material. Thematic coding is most often used to 'draw out' initial patterns within the data collected. As data collection progresses, these tertiary codes are then developed into

broader categories of meaning, usually relating to the theoretical and contextual dimensions of the study's chosen research field. An example of thematic coding used in this study can be found below:

**Table 6: Thematic Coding Example**

<p>“Only problem with the Marvel films<sup>3</sup> is, especially now, there just seems to be that many of them, there seems to be superhero sequels<sup>4</sup> from everywhere and it’s getting a bit boring<sup>5</sup>. Like, a few years ago me and my mate would go see<sup>6</sup> every single one and now we go see one every third or fourth one.”</p>	<p>1 Marvel films</p> <p>2 Superhero sequels</p> <p>3 Bit boring</p> <p>4 Trips to cinema with friend/s</p>
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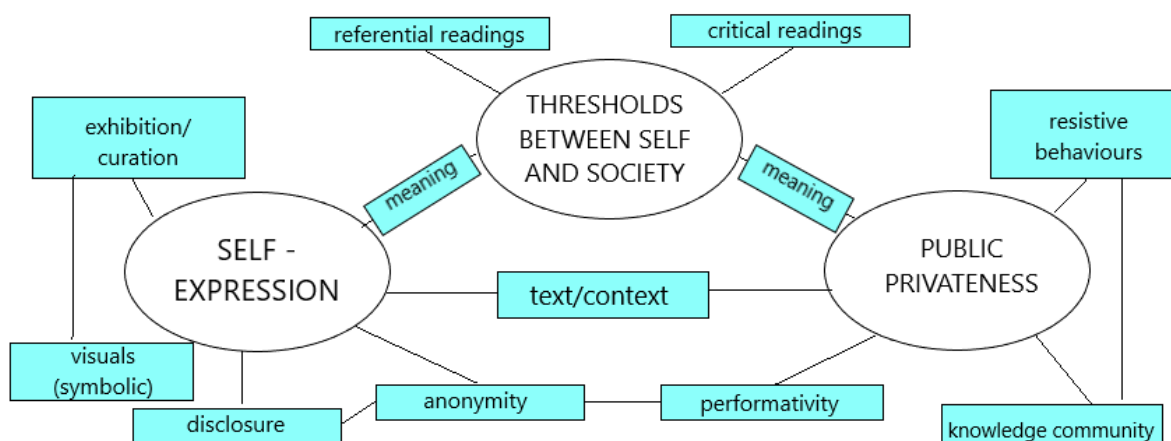
As you can see in the example above, the codes used still very much ‘iterate’ what is being expressed. The aim of this first round of coding was to begin to note some subjects of interest that were naturally occurring in the data. These initial codes then informed the subjects of inquiry for the online interviews. After transcribing all notes and material connected with the interviews, I began a similar coding process to that of the observational data in order to properly familiarise myself with the material. At this time, I also re-read the observational material and began rudimentary comparisons between codes, noting where themes were forming between the two data sets. After I felt certain I had generated enough codes to accurately address the nature of each data set, I began to generate and collate codes across the material as a whole. The data corpus, e.g., the entire body of data collected for this study, was thematically analysed only *after* the individual datasets had been thematised in order to avoid abstracting the data from its intended purpose (Braun and Clarke, 2006:8). Coding the two data sets separately before comparing the overall material proved especially useful, as the themes that emerged from this analysis were more rigorous than those themes that could be inferred from one or other of the data sets alone. Numerous passes of the extant data produced themes that were reflective of the nature of audience reception on the site. In the later stages of coding, further prospects for analysis meant I continually re-organised and re-coded my themes as I had to think more reflexively about how I was deriving meaning from the data. I had to ask myself how the themes and subthemes were interacting with each other, what they were saying about the research subject and whether there were any 'outliers' in the

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data that could prove significant to this study's findings. This meant having to structure the 'narrative' of the data more clearly and how it represented processes of audience reception on Tumblr. As this study is ethnographic in nature it was important to maintain a focus on 'description' of the phenomenon rather than on 'prescription' of any intellectual frameworks, so themes were eventually reduced to those concepts that could best 'develop a set of logical themes and associated characteristics which together formed a 'story' (Tuckett, 2004:76) regarding the nature of online audiencehood. The qualitative data software NVivo was used to organize codes into themes and mind maps created to help visualise the data. The map below represents the final refinement of this study's themes.

**Figure 6: Final Thematic Map of Audience Reception Practices on Tumblr**



Due to the active role the researcher plays in analysis, thematic analysis must be treated reflexively by the researcher as they must be transparent about the frameworks they are using to guide analysis. For my part, most themes identified in this study were adopted in relation to their prevalence in and interrelation across the data sets. However, it must be acknowledged that this analytic work was specifically structured regarding conceptual frameworks reviewed in previous chapters. The analysis that follows is dedicated to exploration of a recent phenomenon in audience practice - online audience reception - and the themes that have been generated during analysis illustrate core concepts regarding forms of audience interpretation, contexts of audience activity, engagement with the media text and audience reflexivity. Together these concepts represent the essential elements that 'make up' processes of audience reception: text, context and meaning (Livingstone, 2005; Jensen, 1987). When undertaking analysis, I always tried to keep these 'caveats' of reception in mind, asking myself what the data could tell me about the nature of the media text, what themes were emerging from the audience's interpretative work, and what I could gather about the contexts in which these meanings were being produced. In this way the data analysis was always geared towards understanding the nature of this form of audience reception, which kept the resulting findings in line with the theoretical aims of this study. The analysis presented henceforth is developed from representative categories that, whilst generated in reference to key theoretical material, remain organic to the user data.

This analytical method allowed me to play a more engaged role in the process. This was ultimately crucial to the success of this study as this thesis is seeking to establish itself within a convergence of research traditions, which naturally necessitates a more versatile approach

to research praxis. I found that the flexibility afforded by this particular analytic approach, which has led some to dub it 'grounded theory lite' (Braun and Clarke, 2006:4), was actually better suited to a study on this particular subject than some of the more theoretically 'stringent' approaches such as grounded theory, content analysis or discourse analysis. As Maguire and Delahunt clarify, this is because thematic analysis is primarily 'a method, rather than a methodology'. Unlike most methodologies, thematic analysis is not intrinsically tied to a single epistemological perspective, which makes it adaptable to a range of different research fields and traditions (Maguire and Delahunt, 2017:3352). This proved particularly useful because the nature of contemporary audience research is very much in 'flux': as highlighted in earlier chapters, audience research is finding itself in a moment of introspection, where more traditional theories within the research canon are being re-examined in light of major shifts in media accessibility and consumption. What has been recognised, and indeed made starkly evident by the current multiplicity of media forms and audiences, is how much of the research up to this point has been divisive about their focus of enquiry, which has essentially pulled the canon from one epistemological direction to another. The temperament of current audience study is that this culture of 'divisiveness' has run its course, meaning that those works that *would* have been the foundation of a grounded analysis may no longer be 'practical' references for current audience research. Thematic analysis, given its flexibility, is actually better suited to analysis for an audience study as it is not wholly contingent on theoretical frameworks that can be seen to be (for lack of a better word) obsolete. The findings produced through this analytic method are derived inductively from participant data and specifically work to describe audience reception as a result of converging texts, contexts, theories and practices.

#### **4.4 Ethical Considerations**

This section considers the ethical implications of undertaking online research and any limitations that have impacted on the research design. Because online research methods are still in a fledgling stage, guidelines for ethical practice are still in development. Indeed, the rapid development of digital technologies and the increasing pervasiveness of interactive content means new ethical and conceptual challenges continuously present themselves (Hines, 2011). Due to the ambiguous nature of the ethics of online research, I therefore applied for and was granted ethical consent for my study. Having already cultivated an 'embedded' understanding of the Tumblr community - and considering the young age of some of the users I could be interacting with - I knew that this project must be carried forward with sensitivity and discretion. In this section I further expand on some of the steps taken to ensure researcher responsibility when operating within an online context.

##### *4.4.1 Transparency*

Prior to beginning my data collection in earnest, I set up an academic blog page on Tumblr named *Spectators & Co*. This page was distinct from my own personal Tumblr blog, registered under a new URL and email and linked to my professional social media pages, including Twitter and LinkedIn. I have developed this page in line with my academic work, reblogging Tumblr posts connected to the topics of film/social media, sourcing links to film trailers and publicity, even writing short blog posts about some of the steps of my academic journey i.e., teaching, publications and grant applications. The aim in creating this page was, firstly, to establish an online presence, which proved crucial when approaching participants



for interview, and secondly, to maintain my visibility (and by extension, my participation) within the research community. Though online observation can be a covert practice, lacking the tangible presence of the person 'in the field' that more traditional ethnography upholds, it is a generally agreed upon principle in the ethnographic discipline that 'there can be no observation without participation' (Simpson, 2017). The act of observing a community, whether or not you adopt the position of 'lurker' that has become so typical of online ethnographical study (Kozinets, 2015), will have an echoing effect on the research, whether that is in regard to the 'reliability' of the information recorded, or in relation to the study participants, who may react strongly to more 'covert' forms of research. Kozinets relates an early netnographical study he conducted wherein he addressed a small community of Internet users to inform them he was conducting an observational study of their group, only to have several members rail against what they saw as the encroachment of academia into their community. Since this first troubling experience, Kozinets has emphasised the importance of transparency in participant research, stating a researcher must remain opaque regarding their motivations for participation (Kozinets, 2015). I made clear my academic information in the biography of my Tumblr page, which I directed users to access if they wanted further information on my project. I was always transparent about my role as researcher and candid about my motivations in engaging with members of the community.

#### 4.4.2 *Researcher Bias*

Previous sections of this chapter have discussed the issues that emerge in the researcher insinuating themselves as a 'co-participant' in the research process. Fan studies in particular has strongly emphasised issues with researcher's making 'presumptions' of audience experience, placing their own experiences at forefront of analysis by virtue of them being both 'fans' and 'academics' a.k.a 'acafans' (Jenkins, 1992). This represents an ethical issue as it suggests that some research is being undertaken at the expense of the fans themselves, whose contribution is being overwhelmed by the 'authority' of the author. If a study is to be conducted appropriately it must be dialogic in its practice and, as highlighted previously, be reflexive about the input of the researcher in the research process. It is crucial that I note, therefore, that I consider myself to be a fan of many of the films discussed in this study, and that I had been engaged in the Tumblr community prior to beginning this thesis. This meant that I was not only tracking several of the hashtags used to sample my study population, but I was also following and communicating with several blogs that shared similar interests. In order to maintain objectivity, these blogs were *not* used in observation, nor in later interview work. I do tend to credit my engagement in these communities as a positive aspect of my research, as it meant I had clear points of access, as well as an awareness of the 'language' needed to negotiate my way around the posts and tags used by these communities. Online communities can be notoriously exclusive, and they tend to have a hierarchy in and of themselves, and so it was a necessary benefit to be able to identify entry points within the Tumblr community. It also – and this is an admittedly holistic remark – gave me a 'feel' for how the online community functions, what it's trends and patterns were and how reception is articulated online. However, it must be acknowledged, for the sake of objectivity if not other reasons, that my inclusion in and awareness of these communities was preconceived, and therefore this methodological approach required a certain level of introspection to ensure it was being carried forward in the appropriate manner. The following sections elaborate on

some of the practices I implemented to ensure that the experiences of the audiences involved were prioritised and my own contribution in the research process clearly articulated.

#### *4.4.3 Intrusion*

There are certain standards of address that apply to online communities. It helps to familiarize yourself with the 'netiquette' (Mann and Stewart, 2000:59) of a given online environment to avoid disagreements with potential participants. The literature on online research methods seems to emphasise the difficulty in creating 'rapport' with people who you are unlikely to meet in a face-to-face capacity (Bryman, 2008), and so rules of 'appropriate conduct' are often enforced within the community to alleviate interaction between unknown parties. In the case of Tumblr, friendliness, open communication and 'polite' debate is encouraged (e.g., users are typically ridiculed if they interject on another's discussion thread with a rude statement, however if a user asks politely for the poster to explain their reasoning, or otherwise frames a contradictory response in a pleasant manner, they are likely to receive a polite response). Manners are key to easy communication on the site. Therefore, it was necessary to introduce myself formally to participants in accordance with the nature of my enquiry, but to also allow for more relaxed conversational practices found online, such as use of emojis, to convey openness and enthusiasm. As communication developed it was possible to adopt a more conversational tone. The purpose of the research and my role as researcher was always at the forefront of conversation, but it was important that some form of basic rapport was evident between researcher and participant before the initial 'face-to-face' introduction in order to make participants more comfortable. This helped smooth the way for Skype interviews as expectations for a more relaxed conversation were developed beforehand. This was a necessary atmosphere to cultivate as it's important to recognize that online communication, whilst still a public act, is most often undertaken in private circumstances. Numerous studies have articulated how social media sites blur the line between private and public life (Livingstone, 2005; Bruckman, 2002) and with the particular focus on anonymity prevalent on Tumblr, engagement with unknown users can come across as quite jarring if not conducted appropriately. Issues of 'intrusion' can quickly transpire in these interactions. Intrusion is a significant ethical implication that should be considered in depth before conducting an online study. Salmons rightly states that online audiences will often have a 'reasonable expectation of privacy' when conducting online activities (Salmons, 2016:27). To intercede into those spaces of privacy, without prior invitation, could potentially offend or even alarm participants. This methodological approach had to be designed and carried out in a way that attempted to avoid issues with intrusion, and so a conscious effort was made to approach participants in an open, honest and friendly manner.

#### *4.4.4 Anonymity, Confidentiality and Consent*

Anonymity is clearly a large part of Tumblr's appeal. One of the difficulties of investigating this site is that unlike many other social networking platforms, Tumblr does not require you to create a profile page or register any personal details other than your email address. In many ways Tumblr is a perfect characterization of the 'obscurity' of online interaction because every user presents as a stranger: an often faceless, sometimes nameless entity, who can read your private thoughts and contribute to personal discussions. The breakdown of privacy in online spaces has prompted accusations of 'tame voyeurism' (Calvert, 2004) amongst users and generated ethical concerns over seeking informed consent from online participants.

Social media sites have made it easy for researchers to collect and store material relating to 'private' information without the knowledge of the individuals under study. Obviously, this provides great opportunity for the researcher to delve into the minutiae of social communication without having to disturb the 'natural flow' of interaction, but it also raises significant ethical qualms regarding the privacy of the people being studied (Sveningsson, 2004:47). Though consent is (arguably) not always essential when undertaking observation - ethnographic practices of observation have long been conducted in the public domain without prior consent, the argument being that it is best to observe 'natural behaviour in its natural context' (Sugira, Wiles and Pope, 2017:191) - it is desirable, as there are noted advantages in allowing participants to make a 'knowledgeable decision' about their involvement in a study (ibid.). The necessity for informed consent is further complicated by the contextual collapse that takes place in online contexts, where it can be difficult to separate personal communications from discourses intended for the 'public sphere'. Some scholars have doubled down on the notion of conducting covert research as a 'pragmatic position' for online methodological approaches (Langer and Beckman, 2005:197), similarly, users have communicated to researchers that the nature of the Internet as a 'public forum' doesn't necessitate requesting permission for study (Sugira, Wiles and Pope, 2017:185). Indeed, many social media sites (Tumblr included) include clauses for 'third party services' in their privacy policies which exempts the site from responsibility for any material publicly copied and shared throughout the Internet: 'Unless you have selected otherwise, you should assume that anything you publish is publicly accessible...Content published and shared publicly is accessible to everyone, including search engines, and this may affect the control you have regarding that content' (Tumblr, 2019). It has been countered, however, that it should be the 'onus' of the online researcher to act fairly when carrying out online research and seek out necessary feedback from those who would be the focus of the research (Kozinets, 2015). Obtaining appropriate consent from participants to use their online content offered an opportunity for participants to 'co-produce' the ethnographic account, therefore ensuring a more equitable and dialogic practice between researcher and participant.

In the same way that consent has been 'taken-for-granted' in cases of online observation, scholars have been similarly divided in their attention to confidentiality. Some have argued that the posting of personal material on public platforms indicates that the user wants material to be made public, to be 'out there', so to speak (Kozinets, 2015). However, I quickly discovered that this wasn't always the case. One of the most frequent questions asked of me by my research participants was 'how I had located them' from amongst the Tumblr community. As many of these participants had been indicated as 'key users' due to the high-ranking nature of their posts, it was surprising that participants did not always recognize their own visibility on the platform. I felt it was my responsibility, then, to ensure confidentiality and do all I could to preserve the anonymity of my participants. All interview participants were given detailed information sheets regarding the specifics of the project and were required to fill out a consent form prior to interview. Participants were readily informed that that could drop out of the interviews at any time and without explanation. Participants were also informed that if they did not want certain material to be included in the body of my work that it would not be included in the final project. In the case of observation, in order to prevent the possibility of unwanted or potentially harmful information being used in this work, I contacted those users whose posts or images I wanted to introduce in my thesis, explained the nature of the project to them, and asked their permission to use their material.

Wherever a post has been included as documentary evidence that shows a Tumblr's user's URL, these names have been blanked out and user numbers have been used to refer to the interview participants in order to preserve their anonymity. Though proving a more time-consuming process, I was assured in taking these extra steps to safeguard information that all participant generated data was appropriate to be used and would not cause the participant undue stress or discomfort. I delve deeper into the Tumblr communities' practices of anonymity and confidentiality in Chapter Five of this study.

#### *4.4.5 Vulnerability*

Tumblr's anonymity in relation to other social networking sites admittedly allows for more candid interaction between users. Discussion of sensitive topics including sexuality, drug use, mental health and other personal issues are prevalent amongst the community. It was clear even before beginning observation of the site that some personal information that had been shared on Tumblr had been met with backlash, ridicule and harassment. It's nothing new to note, after all, that 'the online world has its own forms of intimidation, harassment or threat' (Mann and Stewart, 2000:44). Online ethnography opens the researcher, but perhaps more significantly the participant, to possible vulnerabilities. Again, in order to counter issues with using potentially sensitive material in my work, I made every effort to ensure participant consent, which included seeking user's permission to use their Tumblr content as documentary evidence within the thesis. Another significant step taken to ensure ethical practice was to limit the minimum age for interview participants to 18 years of age. Tumblr has a majority demographic of adolescent and young adult users (Pew Research Centre, 2010), meaning it presents itself as a useful site for studying young people's online behaviours. By putting an age restriction on my interview sample, I was essentially placing restrictions on the scope of the study. However, I felt that the ethical issues of interacting with minors overrode any of the potential benefits of being able to conduct a demographic study. It is already difficult to verify age online, which leads online methods into a new thicket of ethical issues (Hoke et al, 2018). Tumblr's eligibility of use regulations, much like other popular networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter, require users to be 13 years old to join the site - however it is not unheard of for a younger user to sign up under a different age. I discovered this first-hand when first approaching participants for interview. Having narrowed down a selection of key users, I would often use the biographical information included on users' blogs to check whether they fell within an appropriate age criterion. After approaching appropriate candidates and ensuring their participation in the interviews, I asked participants to fill in a brief registration form, confirming key details such as name, age and contact details. One user, who declared they were 18 on their Tumblr page, revealed they were 15 when prompted to fill in this extra measure. I had to politely rescind my request for interview, as I felt it would not be appropriate to move forward. This was a primary motive in seeking ethical approval for this project, as it was always a possibility that the participants I was engaging with were not the age requested. With all the inconsistencies operating in online communication, it was particularly important that I went about my work responsibly, with respect to the potential vulnerability of online users.

#### **4.5 Delimitations of the Study**

Audience studies is a vast field, and audience reception is one of the most persistent research topics within it, so it is perhaps expected that limits be placed on the scope of the study. I

have tried in this thesis to clarify some of the problems and contradictions that have arisen in the development of the audience reception canon, and how these have complicated the pursuit of knowledge in this subject area. In this way I hope to have provided appropriate contextual information so that this study, and others like it, may progress towards new areas of audience study with an embedded awareness and understanding of the research that has gone before. However, because this thesis is working within a reflexive, post-structural approach to audience study, this study has had to 'make the break' with some conceptual and methodological approaches that could not (or would not) align to a more 'integrative' research practice. For instance, one thing that is perhaps noticeably absent in this study is any sort of textual analysis of the film texts. This is a conscious delimitation of this study, but by no means an easy one to uphold. After all, reception analysis is not merely an investigation of the relationship between media and audiences, it is at the same time a study of the connection between text and context (Mathieu, 2015:16). Reception is a form of 'reading' - a process of understanding wherein experience, affective response and come together to form meaning. The media text therefore feature prominently as a 'catalyst' for audience interpretation. Due attention has been given in earlier chapters to the debates surrounding the text-context relationship in audience reception studies, and also to the ways in which film in particular has been conceived as a 'textual' medium, however it must be stated that the research aims of this study do not concern themselves with analysis of the film texts themselves. The reasons for this delimitation are mainly pragmatic. Firstly, because this is a study of *online audience* practices, the conventional 'text-audience' encounter, for which a textual analysis might have provided useful foregrounding, does not apply to forms of online reception. As explored in greater detail in the upcoming chapter, the 'diffused' nature of the online environment ensures that media texts will often present as numerous, fragmented, and ephemeral, so providing an analysis of the film text as it would typically be encountered in a cinema, at home etc. is not strictly representative of the sort of 'text-audience encounter' as it occurs online. Processes of online reception are 'multiply mediated': first by the initial texts that 'work on our bodily senses' and secondly by 'socially organized and historically developed' systems of symbolic meaning which are generated through interpretative communities (Fornas, 2000). The parameters of an online audience study are not decided by temporal or spatial factors, but instead by 'movements' or 'intensities' of communication, meaning their significance is delineated by the actions and processes of the audience. It is ultimately what the *audiences* are doing with these texts that I find to be of more significance for this study, particularly as we are dealing with a type of audience engagement that has been uniquely informed by processes of prosumption and participation. This is not to say that there is not legitimization in using textual methods to analyse film texts, of course. Movies are 'meaning machines' (Carroll, 1983); not only can they be read, disseminated and teased apart in the same meticulous way texts can, but they can also speak to the social and cultural landscape through which they have been created. Whilst I believe the 'presence' of the text should still be factored into reception research, and I have made efforts to appropriately contextualise the main texts identified by this study's participants (see pg. 50), I do believe that audience reception is an altogether more complex affair than textual analysis can account for, and that dedicating the enquiry to textual inference would incidentally detract from the 'empirical realities' (Mathieu, 2015:17) of online audience reception - as has been the case in reception studies that have went before. Ultimately, producing a textual analysis of the films discussed in this thesis would not be pragmatic, as it would not fit within the scope of this study's

theoretical and methodological aims, and it is for this reason that this study has opted to move the methodological focus away from the film text, and onto the practices and processes of online film audiences.

### ***Conclusion***

There has developed, across the years of research, a methodological precedent for undertaking reception research. Ethnography has most often been used as a means of 'foregrounding the cultural contexts within which meanings are both encoded and decoded', as well as a means of 'acknowledging the importance of the socially shared (or diversified) aspects of those contexts' (Jensen, 1993:26). Though a study on film reception would usually have been approached through textual analysis, I opted to follow the lead of reception studies before me and study online reception ethnographically, by observing and interviewing users about their practices and preferences, before consolidating this information into a detailed account of online audiencehood. The aim of this study is to gain an understanding of online audience practices and the ways in which audience reception presents itself online. Ethnographic investigation helps to establish the routineity of people's acts of 'audiencing' (Fish, 1980; Couldry, 2014), thereby grounding reports of audience engagement within the contexts of everyday life. An ethnographic approach ultimately makes the integration of online media in day-to-day life more intelligible (Cavalcante, Press and Sender, 2017:2), thus enabling researchers to distinguish audience engagement in a moment of otherwise ubiquitous media use. This study's research design was constructed to operate as a multiple-method approach, wherein each dataset would expand on the findings of the other, thus providing more rigour to the analysis and triangulating the overall approach. Overall, the study seeks to adapt traditional ethnographic approaches to the digital context, exploring the ways in which the online audience's interaction with the media text (in this case, the film text) is realized through complex processes of interpretation, selection, creation and critique.

## Chapter 5: Audiences, Assemble: Establishing Routine Contexts of Tumblr Use

"The most useful impact of the Internet is the ability to connect people. From that, everything flows." - Dan Lynch

This chapter explores habits and trends of everyday Tumblr use amongst millennial users. The intention of this analysis is to form an empirical 'foundation' from which I might be able to develop a conceptual account of online audiencehood. This chapter's findings are derived from ethnographic data which sought to offer a detailed overview of Tumblr users routines of use, their motivations for engaging with the site, and how they interact within the online community. As outlined in the previous chapter, information offered by Tumblr users during this study's series of 24 synchronous and asynchronous interviews was examined in addition to observational data and extant material collected during the period of online observation. This information was then analysed thematically in order that I might develop a conceptual guide to participant usage. The findings set out here seek to address this study's first research question, which is concerned with developing an emic (e.g., localized) perspective on social media use. This analysis is intended to foreground the significance of social media in these subject's everyday encounters with media texts, illustrating how online platforms have become a 'nexus' for processes of meaning-making. This chapter should therefore work to establish situational context for analysis of audience readings found in Chapter Six of this thesis, detailing how the interpretative encounter between the audience and the film text is uniquely informed by contexts of Tumblr use. Whilst elements of the findings presented here are reflected in previous works on usage behaviours, gratifications and affordances, this study joins only a select few studies that have extended analysis of these processes to audience reception (Costello and Moore, 2007; Deller, 2012; Monk, 2011; Wu and Bergman, 2019). This means that this chapter should offer unique contribution to the research field. In the context of this study's contextualised approach, the themes produced here are intended to reflect conditions of engagement set out *by, for, and in the interest of* the audience members themselves, producing the reflexive ethnographical work needed to appropriately contextualise online audience encounters (Hermes, 2009; Ytre-Arne and Das, 2019).

The analysis set forth in this chapter synthesises observational information on platform design with contextualised discussion on platform usage and affordances, in order that these findings be able to reflect critically on the structural elements of social media, as well as the 'active' nature of the audiences that are engaging with it (boyd, 2008; Madinou and Miller, 2012). This study found that Tumblr's lax curatorial design offered a unique opportunity for users to 'shape' their usage experience, suggesting that this site offers its users a 'curative' presence. Analysis thus highlighted four distinctive themes which can be said to embody trends of user engagement on Tumblr, these being: *performance and exhibition, self-expression, anonymity* and *bricolage*. Initial findings indicate that although routine Tumblr use is complicated by issues of 'mobility' and 'privacy', the site functions overall as a 'safe space' for its users to creatively express aspects of their self-identity. I expand upon this dynamic to illustrate how, in the contexts of audience study, online usage enables audiences to pursue a productive role as both 'performer', and 'editor' of filmic content, together conceiving of Tumblr's online audiences as creative 'bricoleurs', subjects involved in the symbolic 'remixing' and re-assembly of film texts (Lévi-Strauss, 1962; Johnson, 2012).

This dynamic position illustrates how online audiencehood often functions as a hybridized process, reflecting as it does upon the mercurial nature of the Internet itself, as well as the contextual conditions and abilities that differ from user to user. The findings set out here present Tumblr as a promising site for future audience enquiry, working in tandem with a number of other studies that have called attention to this platform as facilitating significant opportunities for creative socio-cultural engagement (Hillman, Procyk and Neustaeder, 2014; Newman, 2015; Keller, 2019).

### **5.1 Tumblr: Daily Use**

To situate analysis within the contexts of the audience's everyday lives, interview participants were asked a series of questions intended to build up a more specific description of their habits and trends of Tumblr use. This study necessitated a reflexive approach to Tumblr activity to ensure that the practices uncovered reflected on the 'realities' of users online engagement – a necessary caveat when undertaking audience research, which has previously been criticised for 'presupposing' terms of audience participation (pg. 38). As a result of this study's embedded approach, this investigation shed light on aspects of Tumblr activity that have yet to be taken into consideration by other scholars reporting on the site. It emerged that Tumblr use was contingent on certain 'spatial' factors that impacted on site accessibility. Though posing a possible impasse to routine use, it was found that Tumblr users had actually adapted the terms of their engagement to accommodate complications of platform design, thus creating an internalised culture of usage that distinguished participants daily engagement with Tumblr from their use of other social networks. The evidence that follows therefore offer new, nuanced information regarding the everyday networking activities of young adults aged 18-28, and the sophisticated negotiations that underlie Tumblr use.

When interviewing users, it quickly became clear that there were issues of mobility surrounding Tumblr use which complicated routine engagement with the site. Mobility is a fundamental affordance of new media: as discussed in earlier chapters, mobile technologies such as smartphones, tablets and the like are positioned (for young people especially) (Pew Research Centre, 2010) as a primary means of accessing media content, their portability assuring that they can be carried on their person and used habitually throughout the day. Gerald Goggins points out that mobile technologies are therefore significant to contemporary audience formation, as personal technologies increase the 'addressability' of the individual audience member, expanding the points of contact between text and viewer and increasing opportunities for synchronous engagement (Goggins in Nightingale, 2011:130). In order to explore Tumblr's capacity for audience 'addressability', then, I asked each of the 24 interview participants to estimate their hourly usage per week and expand on how they might typically use Tumblr on a day-to-day basis. The majority (92%) reported that they 'glanced' at it every day and estimated their dedicated use at around 4-6 hours a week. Given that recent figures concerning young adults' social media use places sites such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter at 2-4 hours *per day*, this presents as a modest level of engagement in comparison to other social media sites (Clement, 2020). Rates of daily consumption amongst Tumblr users proved smaller than anticipated for a sample of this age range (18-28 years), social background (majority (54%) were students in higher education) and gender (majority (66%) female) – these demographics being previously identified as evidencing high frequencies of daily social media use (PEW Research Centre, 2018). This put Tumblr's



position as a potential ‘nexus’ for audience engagement in jeopardy, as it was clear that the ‘addressability’ of this site was not as consistent as other social networks. When quizzed as to why this could be, participant #6 and #7’s responses indicated that the site’s mobile application was especially difficult to use. Participant #7, for example, when describing how she would typically access Tumblr on her tablet during her 'down time' (e.g., after work or on weekends), explained some of the issues she had encountered when using the Tumblr app:

*I use the app for everything, I wish it was dead [laughs] .... Basically, I'll get a photo ready to upload, write three paragraphs underneath then it'll delete the caption so I have to rewrite it. Then if I manage that and then later on spot a spelling mistake or something it'll delete the caption when I press edit. There's no issue with images. Apart from the fact that GIF quality is fucking horrendous... I use it (the app) on my iPad, I can't sign in on my phone, I haven't used desktop in years... It's more that I use it half the time, but I loathe it the entire time. (#7, female, age 26)*

Similarly, participant #6 indicated that the functionality of the app was quite 'hit and miss', so she preferred to access the site through her Internet browser (#6, female, age 22). Overall, issues with the Tumblr app were expressed by 67% of interview participants. These responses were mirrored by discussions observed within the wider Tumblr community, wherein reports of regular faults, lags in loading multimedia and software glitches had turned the mobile app into a common point of ridicule:

**Figure 7: User posts concerning the Tumblr mobile app**

Tumblr app: I'm done loading  
Me: but what about all these blank pictures and GIFs  
Tumblr app: did I fucking stutter

Tumblr app: \*crashes\*  
Me: \*looks into camera like I'm on The Office\*



anyway i had to post this from the mobile website because the app literally isn't functional

The examples above, which were analysed as part of the extant dataset collected during the period of site observation, reflect the general sentiment of Tumblr users towards the mobile app being 'unreliable', a finding which indicated why Tumblr users might be less likely to engage with Tumblr more frequently during the course of the day. This has several repercussions in regard to audiencehood. Firstly, it indicates that in terms of the 'temporality' of audience engagement, Tumblr offers less opportunities for synchronous engagement with media content (e.g., engagement occurring at the same time as viewing). Unlike other mobile networking sites, then, where 'liveblogging' has become a popular trend of online audience participation, Tumblr's lack of mobility means users are less likely to engage in 'instantaneous' response, as their opportunities for immediacy have been greatly reduced by the inflexibility of the platform. Though this should not affect the role Tumblr plays in relaying instances of audience reception (media 'reception' should not be confused with media *comprehension*, which represents an audience member's immediate cognitive response to a text, a process which would therefore be greatly affected by a loss of 'instantaneity'), it does suggest that audience engagement on the site operates as a 'delayed response' to media content, a condition which I believe intimately informs the 'deliberative' qualities of interpretation evidenced by site users, who have had more opportunity to 'compare and contrast' their readings with others in the community (see pg. 137). Secondly, and in relation to the last point, this denotes that Tumblr users have had to develop a more 'discerning' – perhaps even more *restrictive* - routine of engagement than they have with their other social networks. The next section briefly explores some of the conventions that Tumblr users have placed upon daily use of the site, which include some fascinating insights into the ways participants privatize and 'protect' their platform usage.

Participants interviewed regarding their practices of daily use appeared to possess a reflexive understanding of the distinctions that existed between their use of Tumblr and other social media accounts. Several of the users interviewed described how use of other networking sites (e.g., Twitter and Instagram) had become embedded throughout the course of their daily lives, detailing how use of these SNS's usually made their way into their commutes, their downtime at work, or other routine tasks. Tumblr, in contrast, was a platform they elected to access *in their own time* and within the confines of a private space, with 33% of users relaying that they preferred to access Tumblr at home alone in their bedrooms. This selection of participants opted to access Tumblr through 'terminal devices', such as their laptops or desktop computers, which placed their daily engagement with Tumblr within a static location (Gordon and de Souza e Silva, 2011:9). The 'fixed' nature of these users engagement was compelling because it posed restrictions on routine use, which in turn placed parameters on their everyday acts of 'audiencing'. This condition of usage was further elaborated upon by interview participants who claimed that 'social norms' were also at play in the restriction of their Tumblr use. Participant #6, for instance, clarified that aside from the technical issues encountered when using the Tumblr app, her selective use of Tumblr was because she had to be conscious of the logistics of accessing 'sensitive content' in public places:

*I'm not likely to check up on Tumblr as often as something like Twitter or Facebook because 1) the app is very hit-and-miss... and 2) I can't whip out Tumblr on like the bus or something to scroll through 'cos you never know what might come up on your feed... It doesn't mean I wouldn't want to use Tumblr more, it's just you need to be in the right environment for it. I prefer using it in my own space, you know? I can be more engaged... more focused. And less worried about someone looking over my shoulder [laughs] (#6, female, age 22)*

The participant went on to describe how Tumblr's relaxed policies on adult content, including pornographic imagery and nudity<sup>7</sup> meant that she was more cautious engaging with Tumblr in public than she would be with other social media sites, again emphasising that she couldn't be certain what sort of material (graphic or otherwise) would appear on her mobile feed. To avoid potential embarrassment, she stated, she preferred to engage with the site in private, in the comfort of her own home (#6, female, age 22). This expression of Tumblr use as a static, focused activity was compelling, not only because it belayed some symbolic comparisons to traditional media forums (explored in more detail in the coming sections), but because it spoke to an initial understanding of Tumblr use as an 'intimate', or otherwise 'privatized', practice.

The spatial-temporal conditions these study participants posed on their usage appear to associate their daily Tumblr use with practices of 'privacy protection' - that is, ways that online users negotiate the 'publicness' of online content by restricting (or 'guarding') access to personal information (Peng, 2017). This was further emphasised when exploring motivations for using the site, which determined that a key factor governing Tumblr use was participants' desire to find a 'personal space' through which they could explore facets of their own self-identity. Conceptions of Tumblr as a 'personal platform' were recurrent throughout user testimony, with 17 of the 24 interview participants referring to their Tumblr blog as being 'unique' or 'individualized' unto themselves. Participant #10 expands:

*My Tumblr is all me, it's very personal.... the things I like, the things I post, the quotes I choose are **me**. They're what I think are very, like, impactful, to me, as a person. (#10, male, age 19)*

As will be detailed later in this chapter, the enforcement of Tumblr as a private space afforded its users a platform to safely 'exhibit' personal perspectives, therefore encouraging more expressive (and performative) trends of interaction within the community. There is an interesting connection, I believe, between these user's patterns of 'personalised' engagement and some earlier social media theories regarding privacy and networking use. There was much to connect this user trend to theories of 'bedroom culture', which dominated early investigation into SNS's (McRobbie and Garber, 1976; Livingstone, 2007; boyd, 2008). As explored in this study's literature review, these theories suggested there was a connection between the way young people personalise and 'guard' their bedrooms - as one of the primary spaces in which they can experiment with their emerging self-identity - and their uptake of social media sites. Social media pages, which are usually customisable, geared towards exhibition of the individual's interests and tastes, and (arguably) 'impenetrable' to

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<sup>7</sup> This interview took place in 2018, before Tumblr's adult content ban (known colloquially as the 'porn ban') was implemented. The implications of this ban and its effect on the Tumblr community are explored in chapter eight of this thesis.

older generations of Internet users (boyd, 2008), offer young people the ‘symbolic and practical properties of an individually owned and controlled space’ (Hodkinson and Lincoln, 2007:2). Whilst this concept has typically been associated with adolescents, especially teenage girls, my findings indicate that this was a practice adopted across ages and genders, suggesting that this practice has taken on much broader significance over time. I assert that this represents a ‘learned behaviour’ drawn from histories of social media use, as it should be noted that the participants included in this study’s user sample are representative of that ‘first generation’ of social media users dealt with in early behavioural studies (boyd, 2008). I further expand on the significance of ‘historicized’ online practices in Chapter Seven of this study. Overall, the singular qualities of participant’s everyday use of Tumblr set the scene for conceptualisation of site engagement as an individualized experience. This prompted a need to gain further insight into the social dimensions of online engagement and how they could relate to traditional processes of audiencehood, considering - in particular - how an otherwise ‘individualized’ usage experience might pertain to a famously ‘communal’ cultural practice.

What is confusing about the conditions of Tumblr use outlined so far is that they would seem to bely an ‘isolated’ usage experience, an experience which would - in fact - seem fundamentally opposed to the traditional ‘audience encounter’. The commonly accepted image of an audience is of a mass assembly observing a real-time event; however, experiences of audiencehood as they exist online are much more individualistic and remote, as users are typically alone when accessing the platforms, and therefore only able to find community in a peripheral sense, by immersing themselves in the activity of the online network. This ‘isolation’ should be more pronounced on Tumblr, as the community is making specific efforts to remove themselves (both literally and metaphorically) from the public eye. Participant #24 addressed this contrary condition of Tumblr use when discussing the site’s affordances, indicating that she actually found comfort in this sense of ‘pseudo-community’:

*I like that kind of a sense of being 'alone' but also not being alone, because there is a whole community of people who are doing exactly the same thing. (#24, female, age 18)*

This user’s articulation of being *'alone, but not alone'* perfectly captures the paradoxical nature of online engagement. In her work on ‘The Tethered Self’ (2011), Sherry Turkle suggests that online engagement has re-invented notions of ‘solitude’, as new intimacies with networked mediums have altered the way we see ourselves and our relation to others. Though critical of social media’s ability to offer ‘the illusion of companionship without the demands of friendship’ (Turkle, 2011:29), Turkle nonetheless acknowledges the emotional resonance of online connections, as representing new possibilities for identity experimentation and sense-making within a public framework. This finding further foregrounded the ‘contradictory’ nature of online audience work, therefore, in that it illustrated how the online environment is simultaneously an ‘agent of fragmentation’ and a ‘source of connection’ where audience members are concerned (Hine, 2015:170). Though forms of online community may be ‘fragmented at the microlevel’ (Webster and Ksiazek, 2012:45), with each user accessing the platforms individually and within differing spatial and temporal contexts, the sharing practices users undertake on these sites are able to connect the individual to a much broader community of users – people (it should be noted) they would likely not get opportunity to engage with in the course of daily life. Dunas and Vartanov (2020) suggest that this fulfils specific social needs attributed to youth users, which include the ability to

communicate within a diversified network, the need for clustering with people with similar interests, and the need for friendly social relations (Dunas and Vartanov, 2020:194). My findings reported similar motives for use: participants stated that the opportunity to connect with ‘like minds’ was a defining affordance of the site, with 13 of the 24 young adult users relaying that Tumblr offered an opportunity to expand their social circles outside of their ‘real-world’ networks:

*To be honest, for all its faults, I don’t think there is another site like Tumblr. Tumblr allows you to connect with people who are as passionate about something as you are. It’s a place to connect and engage with others with similar interests. (#23, female, age 23)*

*I like being able to see and gather things related to all of my interests in one place, not to mention find new interests and information I otherwise wouldn’t even know existed. I also made a lot of new friends through Tumblr. (#11, male, age 26)*

*There is the opportunity to make new friends. It gives me an opportunity to interact with people that I would otherwise have no way of knowing. (#9, female, age 26)*

Though Tumblr use is complicated by issues of addressability and accessibility, the platform has nonetheless distinguished itself as a place to share, connect and interact within an inclusive user base (Hillman, Procyk and Neustaedter, 2014:6). I would maintain that the tangential bonds forged between Tumblr users is significant to both the social and the material affordances of Tumblr use, and therefore integral to processes of audience formation occurring on this site.

To better understand the peripheral intimacies of Tumblr use, it was necessary to interrogate how affordances of platform design were implicated in users social practices, in order that I might critically address relations between platform structure and audience participation. To compound on earlier observations, study participants were asked if they could talk me through their usage ‘routine’, e.g., the habitual actions they took after logging onto the site. The user dashboard (or ‘dash’) is the first point of contact for users accessing Tumblr and therefore a constant feature in participant’s daily use. In listing their initial activities when logging onto Tumblr, it became possible to detect a common trend of use occurring across the sample of 24 interview participants. This trend is best described as a practice of ‘continuous scrolling’:

*I definitely check Tumblr every day as sort of like a Facebook-style newsfeed just to see what people are up to. For the most part I think my username and password is already logged on, so I don't need to even do the login screen, usually I just look at my dashboard, I scroll through the feed to see whatever is new for the day, if I catch anything that is interesting to me I either like it or if I want to reblog it immediately I just hit the reblog button. (#13, male, age 23)*

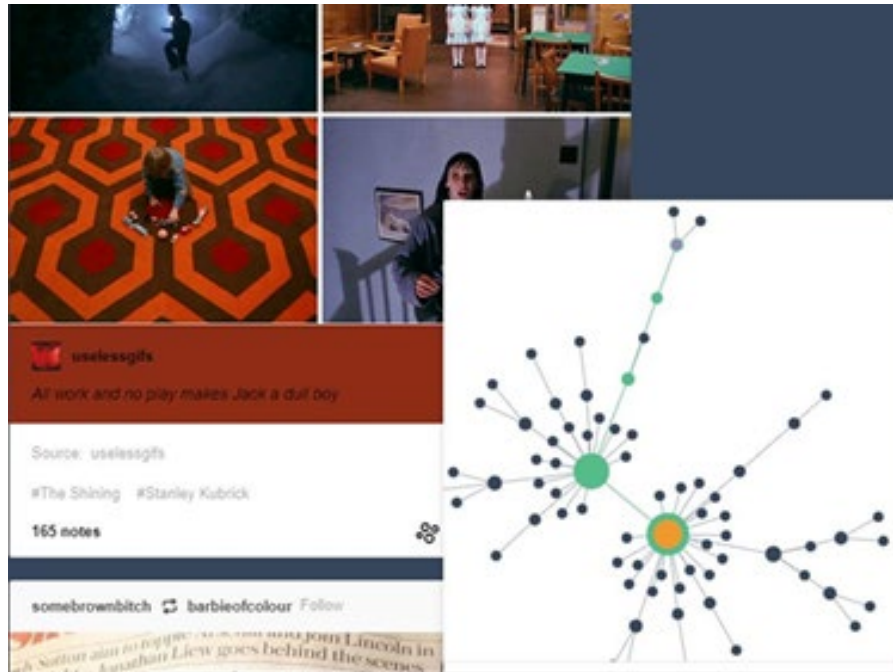
Practices of continuous scrolling were mirrored in 83% of participant's daily routines: having built up a selection of blogs to follow, users are able to peruse their dashboards for an unlimited amount of time as the stream of content from other users is continuously updated. This essentially means that content published hours, days, even years earlier can alternately resurface in users’ feeds – a feature which can make up for some of the ‘instantaneity’ lost due to the site’s mobility issues. Despite any time-space disparity in user’s reception of

other's posts, then, the subject can still experience a perceptual sense of 'immediacy' to reported events in other user's lives, their interests and activities, or even their mood at a certain time. Thompson (2013) names this phenomenon 'ambient awareness', and suggests it encapsulates a particular type of digital 'closeness' prompted by peripheral awareness of a social other arising from reception of numerous fragments of personal data afforded by blogging (Thompson, 2013; Levordashka and Utz, 2016). On the whole, notions of 'ambient awareness' were picked up by 11 of the 24 interview participants, with female users proving more likely to express a sense of 'co-presence' with other Tumblr users (7/11). Participant #24, for example, described how she felt she could gain an 'intuitive' understanding of her follower's personalities simply by scrolling through their blog content:

*I kind of like that everyone has their distinct personalities (on Tumblr), like you can sort of tell what a person is like when you go on their blog and look through their content, even if you don't know much about them. (#24, age 18, female)*

Once again, it should be noted that Tumblr's platform design has had a hand in enforcing these otherwise 'tenuous' social connections. Tumblr's content delivery model ensures that all forms of user activity are posted to the user dashboard, whether this be: content someone has reblogged, a comment on another's post, an ask box submission a user has answered, or even a private inbox message - all forms of user activity are able to be made public for others to see (see Figure 8 for example). Hillman, Neustaetder and Procyck (2014) found that Tumblr's 'visible content' was fundamental to community relations on the site, as the open nature of Tumblr content affords users opportunity to 'articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection; and view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system' (boyd and Ellison, 2008, p. 211). This was reflected in my own findings: in interview, participant #13 pointed out that as he was able to physically 'see' who his followers were reblogging their content from, he could expand his own follower network to include those who held similar interests to himself. He stated that he felt there was a strong sense of community between Tumblr users because they are quite often '*followers of followers*' (#13, male, age 23), in that a sort of 'six degrees of separation' exists between a Tumblr user and an otherwise disparate peer. This notion was reiterated by 10 of the 24 users interviewed. Interestingly, a beta feature of the platform known as 'Tumblr Labs' offers a dashboard extension that can help visualise this process. The figure below shows the flow of user activity surrounding a reblogged post:

### **Figure 8: Tumblr Labs Reblog Graph**



In this screen capture the highlighted yellow circle represents the source of the post. The lilac circle represents the ‘level’ (“four reblogs deep”) at which the post entered the author’s content stream.

This beta feature clearly shows the intersection between tangentially connected users in the circulation of site content. This represents the process by which online users are able to build upon otherwise ‘loose’ interpersonal connections to establish an ambient network of

‘Ambient awareness’ has been flagged by prior social media studies as being significant to understanding of user behaviour, in particular how awareness of social ‘others’ will inform *what* users choose to share on the site and *how* they choose to present this information. As indicated in the literature review, and in line with this study’s focus on audiencehood, I adopted Marwick and boyd’s concept of the ‘imagined audience’ to help channel findings related to Tumblr users negotiation of the ‘publicness’ of social media use. Studies on imagined audiences demonstrate that media users must create a ‘mental conceptualization of the people with whom [they] are communicating’, in order to make up for the lack of ‘social cues’ afforded by an audience are physically absent at the moment of presentation (Litt, 2012:331). Usually, imagined audiences are tailored to meet the social expectations of family or friends (boyd and Marwick, 2011). Tumblr is distinct in this regard, however, as site anonymity meant that subject's understanding of their own receptive audiences was mostly vague and ill-defined. Mostly, users reported that as they could not gather a clear idea who was viewing their posts, they tended to share content ‘abstractly’, as if they were addressing a nebulous ‘public’. However, some generalised characteristics did emerge from this discussion. Interview participants reported that their ‘imagined audiences’ on Tumblr were likely to be young (adolescents or young adults), liberal or left-leaning in their political orientation, and typically contained within the ‘limits’ of the platform:

*From my narrow perspective, the Tumblr community is civil and well-educated and left-wing. (#16, female, age 27)*

*I think they’re young, young people – people my own age or younger. I doubt I’d find my grandma on Tumblr, let’s put it that way [laughs]. (#4, female, age 24)*

*Tumblr's is its own community, it has its own culture and way of doing things. I don't think of my audience as being 'outside' of Tumblr. It's quite contained, I don't think people outside the site see my posts. (#6, female, age 22)*

Intriguingly, I found this articulation of Tumblr's imagined audiences as an 'unknown public' tracked with repeated characterisations noted during observation in which the 'environment' of Tumblr was compared to communal forums, such as those of the cinema, stadium or theatre. When synthesising data from users observed with information from participants interviewed about daily practice, a common conception of Tumblr as a 'public arena' began to emerge:

*Whenever I post on Tumblr I just imagine myself standing in the middle of a stadium shouting my posts through a megaphone... It's that feeling of having an audience, in a way. (#6, female, age 22)*

*It sounds weird, but I see myself as 'acting out' my posts, almost like Tumblr is a stage and I'm performing for an audience. (#4, female, age 24)*

the weird thing about tumblr is you can have 5000 followers and only have 8 that reblog a post so it's kind of like walking into a theater with 5000 quiet people and going "Hello everyone!" and 8 people go "hey"

#logging on tumblr be like WELCOME TO THUNDERDOME BITCH

Considering these findings from a post-cinematic perspective, there are some intriguing continuities between conventions of Tumblr use and that of traditional cinematic engagement: for instance, both forms of engagement take place in primarily 'static' sites, both promote a sense of a private (read also: 'immersive') experience within an otherwise public environment, both perpetuate 'ambient' awareness of social others, and finally, both take on aspects of 'eventfulness' due to ritualised practices of consumption. In light of these findings, I would therefore maintain (once again) that Tumblr is uncommonly suited to investigation of film reception, as platform conventions strangely 'mirror' key conditions of cinematic address. I expand further on the stylistic and symbolic links between forms of old and new media in the section on 'bricolage' (pg. 127).

What emerged from this analysis of Tumblr's 'cinematic' contexts was a better comprehension on Tumblr users own consciousness of themselves as 'audiences', as subjects engaged in content consumption within a framework of public engagement. What it also highlighted was an emerging trend within the community of referring to Tumblr engagement as a form of 'performance'. This next thematic section explores this concept in more depth, providing further context on the ways Tumblr functions for its audiences as both a 'public' forum and a 'private' encounter. This thematic section proposes that conditions of online audiencehood can potentially represent a new intervention in produsage dynamics – that of the audience as 'performer'.



## 5.2 Self-Expression and Identity Performance

As explored earlier, participants ‘personalized’ routine practices, particularly when considered in contrast to their conceptualisation of the site as ‘public arena’, speak to a usage experience which intrinsically blurs lines between ‘public’ and ‘private’ communication (Litt and Hargittai, 2016). Though this is a phenomenon by no means unique to Tumblr use, the contrasting dynamic between publicness and privacy on Tumblr is especially noteworthy, as it represents the users continued negotiation between platform affordances and their own psychosocial needs. As suggested earlier in the chapter, the Tumblr community will ‘work around’ Tumblr’s curatorial design to establish shared practices of privacy protection. In doing so, the Tumblr community ultimately works to establish a space which is ontologically secure, resulting in greater levels of confidence amongst users operating on the site and encouraging forms of creative self-expression, discursive exhibition, and identity performance. I explore these contrasting themes in more detail in this section, articulating how daily Tumblr use centres on ‘the self-motivated (though not necessarily self-centred) sharing of personalised ideas, plans, images and resources with a network of others’ (Bennet and Segerberg, 2012:753-760).

‘Self-expression’ emerged as a key theme articulated by Tumblr users reflecting on their habitual engagement with the site. Self-expression represents an external rendering of the self, an identity situated within discursive contexts (Miller, 2011:160). Studies have shown that blogging is often motivated by self-expression: blogs are likened to online diaries wherein the blogger can document their life, allowing them to express or ‘work-out’ ideas, emotions, or opinions on a public forum (Nardi, Schiano, Gumbrecht, Swartz, 2004:43). In the course of online interview, participants were explicitly asked what sort of content they would post on Tumblr: three participants reported a fairly ‘traditional’ practice of blogging about their daily life; four contributed edited multimedia content as part of journaling practices on their film blogs (see section on ‘film journaling’); and two described how they would generate creative content (specifically fanart, fanfic, edits<sup>8</sup> and GIFs) around their main fandoms. However, the majority informed me that their typical Tumblr practice involved reblogging multimedia content that spoke to their interests at the time, of which film, TV and music content proved to be standard fare:

*I post things that make me laugh, mental health reminders, resource posts<sup>9</sup>, Star Wars, comic books (and associated movie franchises), and a variety of actors. (#17, age 24, female)*

*I blog mostly about pop culture - film, music, television and comics. Once in a while, I’ll blog about politics and science. (#16, age 27, female)*

It was ascertained that participation on Tumblr was primarily ‘interest-driven’, in that engagement was motivated mainly by expression of personal passions, rather than on the development of interpersonal relationships (Ito et al, 2010:16). Participant #9 thus summarised her blogging activities as a practice of ‘*thinking out loud*’ (#9, female, age 26) – a

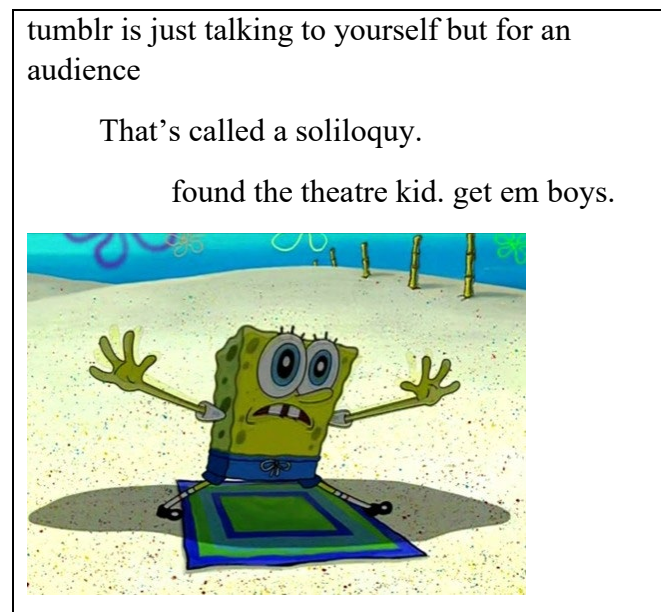
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<sup>8</sup> ‘Edits’ are images (usually stills from film or TV) that are re-coloured and/or remixed with other texts to produce a new visual narrative. An example of a Tumblr user edit can be found on pg. 122

<sup>9</sup> ‘Resource posts’ are lists of hyperlinks intended to educate a reader on a specified subject. Popular topics for resource posts include mental health resources, ‘adulting’ tips (e.g., how to file taxes, cook on a budget, DIY home décor) and study plans.

means by which she could articulate consciousness, and induct a (loosely stratified, and therefore ephemeral) network of others into her thought processes. It was observed that site users were often conscious of how they were walking the line between personal expression and public discourse when operating on Tumblr. Interestingly, a post noted during the period of observation helped build upon a conceptual understanding of the process through which users reconciled the sharing of personal information amongst the Tumblr community when most of their routine activities were centred around preserving privacy. In the post below it was noted by users that communication trends on Tumblr seemed to take the form of a ‘soliloquy’:

**Figure 9: Tumblr use as ‘soliloquy’**



This analysis uncovered how Tumblr users operated on the site with a self-conscious understanding of their online activity as ‘performative’. This study therefore began to pursue themes of ‘performance’ as a conceptual catalyst tying together practices of enacted self-expression in networked spaces.

A number of scholars have drawn from theatrical metaphors to help define modes of online participation (Schroeder, 2002; Hogan, 2010; Mendelson and Papacharissi, 2010; Zhao et al, 2013). Two prominent subjects that have emerged from this body of work are performance and exhibition, which play on the ‘publicness’ of the social media platform as constituting a sort of ‘virtual stage’ on which people routinely exhibit facets of their everyday life. The foremost performative process that Tumblr users undertake appears to be a ‘performance of the self’ (Goffman, 1956), that is, the ‘conscious, visible and deliberate’ articulation of identity by online participants (Gabriel, 2014:104). Though conducted individually, this is ultimately a social practice undertaken by online users, as it is implicated in the person’s symbolic management of the multiple parts of their personality, which parts of the ‘self’ are exposed to society, and what parts are kept ‘hidden’ (Marabelli and Page, 2016). It would be expected, given the users awareness of the public nature of their content, that impression

management be an integral aspect of site usage. However, my findings indicate that interaction on Tumblr is generally less inhibited than on other social networks. 'Disclosure' was a common feature of communication between users, who traded freely in intimate experiences and embarrassing, awkward, or low moments. The posts below offer just a few examples how 'emotional expression' appears to have found a foothold in the communicative trends of this user base:

Guys I am literally near tears about this Rogue Squadron movie. I am so excited and happy. The adventures of Rogue (and Wraith) Squadron was always my favorite part of the vast Star Wars universe, and to see that it's getting its own film...I haven't nerded out this long in ages. AND IT HAS A FEMALE LEAD.

I JUST.

GUYS.

I CAN'T.

following me is just basically getting a front-row ticket to my easily-excited ass yelling about everything, always. even if i'm not literally yelling i'm still, in spirit, yelling. that's the ticket you bought. you didn't ask for it but you got a backstage pass too, free of charge. welcome to hell

Y'all ever just feel like a fucking failure in comparison to your peers like fuck am I really that terrible and behind like wtf why can't i just be content with where I am??

really hate the idea that getting upset or getting emotionally absorbed or involved in things in general is a bad thing and that it's cooler to put yourself above emotions and to make fun of people who are emotional. not to sound cheesy but caring about things is cool and good

Previous research into self-expression presented via social media has shown that users often regret such 'emotional outbursts', as these can conflict with carefully cultivated aspects of their self-presentation (Zhao et al, 2013; Wang et al, 2011). For example, a study by Marwick and boyd (2011) demonstrated how Twitter users would often engage in practices of self-censorship, shying away from discussing intimate or controversial topics with their followers (Marwick and boyd, 2010:125). They concluded that the user's awareness of a broad, overlapping audience for their posts meant that they would not broach certain topics for fear of this content being viewed by the 'wrong people' (ibid.). This is not the case on Tumblr. Though (as addressed earlier) users were still conflicted about who exactly was viewing their blog content, participants nonetheless expressed a nonchalance towards their own self-

presentation on the site, with participant #10 suggesting that his own indifference was due to the site's anonymous design:

*I don't really know like 99.9% of the people that are reblogging or liking my things... I mean, if you compare this to my Instagram page, I know 90% of my followers on Instagram and I think that makes me care too much about the things I post because - I mean, we all want to please people! I think that I'd wanna post a picture that's "good" on Instagram.... but on Tumblr, I can go crazy, no one would care. (#10, male, age 18)*

Feedback from interview participants about self-expression seemed to suggest that as their networks on Tumblr had little connection to their real-world relationships, they are more willing to be open and honest about the things that matter to them, as there is little to no conflict with their 'real world' identity presentation. It was found that Tumblr users evidenced a reflexive understanding of the affordances of site anonymity. For example, Participant #17, when addressing her practices of identity presentation on Tumblr, showed a sophisticated awareness of how her self-presentation was 'safeguarded' by the anonymity of the site:

*In some ways my Tumblr page is the most honest representation of me as a person, but it's honest in the way that shouting into the void of space is honest: there's no risk involved. (#17, female, age 24)*

The participant clarified that as it was unlikely any of her content would 'come back to her', she felt more able to express herself in an authentic manner - however, it should be noted that as she recognised this wasn't something she was afforded in her everyday life, the extent to which she was able to express herself online didn't necessarily translate to 'offline' contexts. It can be surmised that for Tumblr users a tension exists between what they see as 'realistic' representation and an 'ideal' self. This factor is explored in more detail chapter

Overall, the interview participants responded positively to the expressive affordances of Tumblr. A common refrain offered by 79% of the interview sample was that their Tumblr blog allowed them a space to 'be themselves', free from everyday social niceties. These users relayed the cathartic release they felt in being able to let out their 'inner selves' when on Tumblr - that is, their uninhibited personalities, what Goffman would call their 'back-stage' personas (Goffman, 1956). Participant #11 and #23, for instance, both identified how participating on Tumblr afforded opportunity to share interests, thoughts, and feelings that they felt were too 'intense' to share in their day-to-day life:

*My Tumblr page is a place to put up all the things that I can't talk about publicly in my life; it's a place for the nerdy stuff, the memes, the Deeply Personal Overshare, and anything else that lacks a sphere of expression in the "real world." (#11)*

*Most of my friends and family (IRL), they like movies. So they watch a movie, they enjoy it and then they move on; they cease thinking about it. Whereas, for me, cinema is one of the most important things in my life. I love discussing movies, characters, thinking about why they took a certain course of action, why they didn't. I love learning about the behind the scenes stuff, knowing why the director chose to do something a certain way, what the actors reasoning was behind a certain acting choice. People on Tumblr share that same passion and enthusiasm for this kind of*

*stuff. I don't know of another website that offers you a platform to discuss the intricate and intimate details of a movie/character, without coming across as an obsessed weirdo! (#23, female, age 23)*

This information from interview participants seems to suggest that users felt 'freer' to indulge in forms of intensive or exaggerative self-expression. I wish to expand upon how Tumblr's community has developed practices to incentivize self-expression. The next theme of use, 'anonymity', describes how Tumblr users have established social practices that safeguard both individual and collective anonymity. This 'communal policy' is upheld by users in several distinctive ways, implicating 'anonymity' as a form of community practice.

### **5.3 Anonymity**

If, as Pearce and Sharpe (1973) suggest, 'people are most comfortable sharing intimate disclosures with either a complete stranger or a trusted companion within a dyadic boundary' (Pearce and Sharpe, 1973), Tumblr provides the ideal environment for self-disclosure. Anonymity and pseudonymity are key features of the usage experience. The site literally presents as a 'community of strangers', with each blog lacking the standard profile page used to formally identify the user. Whilst other networking sites typically require a user to fill in their full name, email address, birth date and more in order to begin to build their individual profile, on Tumblr the only information required is an email address and a personalized URL, which also functions as a site username. The site infrastructure is uncommonly 'old-school' in this way: Miller (2015) finds that Tumblr's platform design is more representative of earlier chat forums than recent microblogs, combining the multimedia features and instant messaging properties of these newer platforms with the 'non-identifiability' of the message board (Miller, 2015:5). Long-term observation of the site showed that the online community will often collaborate to enforce user anonymity in instances where platform design falls short. The practices of anonymity that Tumblr users enforce supersede the site architecture, thus connecting these findings to Scott and Orlikowski's theory that online anonymity represents a process of 'enactment': 'anonymity is not a status or attribute of an entity or system, but an ongoing socio-material enactment' (Scott and Orlikowski, 2014:18). In this section I break down some of these enacted processes, drawing attention to the ways these practices incentivise expressive communication, and thus emphasise users receptive readings.

Tumblr blogs lack the requirement for personal data that have caused other popular networking sites concerns over data privacy and commercial intrusion (Miller, 2015). As Tumblr's platform design does not support a formalised 'profile page' wherein user information is publicly displayed, it is at the user's own discretion what personal information is made available to others through their Tumblr account. One of the first examples I noted of users enacting anonymity is in relation to the biographical details they chose to provide on their blog pages. Observation of the site showed that many Tumblr users opt to include only very vague self-identifiers on their blogs, such as their age, gender, or preferred pronouns. This observation was corroborated by interview participants, who described what they elected to include as biographical information on their Tumblr pages:

*I guess I'm cautious so I don't put a lot of my information out onto the Internet and stuff so I don't think I even have my name on (my page) I think it's just my age and that I'm a girl. (#24, female, age 18)*

*I don't even have my name. Just the fandoms I'm in, my pronouns etc. Nothing in-depth. When I first started (Tumblr) I actually used a fake name. (#9, female, age 25)*

*I have my first name, age and star sign. That's it! (#5, female, age 23)*

This practice is known as 'security through obscurity' (boyd, 2008). This is an action in which online users limit the information they present on their pages in order to obscure the accuracy of search engine results. Especially prevalent amongst younger social media users, this tactic reduces the possibility of parents, employers or other authority figures finding their blog through Internet searches (ibid.). As suggested in earlier chapters, Hart (2015) had previously determined that Tumblr's lack of commercial intrusion was welcomed by the site's young adult userbase, as it supports a notion of the site as being free from social scrutiny (Hart, 2015). This study reported similar findings, again stressing the importance of privacy protection amongst this cohort of users. Participant #15 stated that to have a site on which he could post with 'relative anonymity' is something he valued, whilst participant #12 stated it was rare to find a site where you didn't have commercial content 'pushed on you', where you can choose 'what you see, and what is seen' (#12, female, age 23). Another Tumblr user shared this statement on their blog regarding the benefits of site anonymity:

It's easy not to be found on Tumblr. I don't have to worry about people from real life being able to find me bc I can hide my blog from search engine results. I can be open here and have a little space to myself to explore my interests and stuff.

These findings reiterate that Tumblr users value their privacy, and that part of their motivation for adopting this site is because it appears to offer them some measure of control over who has access to their personal information. This is significant, as I will reiterate across the next few chapters, as clashes with 'authority' have come to typify this particular audience demographic. Tumblr's community culture has been built around an expectation of 'expression without threat' (Nardi et al, 2004), with the anonymity of the site allowing for freedom of expression that might otherwise be restricted. Though, as addressed in later chapters, this does not reduce the risk of persecution or harassment from other users, it limits the extent to which people's offline lives - their social circles, family life or career - may be impacted by their online presentations. Hence, the community's trends of self-expression and their enactment of anonymity go hand-in-hand.

Another tangential way it was observed that Tumblr users enact anonymity is in their lack of 'real world' contacts. The users I interviewed expressed that it was rare for them to tell anyone about their Tumblr pages or for them to add their 'real-life' acquaintances. This is unusual for a social media site, which is typically geared towards the development of social connections. Unlike sites such as Facebook or Twitter, follower networks on Tumblr are not made up of people from the user's immediate social circles or professional networks. Participant #12 expanded on how she has managed to keep her Tumblr separate from her other social media accounts:

*It's not a platform that I tend to share widely. I do have a lot of other social networks and I'm more 'open' about them. I don't link to it (Tumblr) from any of my other social platforms or anything...and the only people who I really share it with are other*

*people who already have it. It's not that it's 'hidden' - it's just not **shared**.* (#12, female, age 23)

Here the user showed a cursory understanding of circulatory nature of the Internet, what Henry Jenkins calls it's 'spreadability' (Jenkins, 2006). In tapering the spreadability of their content by choosing not to share their use of the site, users are ensuring that they can keep the Tumblr community 'insular', in that they can demarcate their Tumblr use from the wider Internet 'public'. Participant #24 therefore described the value of operating in space 'distinct' from her everyday social relations:

*I kind of like that not a lot of people in my life know about my Tumblr account so it's like something that's just for **me** that's like, really relaxing ... I like that it's something I have to myself, but I'm not incredibly precious about it, I just like having my privacy. I like the separation between my real life and [my] Tumblr life, that's what attracts me most.* (#24, female, age 18)

A final trend of enactment observed was the placement of an informal 'gag order' on Tumblr usage by the community at large. Tumblr users were encouraged by others not to speak of their usage outside of the perimeters of the site, usually by reinventing the popular phrase from David Fincher's cult classic *Fight Club* (Fincher, 1999)<sup>10</sup>:

#### **Figure 10: The First Rule of Tumblr**



This community practice was significant because it generates an impression of 'exclusivity' around Tumblr use. This both emphasises and elaborates on Tumblr's 'niche' status amongst microblogging sites (Attu and Terras, 2017); it positions the website almost as a 'secret club', an underground organisation not dissimilar to Palahniuk's infamous 'fight club'. These findings reiterate that Tumblr users find value in the platform as an 'insular' culture – a subject I shall pick up again in later sections regarding user 'policing' and 'gatekeeping' (pg. 158). On the whole, it was determined that the site's exclusivity afforded its users subcultural capital, that is, the power of being in the group that 'knows and appreciates together' (Thornton, 1996; Jancovich, 2008).

The enacted dynamics evidenced in these last sections have evidenced the tension that exists on Tumblr between the private and the public self, a subject caught between the exhibitionistic nature of the platform and the privacy of its bounded, inclusive community. The findings derived here from in-depth observation and engagement with users should highlight how online audiencehood is intrinsically entangled in tensions between the

<sup>10</sup> The author apologizes for breaking the first rule of Tumblr. Needs must.

‘authentic’ and the ‘performative’. These elements all have an influence on the character of online ‘audiencing’, and so care should be taken that any audience account given in these contexts is appropriately interrogated and reflexively analysed. For my own part, I was satisfied with the continuities of thought that were evident between Tumblr users online posts and their first-hand accounts, concluding that the enactment of anonymity across the site by users allowed the Tumblr community to present a more ‘emotive’ - but certainly no less ‘truthful’ - account of their audience practices. In the next thematic section, I briefly explore how features of site architecture mean that discursive ‘artefacts’ posted by Tumblr users offer opportunity to create ongoing ‘exhibits’ of communication (Zhao et al, 2013:1) – exhibits that can ultimately aid the audience researcher in the collection and preservation of receptive accounts.

#### 5.4 Exhibition

As established in prior sections, Tumblr’s platform architecture – whilst mostly leaving room for audiences to shape their own usage experience – nevertheless affords features that can be seen to emphasise (or *intensify*) forms of audience engagement. For instance, Tumblr’s interaction model operates in the form of a ‘cascade’, in that the platform relies on the mobilization of its users to ‘trickle down’ information to one another. This produces a formulaic mode of engagement known as ‘Push-Push-Pull communication’ (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2011): in brief, following another’s blog will effectively ‘push’ their content onto your feed, which you then may ‘push’ further by reblogging, making the content available to your own followers, who may then ‘pull’ additional information from the web on the subject (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2011; Chipp and Chakravorty, 2016). Kaplan and Haenlein have previously illustrated the socialising potential of this mode by detailing how ‘initial [posts] can cascade down from one follower network to another, and on the way transform from a simple bit of information to word-of-mouth’ (Kaplan and Haelein, 2011:107). The translation of information from individual contribution to ‘word of mouth’ is indicative of SNS’s socialising potential, as this process works to emphasise social inclusion and collaboration amongst an otherwise isolated userbase (*ibid.*). A significant function of this model of communication is that it essentially allows users to interact with each other in a manner comparable to public speech, the ‘visible’ nature of Tumblr content ensuring that any user can become a contributor to another’s conversation. Interactions can therefore play out for the observer almost like a scripted dialogue, a feature that I observed was further emphasised by Tumblr’s ‘staggered’ posting format. For example, each of the indented lines of text shown below represent the interjection of a new user in the circulation of the original text post:

all I ask for in the new star wars films is leia with a lightsaber

I don’t think they give non-force sensitives lightsabers, but I also don’t think they’ve established Leia as force sensitive or not, so who knows

leia is anakin’s daughter. if she’s not force sensitive, I’ll eat my shoe.

The hell do you mean “they haven’t established Leia as Force-sensitive?” Have you not seen Empire Strikes Back? The movie where her Force-sense was pinging every five minutes? Or in Return of the Jedi: “The Force is strong in my family. I have it. My father



has it. My sister has it.” “In time, you’ll learn to use that power too.”  
Leia is just as much a basket of potential-Jedi as Luke is.

“No, there is another.” HOW DID YOU MISS THAT

Because girl.

“In Expanded Universe materials set after Return of the Jedi, Leia is portrayed as a founding member of the New Republic. Although most of her life is devoted to such matters of state, she engages in limited study of the Jedi arts, with Luke as her teacher. **Notably, she wields a blue lightsaber that she built herself.**”

(on *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*, 2015)

Outside of the significance of Tumblr’s ‘visible’ platform model in connecting disparate users, then, this site’s model of ‘exhibitive’ communication is integral to audience study because it can help formalize processes of audience meaning-making, including readings presented both independently and in communication with other audience members. It is clear to see from the example above how Tumblr’s publication model can allow for clearer apprehension of patterns and themes of audience reception, with the formatting of content making for orderly, digestible data that even the most strictly managed focus group or interview could hope to produce. Tumblr’s formulaic tendency towards ‘exhibition’ helps visualize forms of sense-making that would otherwise ‘pass ‘unseen’ (Mathieu, 2015), thereby positioning the site as a valuable resource for undertaking reception study. In the next few subsections, I wish to draw attention to specific ways Tumblr users engage with film texts, by highlighting, in particular, how the site’s ‘visual culture’ offers new opportunities to perform, preserve and exhibit processes of meaning-making.

#### 5.4.1 GIFs as Exhibitive Artefacts

In no other form of content creation on Tumblr is exhibition better encapsulated than in the GIF. GIF, or Graphics Interchange Format, is a compressive file format that allows for high quality visuals for animated imagery. The format was first developed in 1987 and was used primarily for static graphics and logos before finding its niche as the 'aesthetic calling card of modern Internet culture' (O'Leary, 2013). Today's GIFs are designed to loop a few seconds of mute video footage. As a result, they have been widely adopted by users on social media platforms for use as reaction graphics: like emojis, GIFs are used to insert 'liveliness' into an otherwise static interaction:

#### Figure 11: Example of GIF use

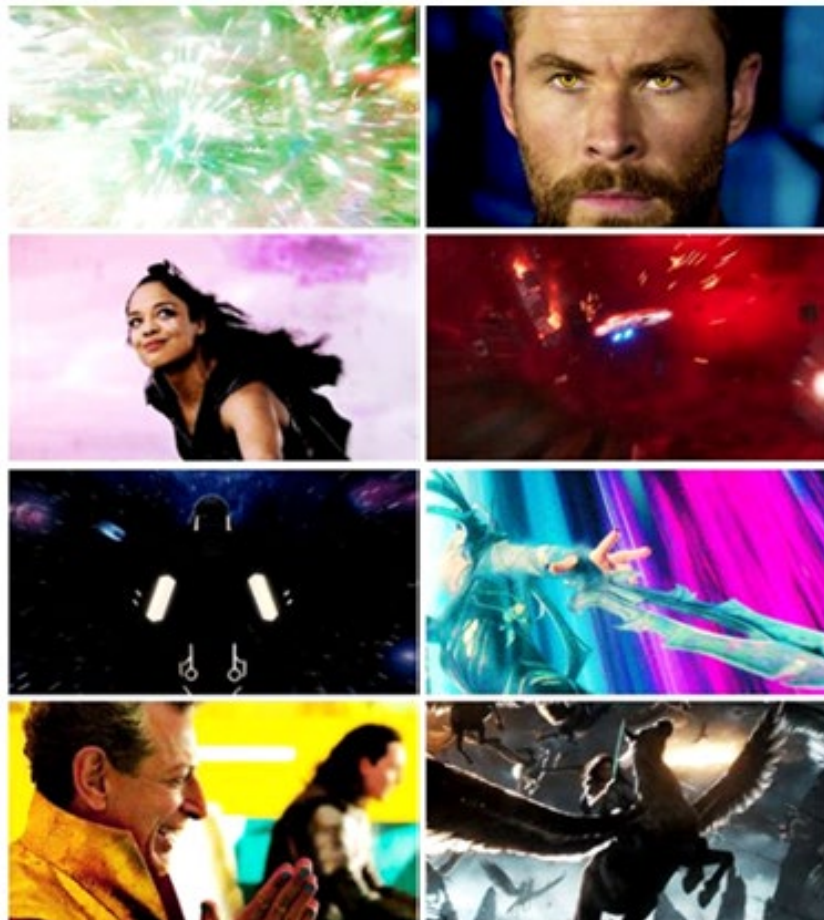
i graduate college in a month.....



WHAT

GIFs have emerged as popular forms of content creation amongst the Tumblr userbase and are used to animate anything from celebrity interviews, TV series, reality television, YouTube videos and TV news reports. I've observed Tumblr users utilise the GIF format to animate works of fan art and chronicle scene dialogue or action in a set of animations known as a 'GIFset' (Figure 12). I have also observed proficient users who have created their own GIFs provide tutorials, available through Tumblr or YouTube, to instruct others how to upload their own animations to the website.

**Figure 12: Tumblr GIFset**



GIFset used with permission from creator (<http://wallsofdreaming.tumblr.com/>)

The use of GIFs on Tumblr, whilst undoubtedly used in the vein of 'memic' humour within the wider community has a specific purpose when utilised in interaction around film content. It was found through observation of the community that forms of GIF use concerning film content could be split into two exhibitory categories. I have designated these categories as 'reaction' and 'spectacle'. The 'reaction' category represents a process in which the user's response to a film text is enacted for the online reader using GIFs. In these instances, Tumblr users will play on the dynamism of the GIF to 'act out' the individual's reaction to a piece of media content. These GIFs can ultimately work to make reception visible as the meanings the audience derive from the film can (literally!) be 'acted' for others to see:

**Figure 13: Example of 'reaction' GIF use**

Someone: Hey was Infinity War good?

Me :



In this sense, GIF use on Tumblr can be considered a mode of 'embodiment', a means to bring some physicality to what would otherwise be a one-dimensional interaction. Beckett suggests that GIFs act as key mediators of meaning online, intended to 'describe or intervene in the world shared by audience and maker' (Beckett, 2016). It was determined that the adoption of GIFs as a textual 'mediator' between users made receptive responses more apparent, as they (for all inherent purposes) could physically enact the audience member's response to film content. Often, this had the consequence of 'distilling' the subject's affective response. For instance, when discussing her use of GIFs in relation to film, for instance, participant #8 reported that she used GIFs to convey emotions she felt were too abstract or complex to express effectively with words:

*I have a lot of emotions [laughs] and sometimes when I watch a movie, like.....this is so hard to say....which is kind of my point [laughs], ok... my opinion of a movie that I've liked or loved or whatever might be that I want to scream [laughs] or cry or whatever....and I can't express that online outside of keysmashing<sup>11</sup> ...and GIFs help me express what I actually feel. I think GIFs are a way of expressing something that can't be put into words. (#8, female, age 26)*

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<sup>11</sup> 'Keysmashing' is when a user types a string of random letters to signal an intense emotional reaction. The idea is meant to represent the act of slamming your hands on the keyboard. For example, a commonly used keysmash expression is 'asdfghjkl;'

This was typical of the majority of Tumblr users interviewed. The GIF's animated format can condense otherwise complex issues into a gesture or movement, making complex expressions more salient. GIFs are therefore another inherent feature of Tumblr that emphasise a sense of 'co-presence' and 'immediacy' in usage.

The second category of user GIF use surrounding film can be seen to further emphasise the format's 'curative' potential. Tumblr's film GIF economy can also be said to operate on terms of 'spectacle'. I noted early on in site observation that film content posted by Tumblr users tended to emphasise visually striking or impactful scenes. These typically included moments of high action or emotive response - essentially, the 'aesthetic' aspects of a given film:

**Figure 14: Example of a 'spectacle' GIFset**



What is interesting is this mode of GIF use presents as an unspoken rule that has emerged within the Tumblr community – there have been no prescribed outlines that dictate that Tumblr's film content should focus on exposition, the online film audience appears to have simply gravitated to moments of spectacle within motion pictures. This supports my argument that Tumblr's aestheticism makes it such a productive case study for *film* reception in particular, as film is founded on aesthetic principles that govern realism and narrative, and these principles are clearly articulated in user's creative content. The 'spectacle' category represents an aesthetic process wherein Tumblr users work to highlight (and consequentially curate) visually striking and/or emotive film scenes. It is significant that the online audience is engaging in forms of content creation that emphasises the affective instances within film, as this essentially means that digital audiences are cultivating their own forms of spectacle. It's almost as if the Tumblr audience is taking on the role of editor, selecting and emphasising moments that capture the film's affectivity. The hybrid position the Tumblr occupies, therefore, is not only that of performer/audience, but also that of 'editor'. The adoption of GIFs as mediators (and artefacts) of audience reception is a distinctive aspect of Tumblr engagement and speaks to the ongoing 'levelling' of authoritative dynamics between media producers and audiences. In this final subsection, I again draw attention to another distinctive practice of content engagement observed across the Tumblr community. This practice, which

I have termed ‘film journaling’, should clarify how online forums can aid in the preservation and ‘consecration’ of receptive processes.

#### 5.4.2 Film Journaling

What I believe is apparent in Tumblr user’s creation and reproduction of film GIFs is a need to preserve something of the spectacular nature of the film ‘event’. This extended to users blogging practices and was further emphasised when engaging with members of Tumblr’s self-appointed ‘film community’. Whilst *every* user interviewed for this study indicated that blogging about film content made up a considerable part of their Tumblr routine, the sample of Tumblr users approached for interview flagged down a number of ‘dedicated’ film blogs, that is, Tumblr accounts created solely to circulate filmic content (stills, trailers, reviews and commentary, promotion and publicity). Of those participants who took part in online interview, 4 ran dedicated film blogs in tandem with their personal Tumblr accounts. Participants who ran film blogs were asked to describe their actions when producing content for their Tumblr pages. What emerged was a practice I have termed ‘film journaling’ wherein users would post film stills, quotations, and short-form reviews as a record of the film they had most recently viewed:

*My film blog is basically a film diary where I just post stills of the film, like a film that I watch, as soon as I finish it I go on Tumblr, I make the post, I find the still, I find the quote and I just post it on Tumblr. (#10, male, age 19)*

*Obviously, it’s (the film blog) mostly movie stills, so I mainly repost stills with a caption from the film and the director and the year it was released. (#13, male, age 23)*

*After watching a movie we select from 1 to 2 scenes that we like the most and post the still on Tumblr. We take movie stills from online, but we edit and process them in order to post them in a distinctive way on our blog. (#18, male, age 28)*

Film journaling would typically be presented on Tumblr in the following way: a post of a high-resolution movie still sourced through the Internet, under which the blogger would include a) a quotation that resonates with them personally, or which they feel ‘sums up’ the movie’s core message, b) the title of the picture, year of release, and the name of the director and (optionally) c) a brief review of their thoughts on the film – what they did and didn’t like. An example of a typical film journaling post is shown below:

#### **Figure 15: Example of film journaling**



"We are not things."

Mad Max: Fury Road (2015)  
dir. George Miller

Image reproduced with permission of creator (<http://oldandnewfilms.tumblr.com/>)

Significantly, (particularly regarding this study's focus on audience reception), these posts evidence how audiences create 'cultural resonances and implicate mythic meanings' (Livingstone, 2007:3) around film texts by consecrating certain words and images. M.Z. Newman reports that the act of [preserving/circulating content online] highlights how classic or 'cult' status is socially produced, suggesting Tumblr may very well be a new 'ground zero' for cult film creation (Newman, 2015). The process through which film becomes a cultural artefact, that is, an embedded souvenir of a current socio-historical climate, is clearly exemplified through these user's curative practices. Though the interpretative work undertaken may seem cursory, these journaling practices nevertheless have an important curative function as a 'souvenir of viewership' (Bianconi, 2012). Like an insect caught in amber, the journaling content these users produce becomes a record of their engagement with a film *at a particular time*. This practice comes of immediate significance to an audience reception study as reception traditionally has no 'historic record' (Livingstone and Das, 2013). It is argued that unless researchers are willing to do the work to attain contextualised accounts of audience readings at the time of viewing, reception is either subsumed into box office reports and other statistical readouts – or, ultimately, it is forgotten. Tumblr users journaling practices therefore make the site a useful resource for preserving forms of audience reception work. Users involved in editing, selection and enhancement of film texts are taking part in the preservation of a cultural record, providing a sort of grassroots archiving (Bruns, 2008). This evidence from this study's findings therefore justifies an argument that Tumblr users can play an active role in the preservation not only of their own personal content, but of content pertaining to cultural texts. This has implications for greater preservation and historicising of audience activity in the years to come.

In this chapter's final thematic section, I consolidate the information gathered regarding Tumblr users exhibitivite practices to break down how receptive processes occur in users everyday blogging practice. The unification of this previous work should work to address this thesis's research questions, specifically those questions concerned with identifying the specific forms that film engagement takes on the site. As indicated in this study's literature review chapters, this work channels Tumblr users interpretative practices through the concept

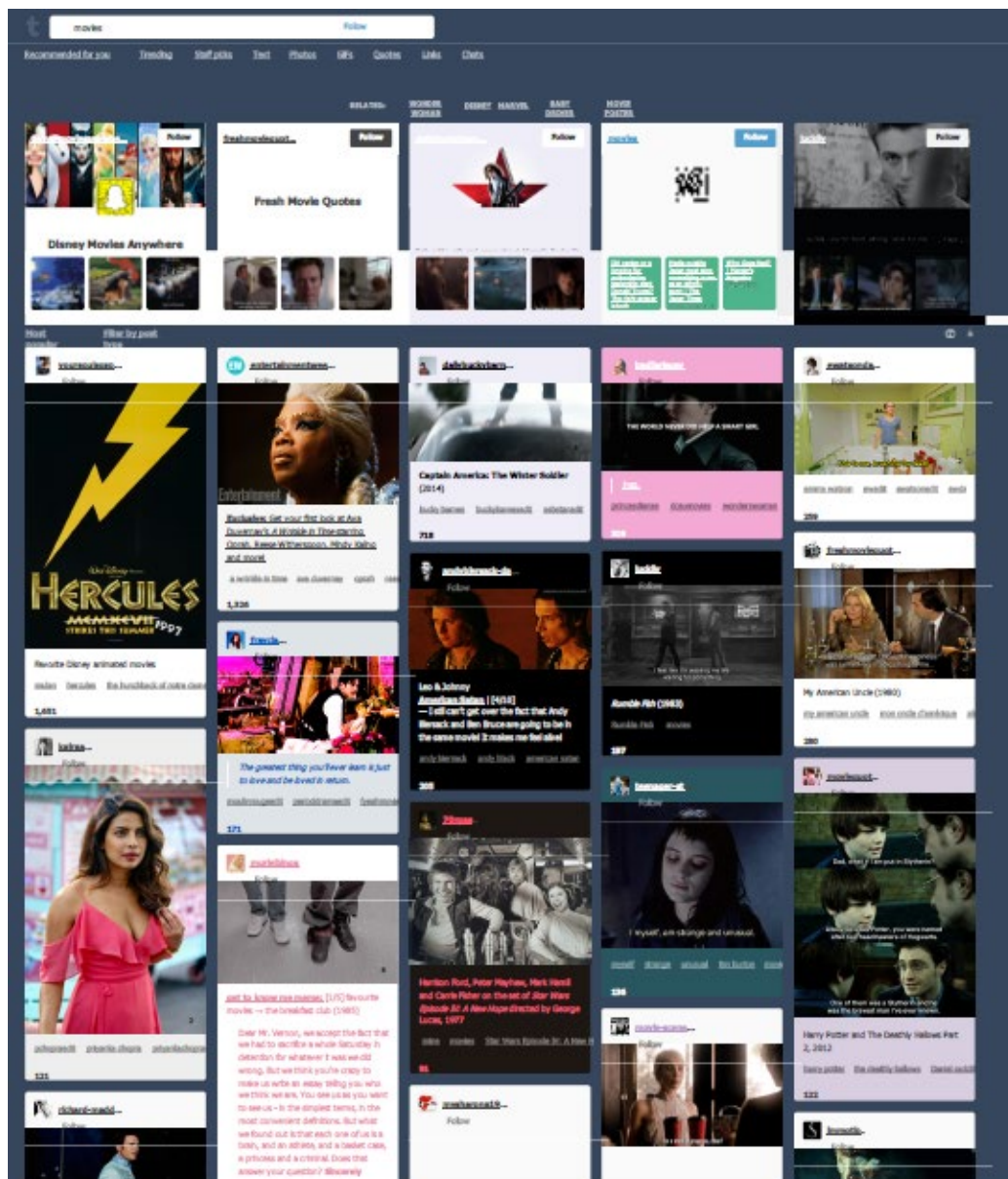
of ‘bricolage’, articulating how online reception is intrinsically informed by the mixing and assemblage of new digital literacies, cultural codes and symbolic meanings.

### **5.5. Bricolage**

The themes generated from findings evidenced throughout this chapter have been intended to set the context for understanding everyday routines of Tumblr use, as directly described by Tumblr users. What I would now like to explore in more detail is the Tumblr community’s relationship to film texts, which are not only a major subject of discussion amongst the site community, but also regularly appropriated as a mode of symbolic communication between users. The artifacts the Tumblr community produces in relation to film are representative of a complex process of media assimilation, interpretation and curation that tie explicitly into processes of online audiencehood. This section therefore demonstrates how Tumblr users routinely ‘exhibit’ their interpretative work regarding film, and how these practices create new creative (and agentive) roles for the audience to occupy.

As addressed previously, a defining feature of Tumblr engagement identified so far is the autonomy the platform affords its users. The site’s curative infrastructure is lax, mostly relying on the dynamism of its users to deploy and disseminate content. Tumblr users therefore take on a lot of the responsibility for the management of their personal information, ultimately assimilating these users into a ‘curative’ role. It was found in observation of the site that association with ‘curation’ was made especially poignant due to the highly ‘visual’ nature of communication present on the site. As discussed earlier, Tumblr users will actively seek out content relevant to themselves and their interests, however, the lack of a formal system (i.e., profile page) for presenting this information means that identity presentation on the site is usually much more abstract than on other SNS's, particularly as a large proportion of Tumblr content is visual material. Newman (2014) reports that the experience of scrolling through Tumblr ‘is often one of scrolling through a river of images’, stating that ‘Tumblr has evolved to favour an image-centred format, so that many of the popular posts there are pictures with brief captions’ (Newman, 2014:127-128). Because of this, user participation on Tumblr has the tendency to produce a literal ‘collage’ of engagement:

**Figure 16: Cross-section of Tumblr tagging system**



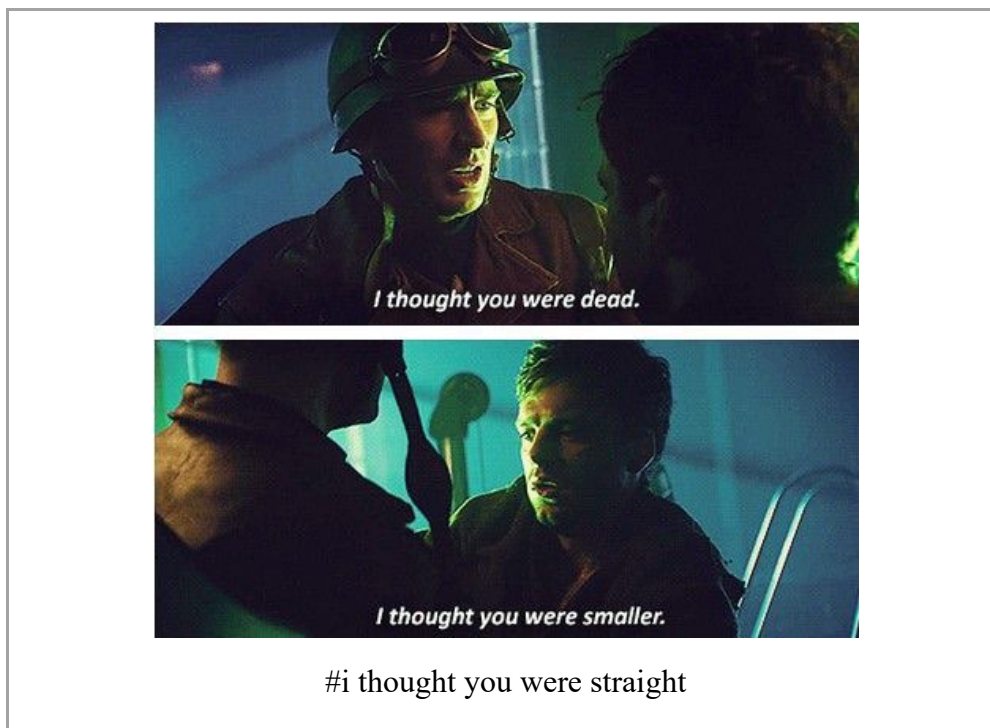
From the example above, it is clear to see how processes of ‘bricolage’, which again is the ‘remaking’ or ‘re-assemblage’ of existing material into a new creative ‘whole’ (Lévi-Strauss, 1962), might be integral to a site which functions within a kaleidoscopic spectrum of visual, textual and multimodal content. Tumblr’s adoption of visual content as its primary mode of communication is especially conducive to articulation of its users as ‘curators’, then, as it encapsulates the functional role these subjects take in the selection, stratification and exhibition of visual material for public consumption. Again, the Tumblr audience can be seen to occupy an authoritative position in the reproduction of site content, a condition which was further emphasised in users online receptive work.

Though I delve into specifics of user meaning-making in more detail in the next findings chapter, it is necessary to the contextual aims of this first findings chapter that I am able to introduce the ‘forms’ that online reception work takes on Tumblr, in order to a) offer some further foregrounding for the distinctly ‘visual’ quality of site interaction and b) interrogate the aesthetic and ideological nature of film content appearing in networked spaces. Safina et al. (2020) address how the ‘diffusion’ of textual artifacts in networked spaces (as visualised



above) results in the loss of the text’s original contexts, which includes the authority of the authorial perspective who, as the ontological basis of textual creation, has obtained the ‘priorities’ of artistic creativity, including creation of ‘the environment, the context, the spectator, as well as the right to set the logic of narration’ (Safina, Gaynullina and Cherepanova, 2020). The abstraction of textual content into screenshots, GIFs, quotes and soundbites divests the text of its linearity and removes it from reference points set within its authorial context, thus decreasing the ideological contexts of its creation, and leaving what remains ‘open’ to a new host of interpretative positions and perspectives. I would argue that texts gain something of a ‘fresh slate’ within networked spaces, as they are capable of existing as disconnected, de-centralized objects, ontologically open to manifold meanings and interpretations. This is the point at which online audiences are able to take up a more ‘directive’ relationship with media texts, as they are able to assert their own ideological, dialectic or aesthetic responses upon these online textual fragments. Observation of the site evidenced that Tumblr users would actively ‘pick and choose’ visual content that applied to their own interpretative response to a film text, and then ‘re-arrange’ or ‘remix’ these textual fragments to compose their own interpretative account (Figure 17). This creative re-assembly of media texts can (quite literally) ‘make visible’ audience reception work, revealing not only the individuals response to media content, but also the ‘the cultural and contextual factors which differentiate among viewers’ (Livingstone, 2007:3).

**Figure 17: Example of interpretative bricolage**



As explored in the next chapter, Tumblr users bricoleur activities implicate them in aesthetic-political practices of communication (Hovden and Knapskog, 2014). The Internet is often figured as a new ‘battleground’ in the entanglement between ‘author’ and ‘spectator’, between who has the authority to ‘set’ textual meaning and who controls the contexts of consumption. Online users ability to engage in creative bricolage of existing media texts

speaks to a new levelling of hierarchies between producer and consumer, potentially inaugurating audiences into a type of hybridized role, operating both as ‘spectator’, ‘editor’ ‘performer’ and even ‘author’ of media content.

### *Conclusion*

The work presented here should offer an emic, embedded perspective on Tumblr usage. This form of enquiry is a crucial element necessary for contemporary audience research – particularly those audience studies that are attempting to tackle digital media engagement, which presents as an ever more diffuse and kaleidoscopic confluence of texts, contexts and power structures. Producing a ‘routinised’ account of Tumblr usage is not only valuable in establishing specific details of the ‘environment’ in which the audience is operating, it also clearly foregrounds the intervention of the audience in the process of media engagement – a perspective that can often be ‘lost’ or subsumed against the perspectives of media producers and scholars. What should be apparent in this account of Tumblr usage is how specific visual and attributes of the platform usage experience are able to emphasise the audience’s active role in media consumption, drawing particular attention to the ways young people creatively interpret, adapt and exhibit media content.

In Chapter Two, I explained that online audiences are distinctive because they do not fall neatly into the categories of ‘active/passive’ participation that has typified traditional audience investigation over the years. The participative properties of online media mean audiences can easily move from simply observing media content to criticising it and contributing their own multimedia material, therefore actively participating in the life cycle of the original media text. Information analysed here makes it clear that Tumblr offers its own distinctive ‘audiencing’ community, which hybridizes roles of observer/performer/producer. Though site design facilitates many of these practices, it was not active in its curation, meaning this is a role users took on for themselves. This meant that though online audiencehood was shaped by Tumblr usage, the culture of usage was inherently shaped by the users themselves, who would work collaboratively to enact specific affordances of anonymity, self-expression and performance/exhibition. Tumblr therefore positions itself as a meaningful site for user practices relating to the performance, exhibition and curation of the self.

## 6. 'Ahhh, Cinema': Forms of Receptive Work on Popular Film Texts

"Stories are about one person saying to another: This is the way it feels to me. Can you understand what I'm saying? Does it also feel this way to you?" - Kazuo Ishiguro

The previous chapter worked to set parameters for understanding young adult's everyday encounters with social media, demonstrating how these audiences engage with film content when online. The impetus for this analysis was rooted in better understanding contexts of social media engagement in 'ordinary lives and common settings' (Costello and Moore, 2007:126), in order to produce a grounded, reflective account of online audiencehood. This chapter will expand on the forms of 'meaning-making' present amongst the Tumblr community by presenting examples of receptive work captured during the period of participant observation. These 'interpretative artefacts' range from text posts describing users film-going experiences, informal assessments on films I've dubbed as 'mini reviews', as well as other more elaborate forms of content-creation, including GIF use, scene or character edits, and works of fanfiction. This initial observational work was augmented by data collected during online interviews, wherein Tumblr users could reflect on their own audience practices and expand upon the contexts behind their interpretative activities. Once again, thematic analysis proved instrumental in helping consolidate these two data sets, ultimately working to establish an integrative conceptual framework with which we might better understand 'modes' of online reception.

The audience responses reported and analysed here coalesce into four distinctive receptive 'modes', designated as *transparent*, *referential*, *mediated* and *discursive*, in reference to Carolyn Michelle's consolidated interpretative framework (Michelle, 2007). As addressed in Chapter Two of this thesis, I have chosen to expand upon Michelle's categories of reception because she provided an 'integrative' framework for reception that can be attributed to a range of media texts, rather than to a specific genre of medium. As the online space is capable of amalgamating so many different forms of media (including imagery, video, audio and more) a 'compounded' framework of reception was much more viable a reference of study – this integrative model therefore offered the flexibility necessary to address the ever-shifting patterns of online engagement. I address each of these proposed 'modes' of reception in turn, demonstrating through use of extant material collected during observation of 150 Tumblr users how particular 'themes' and patterns of interpretation have occurred across this dataset. In addition to Michelle's categories, I have created subcategories within each mode to designate specific 'practices' that accompany these forms of interpretative response. These practices, though not unique to Tumblr, nonetheless demonstrate how this particular community were able to creatively 'visualise' their interpretative practices. This chapter presents examples of these processes as they occurred within the community. These subcategories are: *imagines*, *storytelling*, *mini-reviews* and *rants*. Ultimately, the findings presented here showed a tendency towards 'communal' patterns of reception, that is, receptive responses that either aligned to – or have actively sought out – other user's perspectives, implicating the individual's efforts to align their own readings within wider social, cultural and political contexts. Whilst concepts of communal reception are not new to reception studies (see work on interpretative communities, pg. ), I would argue that the predominance of this receptive 'mode' amongst this community is intimately informed by the contextual collapse that occurs online, wherein the boundaries between 'self' and 'other' become increasingly tenuous. The findings represented here thus offer a detailed insight into

the ways that young adults users negotiate their meaning-making processes in relation to new globalised networks of interpretation and critique (Gabriel, 2014). My hope is that the analysis presented here might offer an initial blueprint for undertaking online reception study, helping to communicate how online reception practices alternatively *invoke* and *augment* aspects practices of real-world sense-making.

### 6.1 Transparent Reception

As summarised in this study's first literature review chapter, modes of transparent reception are contingent on a close relationship between text and audience, wherein the audience's meaning-making activities work to envelop the viewer within the fictional world of the film. Transparent readings rely on textual cues as the primary source for audience interpretation, meaning audience response is often dependent on the 'internal logics' of the text to frame meaning (Michelle, 2007: 23). This mode represents an interpretive response that primarily follows the intended meaning encoded in the text by the media producer. The transparent mode, as identified here, therefore reflects a notion that the audience is not *always* active in their interaction with media texts, that they can wilfully put aside critical analysis in order to further immerse themselves in the lifeworld of a fictional text. This notion is controversial, as audience researchers have spent years developing an expansive argument *for* active audience engagement with mass media (Bird, 2011:505). Throughout the course of this thesis, however, I have stressed the importance of portraying the 'realities' of online audiencehood, and part of that reality means acknowledging that media engagement isn't always a deconstructive exercise, but rather an activity intended to derive pleasure, enjoyment or relaxation. When first broaching the subject of film with interview participants, it quickly became clear that film viewership was a form of consumption these users associated with 'escapism', with 29% of participants concurring that they considered film to be an 'immersive' medium:

*I love films, they really are my distraction. When I watch a film I only think and care about the film in that moment and not about my problems. Films just really keep me busy. (#8, female, age 18)*

*I think if the job of film is good, you sort of completely forget about your surroundings, you become absorbed. (#1, male, age 21)*

*There's an element of escapism which is different to anything else – watching a film means setting aside a certain length of time to consume it, unlike a TV show or a novel (separated into chapters) which are intended to be consumed periodically, and are designed to be put aside and returned to when needed. Watching a film is an event, whether it's at a cinema or at home. (#22, female, age 22)*

In line with this study's focus on 'embedded' processes of reception, it is crucial that this analysis is able to 'make space' for the audience's immersion in the fictional world of the text. Michelle argues that audience immersion in the text has long been an 'essential precursor' for deriving pleasure from media content and should therefore be taken into consideration in order to accurately represent the full 'spectrum' of an audience's interpretative response (Michelle, 2007). Despite making room in this study for assessing modes of transparent interpretation, however, it was found that this mode was the least represented of Michelle's categories amongst the sample of Tumblr users, with only 3 of the

24 interview participants indicating that they chose to engage with film texts in this manner when online, and only 6.9% of extant material collected from the Tumblr community corresponding to conditions of transparent interpretation. This indicated that this form of interpretative reading was not common amongst the online population, nor amongst those interview participants who were able to offer a ‘first-hand’ account of their interpretative processes. Users stressed the importance of gaining pleasure and enjoyment from the film texts they consumed, which meant that emotional responses to film content (in specific, responses to movie characters) tended to dominate most of the examples of transparent readings identified during this study. This small selection of users would therefore willingly ‘reject’ any critical distance from the text they had been consuming, that they might then achieve the level of emotional ‘affect’ they were desiring (Michelle, 2007:23). Though it was difficult to confirm the ages or genders of the observation sample (see pg. 88 for further information), users who were flagged as undertaking transparent readings of film content proved most likely to produce responses that would comment on movie characters as if they were encountering them in ‘real life’: these users would size up the characters actions, motivations, and temperaments as if sizing up an acquaintance, usually elaborating on the ways in which the actions of fictional characters could be explained by cues provided within the film text. In this example collected from the Tumblr community, it is possible to see how the user willingly suspends her disbelief in the ‘unreality’ of the film text in order to make her point:

just saying, but finn is what some of y’all wanted kylo ren to be.

- switched to the light side
- finn decided from day one that he wasn’t gonna kill for the first order. kylo ren decided that he would kidnap, torture, and kill for them. and for himself.
- overcame abuse
- the “abuse” kylo ren endured at snoke’s hands doesn’t even come close to what finn got. So kylo heard some voices. Finn got taken from a family he never knew and didn’t even have a *name*
- loved rey
- kylo stalked rey. finn supported her.
- impressive and powerful fighter
- mysterious
- good looking
- finn is darling and handsome. kylo ren looks like darth emo. Out.

(on *Star Wars: The Last Jedi*, 2017)

The audience's 'closeness' to the text and their willingness to suspend disbelief in the reality of the fictional lifeworld is thus demonstrated. For the small sample of users who expressed a tendency towards transparent reception, emotional attachment to the movie characters was

central to their interpretation of the text. When discussing posts on Star Wars she had presented on her Tumblr blog, participant #24 gave an account of her ‘attachment’ to the series, in particular’s the franchise’s female protagonists, in a way that granted them the immediacy of real life:

*I really like Rey because I feel like she's kind of headstrong. Same with Princess Leia ... that kind of personality I relate to. I'm very stubborn I guess you would say [laughs] I try to say that in a good way...I feel very passionately about things, there's no in between for me, its 100% all the way or nothing, and I feel like with those characters, that (personality trait) allows me to relate to them more, because I see them and I see that they're complex women and not 100% perfect all of the time ... it makes it so much easier to relate to them and to understand that its ok to be who you are. (#24, female, age 18)*

These findings indicate that Tumblr users who favoured forms of transparent reception often evidenced a ‘parasocial intimacy’ with fictional characters, a relationship built on illusory feelings of association and immediacy between themselves and the textual creation (Hartmann, 2016:131). Tellingly, I found that those interview participants who identified themselves as frequenting this mode of textual immersion had also identified themselves as participating in ‘fandom’ on the site. These subjects were all female and tended towards the younger end of the participant age range, being 18, 21 and 25 respectively. This is notable, as young women have often been the focus of discourses on fan behaviour, having gained an (arguably biased) reputation for seeking out ‘excessive’ means by which to heighten their relation to media and/or celebrities (Jenson,1990; Narai, 2017). Findings indicated that these users placed the ‘pleasures’ they could gain from film consumption (e.g., ‘enjoyment’, ‘connection’, ‘intimacy’, ‘emotion’) – high on their list of expectations for their filmic encounters, meaning that this data did seem consistent with the notion of fans as people seeking to prolong and/or enhance their engagement with the media text. This ‘parasocial’ bond was able to be further ‘enacted’ by Tumblr users through their production of creative fan-works. As discussed in the previous chapter, it was uncovered that Tumblr users would regularly create (or appropriate) content to augment their symbolic ‘closeness’ to the film text. This included users 'scaffolding' their interpretations with intratextual material such as GIFs, stills and edits, as well as elaborating on the text in the form of fanfiction and fanart, all of which add further dimension and tangibility to the audience’s textual encounters. The following subcategory examines forms of ‘transparent’ reception in relation to the Tumblr ‘imagine’, a popular form of narrative play noted amongst the Tumblr community during the period of observation.

### *6.1.1. Imagines*

Imagines are forms of fanfiction that first became popularized on Tumblr<sup>12</sup>, though they can now also be found on fanfiction platforms such as AO3 and LiveJournal (Lord, 2018). These short-form narrative pieces explicitly incorporate the 'reader' as an active participant in the story. The narrative will work to 'break the fourth wall', by using the term Y/N (Your Name)

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<sup>12</sup> Related forms of narrative play on Tumblr include 'scenarios' (similar to imagines, however the impetus for the story is a specific 'scenario' offered by another Tumblr user, usually as an anonymous request) and 'headcanons' (a story which expands upon a plotline or character trait that is not seen to be part of the established movie 'canon', but that the author strongly believes to be true).

or 'reader' to incorporate the online audience into the action of the text. Francesca Coppa (2018) therefore describes imagines as existing 'at the intersection of fiction and role-play.... the writer of an Imagine is not entirely unlike a game designer, or a playwright, as much as an author. And 'You' are not just a reader, but a player and an actor, too' (Coppa in Lord, 2018). Imagines can be regarded, then, as a 'low-risk [way] to play out fantasies with an identity which may be discarded' (Bassett, 1997: 547). The example below represents an 'atypical' example of a Tumblr imagine:

For You (p.p.)

summary: you'd just gotten dumped and had been wallowing in it for what was probably way too long. good thing there was peter.

pairing: college!peter parker x reader

(on *Spiderman: Homecoming*, 2017)

My observation of the site revealed that the majority of imagines created were romantic or sexual in nature, with the majority of these narratives being written by users who identified as female. Imagines can therefore draw comparison to the 'Mary Sue' genre of fan fiction, a female-dominated genre wherein the author sets out to write a 'wish fulfilment fantasy in which she (literally) finds intimate connection with the fictional characters' (Wilson, 2016). There are ongoing arguments within fan studies whether this form of content creation should be considered a means of resistive expression from female audiences "reworking [texts]...to become [more] open to feminine pleasures" (Narai, 2017). It is possible that imagines may operate as 'compensatory literature', that is: texts that "enable [women] to relieve tension... and indulge in a fantasy that provide[s] them with good feelings" (Radway, 1984:95). However, analysis of the material captured during participant observation showed that most of these 'pleasures' tended to fall into line with predominant socio-cultural ideologies. Though Tumblr has a thriving economy of LGBTQ fanfiction (Koehm, 2018; Cho, 2018), for instance, many of the imagines observed tended more towards cisgender assignments, with story content aligning mostly to heteronormative ideals. Though appropriated by the online audience for their own ends, these interpretative artefacts still present 'dominant' readings of the film text; in this case, the reinforcement of the prevailing cultural code' that 'pleasure for women is men' (Snitow, 1979:150). It was apparent that even though Tumblr's creators were actively working to assert their immersion in the filmic narrative, this creative 'reworking' of themselves into the text tends to defer to the cues already encoded into the text, meaning their negotiation with the text presents a traditionally 'linear' reading of the content.

Imagines are just one initial example of how transparent readings are actualised on Tumblr. Transparent readings can seem to produce traditionally 'passive' results, as they tend to work with the ideological messages that are already present within the film text. However, I wish to stress that whilst this form of receptive content creation is undertaken mostly for gratification, it is by no means *superficial*, as some 'passive' audience theories would suggest, in that the presentation of this mode online will often involve some form of creative work, as well as extensive and informed engagement with the film text. What would be an implicitly 'passive response' for audience members engaging with another mass medium can

be reformed as 'active' under the parameters of online participation. This is important for setting contexts for Tumblr audiencehood as a 'productive' position, as explored in the following findings chapter.

## 6.2 Referential Reception

If a transparent mode of reception sees audiences read film texts '*as* life', then the referential mode sees them read film as '*like* life' (Michelle, 2007:25). Processes of referential reception will often figure film as an indicative text seen as 'standing alongside the real world' (Michelle, 2007:26) that the audience can draw on for comparison or analogy. In this sense, the film text will act as a 'resource' for the audience, rather than as a primary source of information, as in the previous mode. Though audiences undertaking processes of referential reception will still evidence a 'closeness' to the textual material, this closeness often becomes contingent on how the textual depictions can weigh up against their own lived experiences, meaning audience members will use their 'stock' of real-world experiences to either affirm or deny the version of reality being presented to them by a text. The following user posts provide some typical examples of how referential readings manifested within the Tumblr community. In each regard, it is possible to see how the audience member's *own experiences* figure as the preferred source of meaning, rather than the encoded cues offered by the film text:

I know a lot of people don't like Silver Linings Playbook but I do, I love it, it speaks to me in a way I can't really understand or express well, idk it's hard to like...explain it I guess. Maybe it's because I used to live 15 minutes from where they filmed it in Philly, or because of my own mental health issues but there's just something there that I feel close to.

(on *Silver Linings Playbook*, 2012)

I don't know about the rest of you but I'm actually a bit overwhelmed by how? nice it is to be a female star wars fan right now? to be able to look in the background shot of TFA and see girl pilots and medics and officers and soliders, to see girls being competent and heroic and *there* and idk about you but when my smallest brother announces rey and ahsoka are his favourite characters without a shadow of hesitation I feel like crying a bit

(on *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*, 2015)

Overall, I found that forms of referential response were the second most popular form of interpretative activity evident amongst the Tumblr community, with around 54% of extant material reflecting this interpretative mode, and 57% of extant material corresponding to conditions of receptive readings. This is perhaps to be expected when we consider how often Tumblr discourse tends towards forms of 'exposition' (pg. 113). I do find it telling that a receptive mode that hinges on 'analogy' would prove popular amongst a community specifically oriented towards practices of self-expression and disclosure. The data that emerged from online observation suggested that forms of referential reception tied into



existing practices of identity performance amongst the community, as this mode of reception explicitly positions the audiences' meaning-making processes in relation to their identity development. Of all of the interpretative modes represented in this study, it was determined that forms of referential reception were most likely to retain their 'temporal' character, in that these modes of interpretation were often indicative of reception processes 'captured' in a particular moment in time:

whisper of the heart and kiki's delivery service are both really important films to me because they really encapsulate the feeling of struggling to find your passion, or even to embrace it due to societal pressures. they're both very much films about self-discovery and finding your own path and that just hits different at this point in my life.

(on *Whisper of the Heart* (1995) and *Kiki's Delivery Service* (1989))

Though relations between identity work and reception have long been recognised with the research canon (Morley, 1980; Radway, 1984), investigation of referential modes of interpretation found that Tumblr user's associations between self-identity and reception were typically formed in relation to their reception of film texts *over time*, drawing specific attention to the connection between a user's formative identity development and their engagement with film texts. Observations of the Tumblr community over the course of this study's year-long ethnography conveyed that narratives of 'growing up with film' were incredibly popular amongst the Tumblr userbase. As explored in the upcoming findings chapter, this is very much representative of the 'generational sensibilities' of this study's cohort of millennial users, for whom themes of 'nostalgia' and 'reminiscence' have become central to their online interactions. Carolyn Michelle asserts that a key source of referential information for viewing audiences is their own personal history, which includes their 'stock of experiences of childhood, adulthood and parenthood, along with personal and familial relationships' (Michelle, 2007). Ruth Deller's reception study 'Twittering On' similarly found that user's personal histories, as well as those of their extended family and friends, could be used as frames of reference for online reception (Deller, 2012). This process is usually carried out by the Tumblr user in narrative form, through forms of 'storytelling'. The next subcategory therefore details the various ways Tumblr users produced embodied (e.g., verbalised and visualised) accounts of their life events in their reception of film texts (Ochs and Capps, 1996:19).

### 6.2.1 Storytelling

'Storytelling' is a narrative form meant to mediate our lived experiences. Our sense of self, as well as our understanding of the society we live in, has long been shaped by narrative accounts. In their text 'Narrating the Self', Elinor Ochs and Lisa Capps argue that biographical storytelling is born out of a need to better apprehend our lived experiences, meaning that this practice becomes integral for analysing people's 'subjective involvement in the world' (Ochs and Capps, 1996:20-21). It is seemingly natural, then, that storytelling be a popular element in people's 'sense-making processes' (Ochs and Capps, 2001). Findings from this study indicated that storytelling was a popular meaning-making trend amongst both

interview participants and the wider observation sample, confirming the ‘universality’ of this interpretative process across extant and elicited responses. For instance, participants #6 and #8 freely offered short autobiographical accounts when recounting their early filmgoing experiences. The narratives they provided drew clear links between these participant’s media consumption and their identity formation:

*I loved the Star Wars movies since I was a baby. Revenge of the Sith was one of the first films I ever saw in the cinema, it was a really old cinema back home, basically falling apart - it was one of the last ones they showed before it was demolished, so it was really, really cold but I really enjoyed it even though I was freezing! My dad used to have them on VHS so I’ve watched them all. I think they’ll always be ‘family films’ for me. They make me feel quite nostalgic. (#6, female, age #22)*

*Audrey Hepburn films were a **huge** part of my childhood and adolescence and out of all the roles she played, Holly Golightly was my favourite. I think from being young I had a tendency to overthink and worry about things beyond my control, so watching someone as fabulous as Holly swan through life in New York with, like, that dreamy, ‘devil may care’ attitude was really inspiring for me. She was always the character I would mimic as I grew up, copying her moves and sayings. (#8, female, age 26)*

It was found during the course of this investigation that online participants would call on similar biographical techniques when relating their interpretation of film texts on Tumblr. It was therefore determined that these narratives, being ‘situated in time and space’, worked to embody elements of the narrator’s ‘selfhood’ (Ochs and Capps, 1996:22), that is, the qualities that constituted their presence as an individual. It was found that storytelling practices were actively encouraged by the Tumblr community, with users even creating community ‘prompts’ to elicit autobiographical accounts from others:

Most people I know had that one movie as a kid; that one movie that they would watch over and over and over to the resigned acceptance of their parents. I’ve always thought that movie says something about a person. What was your movie?

Time in observation showed numerous examples of community members ‘performing’ these narratives of selfhood on Tumblr. Along this line, the performative aspects that can turn the blog page into an ‘identity exhibition’ (Zhao et al, 2013) are being acknowledged, producing accounts that were representative of particular spatio-temporal contexts. It should again be stressed that ‘embodied narratives’ are by no means a practice specific just to Tumblr users - social media in general has really become a prominent mediator of the personal narrative, bringing new relevance to Jennifer Ryan’s claim that ‘technology is the campfire around which we tell our stories’ (Ryan, 2008:6). The ‘expressive’ nature of Tumblr communication, however, offered more emphatic - and therefore more palpable - narrative accounts. In the example below, for instance, it is possible to see how storytelling can give tangibility to what would otherwise be a ‘one-dimensional’ account:

ok so I just saw TFA again and there were two girls in front of me who couldn't have been more than five or six and they were VERY curious about the movie and asked their dad a LOT of questions about what was going on...

[...]

ANYWAY during rey's introduction, she's wearing a mask right? And I hear the little girl go "who's he?" and the dad goes, "SHE is rey." and this, im gonna cry, this little girl gasps with delight and whispers, "that's a GIRL?" and the dad goes "uh huh" and all of a sudden this little girl is like bouncing up and down in her seat asking question after question - "what's she doing? what's a scavenger? what's she scavenging for? why is she doing that?" and then finally rey takes off her mask and the little girl gasps again and goes, "that IS a girl!" and like every single time rey was onscreen from that point on this girl was just absolutely riveted...I just watched a little girl discover her first hero I'm literally bawling

(on *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*, 2015)

This sort of rhetoric imbues the user's receptive account with vibrancy and immediacy. Though, as addressed in the previous chapter, Tumblr discourse likely represents a 'delayed response' to film content, users not often using the site at the time of initial textual consumption, these embodied narratives can give the impression of an instantaneous reaction. This further contributes to senses of 'ambient awareness' amongst Tumblr users, their consciousness of a peripheral audience of socially stratified 'others'. What is significant about narratives presented on social media is that whilst they can be explicitly personal, they can find comparable meaning in a much broader audience. Ochs and Capps explain how we use narrative not only to 'apprehend experiences', but also to 'navigate relationships with others' (Ochs and Capp, 1996:21). Personal narratives provide internal cohesion and 'unite' users under common experiences: 'Shared stories and shared methods of telling them create coherence within social groups and shared commitment to common goals, values and beliefs' (Jones, 2015). This can be vital to communication on a site like Tumblr, where participation is mostly anonymous and development of interpersonal relationships therefore more complex. Observation of the site showed that storytelling techniques often worked to 'cohere' interpretative responses amongst Tumblr members, offering further dimensionality to user's reports of their filmic encounters.

Narrative has long been recognized as an important tool for the development and regulation of individual and collective identities. Often, however, this means narratives become the point at which people's perspectives diverge. As stressed before, the audience's 'closeness' to the text is dependent on the relatability of the content to their own experiences and literacies, meaning the audience can perceive a fit – or 'lack of fit' - within their own cultural milieu, that is: their 'existing body of experiences, observations, and knowledges' (Michelle, 2007:26). For example, participant #24 described how she experienced discrepancies between her own perception of her cultural background (Italian-American) and Hollywood's 'stereotypical' characterisation of Italian characters:

*Watching things myself, for instance, I get annoyed when Italians - because I'm Italian, Italian-American that's like my heritage - I get very annoyed when I see Italians portrayed in a stereotypical way because I'm like, that's not who we are! It's not like that, and especially given the racism that my grandparents had to face back here in Australia ... [shakes head] (#24, female, age 18)*

Here the participant compares the depiction of Italian characters in film with her own knowledge of how Italians “really are” and experiences a ‘lack of fit’ that causes her to reject the textual depictions offered. Notably, audiences experiencing a lack of fit with a media text help bring into relief the inherent assumptions and biases that may be guiding these narratives. Though the audience member may first ‘immerse’ themselves in the text, decoding the text’s messages in a ‘direct’ manner, it often became the case that this initial immersion would then develop into critical distance, as forms of referential reception use the ‘lens’ of audience’s own experiences to critique the legitimacy of the text. In interview, participant #24 articulated this receptive transition from personal experience to objective critique perfectly:

*It just annoys me to see that kind of message put out, so to see people of different races not being represented well in movies and by the film industry and... like, there's **so** many Italians out there and they are **still** presented in that way and it's so much worse [claps hands] for people of other nationalities like Asians, African-Americans and stuff, they face so many worse representations, so I think if it means that much to **me** as someone who has a lot of privilege in this world because of my nationality and my social-economic status, it would mean so much more to people of those nationalities and social standings as well. (#24, female, age 18)*

This finding is significant as it denotes the ways that ‘individualized’ patterns of reception can converge within ‘broader’ contexts of cultural and political meaning. Attention has often been paid in cultural studies to the ways that personal experiences can clash with ideologically powerful social structures (Tajfel, 1978); indeed, reception studies closely consider this struggle to create meaning in the light of oppressive macro structures as a key element of audience’s active response (Morley, 1980; Hall, 1973). The referential mode, as exemplified here, highlights the disconnection that can occur between the audience member’s personal experiences and the potential of the media text to articulate those experiences (Jones, 2015). It was determined, therefore, that referential readings were ‘catalytic’ in their employment, in that they typically facilitated a critical transition between ‘micro’ and ‘macro’ frames of meaning.

### **6.3 Mediated Reception**

This next mode of reception is intrinsically informed by an awareness of the film text as ‘production’. Mediated interpretation represents a process wherein the audience member opts to ‘step back’ from the text to analyse it from a more objective perspective. This mode of reading will show a specific focus on *generic form*, whereby audiences will draw on their knowledge of existing genre conventions to help shape their response to a film text. Significantly, this form of reception practice was most often implicated in instances of interpretative ‘commuting’, that is, the shifting of receptive modes in accordance with available discursive repertoires (Schröder, 1986). Findings showed that Tumblr users would commute in and out of mediated interpretations with regularity, usually pairing their thoughts

on generic form with critical reflections on the nature of the film industry. As such, mediated interpretations permeated most (if not all) instances of receptive work analysed for this thesis. The Tumblr community's adoption of mediated receptive strategies is representative of the 'cineliteracy' of the Tumblr userbase – as evidenced in the previous chapter, the community have shown themselves to be well-informed on film as a genre medium, demonstrating particular sensitivities to filmic aesthetics, narratives and generic forms. This section will expand on the Tumblr communities cineliteracies through examination of an emergent trend of informal critique that I have named the 'mini-review'.

### 6.3.1 Mini-review

In many ways, mini-reviews resemble forms of traditional film criticism, consisting of evaluative account of a given film's content, cinematography and other technical elements. Where mini-reviews tend to differ, however, is that they are usually briefer, include more informal wording, and demonstrate more of a focus on the 'emotional effect' of a film than a formal publication is likely to. This form of content creation shows the audience members 'personal negotiation' with a film text (Frey and Sayad, 2015:4), whereby audience members work through their interpretation of the text by using their knowledge of filmic conventions (e.g., 'plot', 'pace', 'mise-en-scene' etc.) to formally 'structure' their response to content. It was found that this practice was therefore not as 'anecdotal' as the previous receptive mode identified, as the viewer will draw more explicitly on theoretical or technical discourses to compose their response to a text. These forms of interpretation are implicitly *intertextual* in their operation, in that they rely heavily on the intelligibility of other media texts (i.e., other films, TV shows or literature) to impart meaning. On the whole, mini-reviews are intended to direct other Tumblr users to films other users feel are worthy of discussion and want to engage in further discourse in, meaning these interpretative artifacts can represent yet another 'socialising' activity between users:

So right off the bat, the movie assumes you've seen Civil War<sup>13</sup>, but I haven't seen it and I was able to follow the plot with no problems so don't worry about that aspect. The other thing this movie does nicely is that it skips over a lot of backstory almost entirely, leaving much more screentime dedicated to actually interesting plot rather than killing Uncle Ben again.

The villain of the movie, Vulture, is cool as all hell. Michael Keaton actually manages to be scary and also sympathetic as a villain, delving into themes of class warfare, and delivering one of the best performances of the whole film. On top of that his suit and bomber jacket is just the absolute sickest shit ever, and I was loving every second of screentime he got.

On top of having really, good dramatic moments, the humor in the movie is also really well done. Having just watched the awkward cringefest that is Dr. Strange, (or tried to, at least) I was surprised to see jokes that actually landed, as opposed to hearing Benedict Cumberbatch make hamfisted Beyonce jokes. The balance between comedic and serious moments was nice, and there were a lot of lampshade-y moments that I really enjoyed (e.g. Spiderman has to get through the suburbs really quickly and you think "well, there's no tall

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<sup>13</sup> In reference to *Captain America: Civil War*, released April 2016.

buildings for him to swing from, how's he going to-" and then the next shot is of him frustratedly sprinting across a golf course)

Overall, it was really enjoyable, smartly written, well casted. Good movie even if you aren't a big Marvel fan.

(on *Spiderman: Homecoming*, 2017)

The mini-review differs from traditional film criticism in two specific ways. Firstly, they are informal. An antagonist being described as 'cool as all hell' is not typical of a formal film review. Formality, of course, is not a prerequisite of these ad hoc reviews because the online audience have no editorial standards they are required to meet, nor editorial 'gatekeepers' to regulate their discursive contribution. What results, as we see, is an amateurish - but nonetheless sincere – movie review. M.Z. Newman argues that Tumblr's informal reviews hold value because they tend to represent the lived experiences, opinions and impressions of 'everyday' film audiences and are thus able to claim social capital on the grounds of their sincerity – these are film reviews made *for* audiences, *by* audiences (Newman, 2015). In interview, participant's #16 and #24 reported that they felt they could trust Tumblr's informal reviews more than some professional sources, stating that unlike traditional reviews, these accounts seemed to be a better representation of the 'average' audience experience. This was reiterated by 29% of the overall interview sample:

*Though I know there's a lot of trash out there [online], which is a caveat of expanding participation, for better or for worse, I find reviews from actual audiences helpful. Reviews from professional critics are still undoubtedly important too, but I do enjoy seeing other people's perspectives. (#16, female, age 27)*

*Some reviewers I trust. I like the Guardian, they're OK. But then...ok, so there's this film reviewer in the Sydney Morning Herald back home that I've got **vastly** different opinions from, so if he gives a bad review of a film, I wouldn't really care. But if I go on Metacritic or IMDB, Rotten Tomatoes or Tumblr too, yeah, and saw bad reviews, **then** I would be cautious about seeing it. Because it's like a consensus... Tumblr and the rest, they've kind of become an information source. (#24, female, age 18)*

Another attribute that distinguishes these online practices from traditional film criticism is it they are also collaborative. Typically, formal film reviews have involved a single critic presenting their take on a film text. In the online space, any number of receptive takes can be 'pooled together', to offer a more comprehensive (and arguably more meaningful) take on film than any single critic can achieve. For example, the post below shows an interaction between two Tumblr users discussing a recent Marvel feature. The discussion demonstrates how the users combine their respective intertextual literacies to form a sophisticated mediation on the film's plot:

So that introduction (skipping over the Vulture's origin story) – maybe the best since the first Iron Man, and now that I think about it, a little bit similar in that it kind of gives the story a 'frame'. I don't mean to shortchange the Vulture's origin; this was the rare really good Marvel villain.

They definitely did a good job of using the rest of the MCU's built up canon as a way to skip unnecessary exposition. Whereas some films have been forced to do so much building FOR other films, this one had the advantage of building ON some of that

Yeah this did great stuff with the lasting effects of what the Avengers have done/experienced, arguably in a stronger way than Civil War managed in Ross's initial briefing about the Sokovia Accords

(on *Spiderman: Homecoming*, 2017)

Tumblr's mini-reviews are often democratized, therefore, as users can compare perspectives by reblogging or commenting on another's post. This emerges as yet another example of audience reception on Tumblr representing a 'socialised' experience. This is culturally significant as film criticism, in particular, is an arena that has (historically) been reserved for a select number of cultural 'elites' (e.g., critics, authors, directors and academics); as seen in this study's literature review chapters, the film industry has left little space for its audiences to make their voices heard. The online audience's foray into this discursive sphere engenders a new sense of equity between 'professional' and 'citizen' reception work. Overall, it was determined that the online audience was conscious of this leveraging of power, with interview participants discussing how they felt audiences could now take on a more constructive role in the cultural life of the film text:

*In terms of film criticism, the power dynamics has really changed. It's not only a realm of the elite/established gatekeepers. The opinions of ordinary people are legitimised on a visible platform. (#16, female, age 27)*

*Nowadays, an audience can directly give their opinion and talk to directors in charge of making movies, and it can influence the final product that is the film. (#22, female, age 22)*

Audience members understand that their evaluative, collaborative abilities held new sway in processes of cultural production, and consciousness of this was evident across their mediated responses. As was the case with referential readings, it was found that mediated readings would often act as 'catalysts' for broader criticisms regarding the nature of the film industry and producers commercial priorities. In true 'Tumblr style' (more on pg. 158), these reflections were usually sardonic in nature:

#### **Figure 18: Ironic critique of the film industry**

*Executive: "I guess movie audiences just don't like DC superheroes."*



**TOMATOMETER**

**55%**

Average Rating: 6.2/10  
Reviews Counted: 301  
Fresh: 167  
Rotten: 134

All Critics | Top Critics



Critics Consensus: *Man of Steel's* exhilarating action and spectacle can't fully overcome its detours into generic blockbuster territory.

**AUDIENCE SCORE**

**75%**  
liked it

Average Rating: 3.9/5  
User Ratings: 443,648



**TOMATOMETER**

**27%**

Average Rating: 4.9/10  
Reviews Counted: 353  
Fresh: 97  
Rotten: 256

All Critics | Top Critics



Critics Consensus: *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* smothers a potentially powerful story -- and some of America's most iconic superheroes -- in a grim whirlwind of effects-driven action.

**AUDIENCE SCORE**

**64%**  
liked it

Average Rating: 3.6/5  
User Ratings: 225,991



**TOMATOMETER**

**26%**

Average Rating: 4.7/10  
Reviews Counted: 301  
Fresh: 77  
Rotten: 224

All Critics | Top Critics



Critics Consensus: *Suicide Squad* boasts a talented cast and a little more humor than previous DCEU efforts, but they aren't enough to save the disappointing end result from a muddled plot, thinly written characters, and choppy directing.

**AUDIENCE SCORE**

**63%**  
liked it

Average Rating: 3.6/5  
User Ratings: 137,117

*The Lego Batman Movie:*



**TOMATOMETER**

**91%**

Average Rating: 7.5/10  
Reviews Counted: 175  
Fresh: 159  
Rotten: 16

All Critics | Top Critics



Critics Consensus: *The Lego Batman Movie* continues its block-buster franchise's winning streak with another round of dizzyingly funny -- and beautifully animated -- family-friendly mayhem.

**AUDIENCE SCORE**

**89%**  
liked it

Average Rating: 4.2/5  
User Ratings: 19,643

*Executive: Holy shit.*

AND



**TOMATOMETER**

**92%**

Average Rating: 7.5/10  
Reviews Counted: 298  
Fresh: 274  
Rotten: 24

All Critics | Top Critics



Critics Consensus: Thrilling, earnest, and buoyed by Gal Gadot's charismatic performance, *Wonder Woman* succeeds in spectacular fashion.

**AUDIENCE SCORE**

**92%**  
liked it

Average Rating: 4.4/5  
User Ratings: 86,289

*Turns out the trick is making good movies!*



thank god they're making another spiderman movie bc i was really confused about his whole origin story hopefully they set it all straight this time

Mediated responses offered by interview participants showed a similar criticality towards the structural and economic factors that dictate film production. Participants #7 and #21 both expressed frustrations, for example, over what they saw as 'transparent' interventions in film content by industry executives more concerned with monetary gain over 'quality storytelling':

*The core message of Star Wars is that it's always right to join the fight against evil, and that it's possible to make money from a franchise for **literally** decades ... Something I've intensely disliked about [Marvel] recently is that every single storyline seems to be caused by Tony Stark messing up, just so Robert Downey Jr. can appear in nearly every film. (#21, female, age 20)*

*It's just they're rehashing things all the time and it's getting very repetitive, and if you look at the quality of older films from like the 80's and the 90's they've got a **story**, and because they didn't have the capabilities to do all this CGI fancy stuff they've kept with the story and just thrown in some really good stunts. By people, not on a green screen, you know? Ever since CGI came to the fore everyone thinks that film should be made good by adding 20 billion pounds worth of CGI and that does not increase the quality of the film by any stretch of means, not in my mind anyway. (#7, female, age 25)*

Due to the high proportion of mediated readings evident amongst the Tumblr community (as well as discursive responses, as addressed in the next section) it was determined that the young adult audience were showing signs of disenfranchisement with modern media texts – a disgruntlement that extended also to media powers. Richardson and Corner (1986) had previously explored film audiences' identification of a 'manipulative' motivation lying behind industry production, the suggestion being that movie producers will attempt to 'deceive viewers in order to secure their own political or ideological intentions' (Richardson & Corner 1986:163). This oeuvre of criticism has interesting links to Marxist critiques of mass media as a form of 'cultural coercion' (Sconce, 1995:381), a genre of critique which, it is pertinent to note, often dismissed audiences as 'passive entities'. The ironic nature of users mediated responses takes on a new significance when we consider how this ambivalence represents the 'distancing' and 'decentralization' of audiences as the supposed subjects of meaning. What this outlines in regards to online audience behaviour is an implicit attitude of - if not outright *resentment*, then certainly *fatigue* – amongst the Tumblr community regarding the machinations of media producers:

Dude filmmaker: We wanted to cleverly critique the way women are brutalised then sidelined in films. To do this, we had the women in our film brutalised then sidelined. I

think you'll find it incredible; I found it so good that at one point in the film you can hear me audibly groaning "ahhh, cinema" from behind the camera.

So I've been noticing a lot of complaints about whitewashing in big budget movies lately- and yes, I completely agree that that's stupid, unnecessary, and harmful to society- BUT - You've got to remember who's making these movies. What they have in common. These movies are all sequels, remakes, and homages to stories that have already earned their popularity. They're just unimaginative projects proposed by people with lots of money and little creativity. They leech off the hard work and ingenuity of the original artists/authors. You are feeding their lazy ploys for more cash by jumping in to see a story and characters you're already familiar with

These findings demonstrate patterns of indignation that were recurrent across community dialogue. In the collective consciousness of Tumblr, media producers have become a manipulative 'other' (Robinson, 2007: 104), a scheming, almost Machiavellian presence. In connection to boyd and Marwick's 'imagined audiences', then, we have here evidence of the creation of 'imagined producers', that is, a mental conceptualisation of media authorities that online users have adopted to account for an otherwise 'absent' cultural presence. Investigation of the Tumblr community showed a definite dichotomy emerging between audiences and productive powers - a divisive relationship I explore in greater detail in the next findings chapter. Overall, it was apparent that the online audiences consideration of which economic or political factors might have influence over media production was integral in apprehending the ideological 'hold' producers had over film texts. Like with referential reception, mediated strategies illuminated the socio-political contexts of movie's production, making this receptive mode crucial to the cultivation of critical audience responses on film culture.

#### **6.4 Discursive Reception**

The 'discursive' mode of reception was by far the most prominent receptive mode evident on Tumblr, making up 69% of extant material and being evidenced in communication by 22 of the 24 interview participants. Receptive work associated with this category concerned itself with identifying and challenging the ideological makeup of film texts. Forms of discursive reception would position social, cultural and political contexts as primary resources for interpretation. This means that the audience does not show much reliance on textual 'cues' as other receptive modes, instead using a confluence of extratextual sources (such as lived experience, theoretical knowledge, public and political discourse) to support their reading of a text. This detachment from the film text means less 'slippages' between fiction and reality for audience members, with identity-work connected to these receptive practices being oriented more towards forms of civic participation than personal gratification. This mode of reading can reasonably be considered an 'end result' of the commutative interpretative strategies evidenced in the previous modes, with the audience making the critical leap from initial 'comprehension' of ideological content to the explicit positioning of themselves in 'resistance' to these messages. Similar to Hall's 'oppositional readings' (1980), the discursive

mode represents an interpretative response that seeks to interrogate and/or challenge the ideological messaging of mass media content:

Avenge natasha romanoff's characterisation 2K15

enjoy characters and movies for what they are and stop thinking so much into it 2k15

Be critical of the media you consume and protect the few female characters in mainstream media 2k15. Allow people to express their distaste for and disappointment in the media they consume 2k15

(on *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, 2015)

It was surmised that discursive readings compounded on divisions between producers and audiences evident in the last receptive mode, as audiences operating in this mode would often reflect on the ‘moral ambiguities’ of media powers. These readings have a palpable anger to them; despite this mode of reception necessitating a critical distance to the media text, it was noted that Tumblr users would produce responses with similar intensity as those evidenced in transparent readings. Rather than these emotional responses being prompted by an ‘engulfment’ in the media text, however, I would instead posit that these responses were motivated by increasing tensions over ontological authority and media control. Though transparent and discursive readings operate on opposing sides of a textual/contextual spectrum, both nonetheless produce heightened responses to media content, each arising from individuals negotiation with (or acquisition to) textual determinacy. Because of their emotional nature, discursive responses to media content were often tagged by Tumblr users as ‘rants’, a term I have (likewise) chosen to adopt for this study.

#### 6.4.1. Rants

Tumblr is littered with examples of user ‘rants’. The ‘rant’ is indicative of the Tumblr user’s ability to post long-form narratives, as well as trends of community interaction that tend towards ‘performative’ expression. It should be noted once again that the anonymity of Tumblr goes a long way in incentivising these forms of emotional self-expression, ensuring that the social repercussions of these interpretative ‘outbursts’ remain minimal. As Tumblr represents an anonymised space, interview participants revealed that they felt more capable of engaging in critical discussion (and disagreement) with other users than on other social media sites. Tumblr offers, therefore, a ‘safe’ environment for counter cultural discussion, interactions that Renninger (2015) suggests would otherwise be at risk of being ‘disrupted, ridiculed, dismissed, or ignored’ in users everyday life (Renninger, 2015:1514). It was observed that rants regarding film content would usually focus on terms of ‘representation’: who is being (perhaps overly) depicted on the big screen, and who is not:

There are people who complain about gender/race/sexuality being “the defining characteristic” of female characters, LGBT+ characters, and characters of color, but have no problem at all with the fifty billion straight white cis male characters whose defining characteristic is being a straight white cis male. It’s pretty messed up that non-

straight/white/cis/male characters are automatically accused of "forced diversity" or "pushing an agenda" but straight white cis male characters are just allowed to *be*

i had a moment today while watching a whiny shitlord complain about the injustice of new sci-fi media having more female leads, i suddenly felt the strangest sense of déjà vu. i couldn't pinpoint it at first but then out of nowhere, it fucking dawned on me



tumblr taught me so much about representation tho.... today i literally can't watch a film without thinking:  
"why is everyone so white"  
"why is everyone straight"  
"where are the women"

Through observation of the site and subsequent analysis of extant material it was determined that racial representation was a recurrent issue framed by discursive responses, with concerns over filmic depictions of gender and sexuality following close behind. The Tumblr community demonstrated a sophisticated attunement to intersectional relations of race, gender and sexuality, with audience readings clearly articulating how these social signifiers can work in mutually constitutive ways to enforce civic and material injustices. In the examples observed below, these Tumblr users produce discursive readings that criticise the lack of nuanced subject positions films make available for non-white audiences – particularly those audience members who identify in other 'non-normative' ways:

Why can't black girls have a happy teen movie for once? Something bad always happens whether it be depression, teen pregnancy, death, fighting, bullying, drug abuse, or heartbreak in the worst way. Teen black girl movies are always traumatizing. When are we gonna get a Clueless, Bring it On, Mean Girls, High School Musical, Wild Child type movie where we are the main character? This goes for other girls of color too.

Things I'm sick of:

- Asians being ignored in representation discussions or even worse, lumped in with whites as if we were essentially the same
- The utter lack of education on Asian directed hostility that has been a continued issue in the united states ever since we first started coming here.
- People treating all race issues as just Black vs White
- The assumption that since Asians have the stereotypes of being smart, docile, and nonthreatening, that we lack a struggle other minorities have
- The hypersexualization of Asian women and the complete desexualization of Asian men
- How almost all asian representation in media is accompanied with an accent, and rarely breaks from the stereotypes

In line with McCracken's study of Tumblr practices (2017), this study therefore found that Tumblr users would make public calls for 'meaningful diversity' in media content, iterating a seemingly universalized desire amongst the community for material that afforded POC<sup>14</sup> characters developed backstories, key roles in the progression of the narrative, and better exposure in the film's marketing. This call for reform also extended to the film industry itself, which was criticised by this study's interview participants as lacking in '*female directors, especially non-white directors*' (#7, female, age 25) and as being occupied primarily by '*old, white men*' (#5, female, age 23). It is possible to see in these responses how Tumblr's 'imagined producers' have started to take on shape within the classic mould of white male hegemony (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). Once again, the online audience's positioning of themselves in ideological contrast to productive powers was a consistent theme of audience reception occurring across the site community, a subject that ultimately 'directed' the course of users critical readings.

One of the most significant (and indeed, most *surprising*) findings of this reception study was the 'solidarity' expressed in the audiences discursive responses. Both the observation and the interview sample recruited for this study represented a diverse cross-section of online users, constituting a range of ages, gender identities, ethnicities and nationalities (Table 4). Regardless of the diversity of contextual influences these subjects brought to the receptive encounter, however, participants were united in challenging racial inequalities and heteronormative messaging in mainstream film. The significance of this finding can be explained in relation to the canon of early reception work referenced in this study's first literature review chapter, where it was determined that social, cultural and economic differences between audience members would result in contrasting readings of the same text. In this instance, however, discursive readings between users were found to be unanimous,

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<sup>14</sup> 'People of colour' – a term popularised in Internet usage to refer to non-Caucasian characters/subjects.

cohering across signifiers of race, gender and age. To offer an example: participant's #21 and #11 both came from differing ethnic backgrounds (Black African/White British), were different ages (20/26) and genders (female/male). Yet their responses to the recent Star Wars sequels both address similar concerns over 'inadequacies' of racial representation within the franchise:

*I like the originality of the Star Wars universe, the lightsaber fights and the recurring theme of choice and resistance against evil, I like how they gave significant roles to actors of colour in the sequels (it's actually seeing John Boyega on The Force Awakens' posters that made me interested in the Star Wars franchise). I dislike the fact that it's drenched in cultural appropriation (everything related to the Jedi as well as a lot of costumes and makeup are drawn from Asian cultures, especially in the original trilogy and the prequels, and yet there was no significant Asian characters in those movies), but despite adding important characters of colour to the new franchise, LucasFilm is constantly sidelining them (especially Finn, the black male lead) to focus only on the white characters. (#21, female, age 20)*

*See with Star Wars, especially like as a franchise, I'd definitely call myself a fan. Like, the last couple of films I thought were really good in different ways... it's difficult though, to say you're a fan of the recent ones, because there are issues with them... There are different kinds of controversies associated with them, you have particularly the quote/un-quote 'raceblind casting' and that kind of stuff, and some discussion of that has been really useful and really eye-opening, a lot of it has been people who know what they are talking about reacting negatively to industry execs and actors who don't...there does seem to be an issue with them using 'token' Black characters, token Asian characters, and not doing much with them, which is really disappointing. (#11, male, age 26)*

The cohesivity of receptive responses across diversities of age, race and the like are indicative, I believe, of the 'socializing potentials' of the online community, which enables its audiences to engage with content from within a globalised network, offering enhanced opportunities to apprehend and interact with alternative cultural perspectives. It was found that interview participants were conscious of the benefits of being able to encounter different cultural perspectives online, with participant #7 suggesting that it was the intervention of users of other ethno-cultural backgrounds that helped refine her critical relationship to film:

*Now that people have started pointing it out I haven't realised how saturated film was in racist stereotypes, I've just taken it as, that's how it is, and now I'm starting to notice little things [pointing left and right] because people [on Tumblr] have pointed things out, where films are just blatantly...either ignoring the culture of the country that it's based in and the people who are playing the actors, or how the time period would affect who would be present in that place at that time, you know, and how those people are represented. I think personally having grown up in a culture where whiteness is taken as 'normal' - then all of a sudden it being pointed out that all this stuff is going on - because, as I say, it just goes straight over my head because I've grown up with it, so it's been engrained in me to just accept that as normal...and now over the last couple of years this movement has started to gain momentum online and*

*it's become very apparent [laughs] that we are terrible at making films with different races in it. (#7, female, age 25)*

Utilising other perspectives is not uncommon in interpretative work – this is essentially the foundation of Stanley Fish's work on 'interpretative communities', which considers how social groups can develop strategies for reading texts that cohere in their understanding of textual construction (Fish, 1976:219). I would suggest that Tumblr's online community can itself represent an interpretative community, albeit a much broader, multinational community, wherein users shared reading strategies naturally prioritise diversities in representation. Though this study does not intend to fall back on deterministic views of the audience's relation to media, I do believe that Tumblr's platform affordances have had a hand in moulding their critical perspectives. As detailed in the previous findings chapter, Tumblr usage is clearly defined by ambient awareness of the social network as an 'expositive' space. It is easy to see how in this environment personal experience can become intertwined in public discourse, with participant #22 clarifying how online communication made a clear distinction between personal viewing habits and 'public' response:

*Your individual media-consumption choices are pretty irrelevant to the big picture in my opinion, like I watch "problematic" movies and shows all the time (or I wouldn't have anything to watch)—we all do. But your public self and what you put out into the world in terms of supporting media, that's where I'm very judgemental about what people choose to do. (#22, female, age 22)*

As emphasised in greater depth in the next findings chapter, this aligns with latent implications amongst millennial users of online usage as a form of civic engagement. Based on these observations, I argue that Tumblr user's discursive readings of films are part of a wider phenomenological trend amongst online denizens of acknowledging individual responsibilities for resisting ideological content. There is a developing contradiction in community discourse, then, between users who stress that representation in film should be the civic responsibility of media producers, and others who maintain that fundamental changes in the nature of the film industry will only come about if there is increased social demand. This essentially shifts the onus of responsibility onto the shoulders of the audience and has the consequences of 'segregating' what would otherwise be a unified interpretative community. It was indicated by Tumblr users that community attitudes towards those who perpetuate ideological messages (whether through lack of understanding or ignorance of wider social issues) was serving to drive a 'moral' wedge between online audience members. The notion of online interpretation as a practice linked to 'morality' was picked up upon both in observation and in conversation with interview participants:

When people who don't like a character can't be content with just not liking them, they have to prove they're morally right in that dislike. Like... It's not that serious kids. Not every opinion you hold needs to be about Justice and Moral Righteousness. It's ok to just... Not like some characters. You don't actually need to justify it.

*[It's] like if you're not being as critical as you can be you're not being a good person, almost, because you're not being as left-wing or moral as you possibly can be, and that's not always the way that life is. (#24, female, age 18)*

Engagement with users and observation of site hinted at an emergent culture of ‘audience policing’ within the Tumblr community. Whilst online receptive practices should benefit from consolidation of diverse perspectives, this very amalgamation is also stymying divergent viewpoints in favour of ‘ideologically approved’ reading strategies, namely, responses that can critique or challenge productive powers. Participant #6 voiced concerns, therefore, that the community is developing expectations of becoming a ‘hive-mind’, and that interpretative activity on the site is being stifled by a lack of understanding for subjective expression:

*There are so many people on Tumblr and people are going to have different opinions and that's fine, but people don't seem to find that acceptable. They think oh, cos this site is all supposed to be a big family we should all agree on something? That's just weird! There's no online 'hive', there's no shared brain waves, we're all separate people with separate experiences and different subjectivities about how we view ourselves...it just feels generalizing, it feels like what generalizing usually does, it makes you have expectations of people and when they don't fit them you get angry for some reason. Which I find very damaging, personally. (#6, female, age 22)*

These moralising dimensions of online reception, whilst showing an admirable attention to issues of social justice, identity politics and civic participation, nonetheless runs the risk of reproducing the very hegemonies they are seeking to resist.

### ***Conclusion***

Much has been made in audience studies of the social aspects of meaning-making, in particular the ways in which meaning can be ‘positioned’ through interactions within interpretative communities (Livingstone, 2013). The opportunities offered to audiences in the new media landscape work to redefine viewers relationship to film texts, potentially establishing a new multicultural form of interpretation that extends beyond the localised communities that have previously defined audience response. Ultimately, the findings presented here showed that whilst frameworks of meaning-making were not dissimilar from participant's ‘real world’ receptive processes, the act of ‘articulating’ these interpretations were uniquely shaped by contexts of online usage. Online reception is uniquely distinguished by its position as a ‘communal’ process, with online activity forming contexts in which interpretation is reconfigured as a much more ambient and self-aware process than traditional audience work. I would characterize Tumblr’s audience character as being distinctly ‘political’ in its employment, in that frameworks for interpretation are specifically oriented towards addressing diversity in media representation and the ‘decentering’ of whiteness within mainstream cinema. In the next chapter I articulate how these ‘politicized’ community processes enable audiences to insinuate themselves in new, more productive dynamics of meaning-making, effectively utilising their ‘communal power’ to challenge and disrupt structures of media authority.



## 7. The Audience Strikes Back: Perception, Performance and Participative Activity

*“Social media - it's just the market's answer to a generation that demanded to perform ... They say it's like the "me" generation. It's not. The arrogance is taught, or it was cultivated. It's self-conscious. That's what it is. It's conscious of self.” - Bo Burnham*

This final finding chapter aims to consolidate prior thematic work on reception practices and routine social media consumption within a broader conversation about the role of digital media in social and cultural life. In doing so, this analysis aims to address critical questions regarding the ‘active’ nature of online audiencehood and the audiences relations to media power. These are questions, it is argued, that must move to the forefront of contemporary audience research, so that the digital audiences participative and civic abilities are appropriately contextualised with a broader interrogation of new media’s structural and ideological authorities (Bird, 2011; Livingstone, 2013). In doing so, this chapters details findings relating to this study’s third research question, which is concerned with developing an overview of online audiencehood that emerges from participant's own reflections on their online activity. This thesis has emphasised throughout the necessity of offering accounts by *actual audiences*, in order that I might gain an embedded perspective on the relationship between routine use, structures of meaning-making, and socio-cultural contexts. The reflexive account set out in this chapter should elaborate on how practices of online audiencehood have taken on meaning as a ‘communal’ activity for millennial users, expanding on previous work on socializing practices to expand on the contributory role these young adult users see themselves occupying in the current media ecology. Once again, thematic analysis of data collected from ethnographic observation and interview produced several representative themes which I believe uniquely characterise the nature of online audiencehood amongst Tumblr users. These include: ‘Audiencehood as Contribution’, ‘Discursive Generational Identity’, and ‘Outlaw Audiencing’. Working alongside prior theoretical frameworks on audience participation and public practice, these thematic categories offer significant entry-points from which to evaluate the social, cultural and political impact of online audiencehood.

### 7.2 Audiencehood as Contribution

As addressed in this study’s literature review chapters, recent audience studies have stressed the need for research that represents a diversity of audience work, that is, not only work regarding the theoretical dimensions of audience practice, but research that can account for the habitual, everyday encounters between audiences and media texts, acknowledging that this represents an ever-more varied mix of digital tech, texts, practices and platforms. Scholars such as Klaus Bruhn Jensen (1987) and Pertti Alasuutari (1999) have stressed the importance of seeking out the perspectives of audience members themselves, that researchers might then elicit a ‘rounded account of the ways people’s utterances, expressions and self-presentations are shaped and altered by the multiple social contexts they have to navigate in the course of their daily lives’ (Alasuutari, 1999:9). An understanding of online audiencehood should account, therefore, for the participant’s consciousness of their own position as ‘audience’, in order to determine how they then position themselves within spectrums of media consumption and production. This raises significant questions regarding audience self-awareness: Do social media users tend to think of themselves as audiences when online?

What, for them, typically defines the audience experience? And how might we understand the 'self as audience' in the context of these participants online reception work? These questions form the basis for this thematic analysis, offering initial perspectives on the audience's perception of themselves as 'active collaborators' in the cultural life of media content.

In order to clarify users' perspectives on audiencehood, interview participants were questioned about the circumstances in which they tended to think of themselves as audiences, and whether this typically included their social media use. Discussion showed that 75% of young adult participants *did* usually regard themselves as audiences when interacting on social media. This was somewhat surprising, as I had long been approaching this study with the mind that online audiencehood was a stance familiar to media researchers, but one that I might have to justify to study participants, who might be more inclined to think of themselves as 'users' than 'audiences'. Perhaps showing the biases of my own thinking, it was ultimately determined that participant's reasons for considering themselves audiences when online were not dissimilar from my own reasoning for undertaking this study - they had already made the association with audiencehood given the prominent role that mediatisation had come to play in their day-to-day lives. For 18 out of 24 respondents, attitudes toward online usage as a form of audience engagement were intrinsically tied to their consciousness of the ubiquity of contemporary media engagement. Participant #19, for instance, expressed how she understood audiencehood to be an experience that extended across varying aspects of her daily life:

*I consider myself as being an audience when I watch TV, go to cinema, go to a concert, even when I'm at school, but as well when I login on social apps or watch a video on YouTube. I think we are part of an audience every time we receive information from any mass media. (#19, female, age 27)*

This participant articulation of audiencehood as a continuous experience was prompted by her awareness of the range of media 'events' available to her in the course of her daily life. It was understood, therefore, that users held an intuitive understanding of modern media engagement as a 'manifold' practice, that is, a kaleidoscopic process of consumption involving multiple intersections with an (ever-increasing) range of mediatory options (Schröder, 2011:6). Given the age range of the participants interviewed (18-28 years), it is perhaps unsurprising to find that a high percentage of this study's interview participants might be acclimated to media 'ubiquity', as their ages place them firmly within the demographic of the 'digital native', that cohort of young adults whose formative development has progressed mostly in pace with the digital boom of the 2000's (Prensky, 2001; McKeever, Rivera, Withers and Woo, 2020). This age demographic is seen as being accustomed to notions of 'media persistence', with Hampton and Wellman (2018) emphasising how this generation have grown up subject to constant discourses on media universality, surveillance and 'pervasive contact' (Hampton and Wellman, 2018). As explored in the next thematic section, pervasive relations to digital media have intrinsically informed Tumblr users articulation of their 'generational identity', affording a set of conceptual codes through which Internet users could forge new associations and develop new interpretative communities. Given this cohorts intrinsic awareness of media ubiquity, then, it became necessary to interrogate the conditions in which users *did not* qualify themselves as audiences, in order to identify the 'limits' of users media engagement.

When interacting with the sample of Tumblr users who did not consider themselves as audiences, it became clear that their understanding of audiencehood did not discount their ability to operate as an audience online, but rather acknowledged that audiencehood only seemed ‘applicable’ under certain social and/or cognitive contexts. There was an interesting association in these users accounts with 'attention', for instance, and how it might signal to the parameters of the audience experience. This selection of participants acknowledged that for them, audiencehood was a conditional experience that could be ‘activated’ during the course of their everyday media engagements. In this respect, audiencehood was best characterised as a state of ‘attentiveness’ which they could commute in and out of according to the situation:

*As soon as I'm interested enough in something to watch it or listen to it, I consider myself as being part of an audience. So, when I'm online, I consider myself an audience member whenever I talk about the movies and TV shows I like. (#21, female, age 20)*

Participant #21's comment suggests that ‘interest’ and ‘attention’ were integral conditions of audience engagement – this aligns with traditional understandings of audience engagement as constituting a ‘focused’ (perhaps even ‘absorbed’) relation to media content (Staiger, 2005; Abercrombie and Longhurt, 1998). It was found that themes of ‘attentiveness’ were also picked up by users reflecting on their routine use of social media. What emerged from this discussion was notions of social media usage as a form of ‘conscientious’ audience participation. Participant #7, for example, made a compelling comment about how she considered interaction on social media as helping ‘direct’ audience attention:

*Well, if you are talking about something [online] you are being active in making it known, so regardless of whether you're saying that something is good or bad, you are still 'promoting' whatever it is you're talking about, so therefore you are being active in talking about it and getting it, you know, trending or whatever. (#7, female, age 25)*

This reflection of social media use as ‘promotive’ seems to tie into earlier themes identified regarding social networking being an intrinsically ‘performative’ activity. It was interesting to note that users seemed to readily accept their new ‘promotional’ role in media circulation, with connections between social media use and attentiveness being reflected across this study’s interview sample, including across the accounts of participants of differing ages, genders and races. Though this therefore signals towards a core belief of this study’s user sample, it did raise concerns over the audiences awareness of their own labour practices. It therefore became necessary to turn the attention of this investigation back to an age-old question of audience research: what users could detail about conditions of ‘active audiencehood’, and how this manifested in the course of their everyday online activities.

The ‘active audience’, as discussed at length in Chapter Two, is a predominant theory in audience research which argues that mass media audiences do not receive information ‘passively’, but will instead produce varying interpretations of content, usually by basing these readings on their own life experiences as interpretative ‘guides’ (Livingstone, 1991:19). Though the data provided thus far should speak to the ‘active’ nature of online audiencehood, with users evidencing sophisticated patterns of meaning-making and content creation, it was nonetheless important that this study was able to challenge audience members own perceptions of participation, which (as we have also seen) may be taking the participatory qualities of social media as a ‘given’ element of their own social engagement. In the course

of questioning, all the interview participants were asked what they thought an ‘active audience’ is or ‘should be’. This was key to determining any prior theoretical awareness of the subject of research, which might reveal biases which could influence the participants responses to the subject material. Of the sample interviewed, only participants #11 and #13, both of whom were doctoral researchers working in fields adjacent to myself (gaming and film studies), evidenced any prior theoretical awareness of the roots of the active audience. The other participants responses were more intuitive and mainly revolved around their understanding of audience activeness as an ‘augmentative’ process. Overwhelmingly, 92% of the responses to questions about active audiencehood revolved around themes of ‘sharing’ and similar collaborative behaviours:

*[An active audience is] an audience who not only sit down and watch but who cares about sharing with others what they see. (#18, male, age 28)*

*I think an ‘active audience’ is an audience who doesn’t only watch films, but who also talks and generate content about it on the internet, and who is very vocal about what they want and don’t want in movies. (#22, female, age 22)*

*I feel that an active audience is one that doesn’t just watch a movie and forget about it, but rather watches a movie and then continues to engage with it beyond the theatre by discussing and dissecting it or creating fan content. (#17, female, age 24)*

These reflections shed light on how these subjects envisioned active audiencehood as a ‘contributory’ role: their understanding centred on actions which would position the viewer within a broader discursive community wherein they could interrogate and expand upon the text, thus extending the receptive (and productive) lifecycle of the text far beyond the initial media encounter. It was interesting to note how naturally the participants’ definitions of active audiencehood fell in line with Brun’s model of ‘produsage’: as addressed in earlier chapters, produsage is a practice of content creation which functions around ‘the collaborative and continuous building of existing content in pursuit of further improvement’ (Bruns, 2006:2). This form of augmentative audience activity also has its associations with fan work – as indicated in this study’s literature review, fans are consumers whose audience activity is considered to go ‘above and beyond’ norms of media engagement (Sullivan, 2013:193). The fan has typically been considered a marginalised audience position, so it is noteworthy that Tumblr users are setting parameters for audience activity that align with traditionally ‘fannish’ practices (Sandvoss, 2005; Jenkins, 2012; Sullivan, 2020). This association between active audiencehood and fan practices was complicated, however, by users unwillingness to accept their proposed ‘fan’ status. As reported in Chapter Five, only three of this study’s interview participants chose to identify themselves as ‘fans’ or belonging to fandom; the rest, whilst broadly acknowledging that they considered themselves fans of film as ‘a medium on the whole’ (#1, male, age 21), were reluctant to designate themselves as fans, mainly due to their prior experiences with ‘aggressive’ fan behaviour:

*I’m a fan of film but I’m not in fandom, if that’s what you mean...I’m not obsessive to the point that some on Tumblr are, like, I enjoy (films), but not to the extent that I’m gonna go off at someone on the internet about what I think. (#3, male, age 22)*

*Participating in fandom is something I’m very used to...But this situation is a bit different...with Tumblr, I’ve maintained a level of disconnect, which is probably*

*indicative of me growing up and not only of my life becoming more busy, but also of my realisation that my enjoyment of certain things is not and should not be affected by the opinions of strangers... I'm well aware people are harassed and trolled and bullied. It's just something I've shielded myself against pretty well so far. The online community can be vitriolic and aggressive and unwilling to engage in any meaningful discourse. (#16, female, age 27)*

I would maintain that Tumblr's reputation as a 'seat' for fandom makes it much more likely that these users have experienced some of the 'backlash' of fan behaviour first-hand, in particular those 'toxic' traits most associated with online harassment, bullying and 'trolling' (Hills, 2018b). Though this study does not have the scope to pursue a further study of fan behaviour on Tumblr, the information gathered so far does suggest a complicated relationship between Tumblr use and fan practice; though from my own perspective it seems apparent that Tumblr usage takes on a distinctly 'fannish' character, I must defer to the perspectives of the audience themselves, who would prefer to have their augmentative activities associated instead with forms of social 'attention' and 'participation'.

To further explore these contradictions in perception, study participants were directly asked whether they considered themselves to be active audience members, given the definitions they had provided previously. The responses showed some initial hesitation (Was I talking online or offline? Did I mean in relation to films specifically, or media as a whole?), but out of the 24 participants interviewed for this study, only 3 declared themselves as being 'inactive'. It should be noted, however, that these participants' reasons for declaring themselves as 'inactive' *also* fell under parameters of contribution - these users simply did not consider their engagement with media to be invested enough to 'qualify' as active audiencehood:

*I think active audience is when you bring more than just film photos and GIFs to your followers. You also give them something to think about or something really important and valuable to you. I do not consider myself an active audience member because I don't give a strong opinion or anything. Of course, I show them films I like and I think are valuable, but that's all. (#14, female, age 18)*

*An [active audience is an] audience that is active in its interactions with the film industry, in terms of keeping track of reviews, awards, certain high-profile actors/actresses. They probably devote more time and energy into movies. I don't consider myself an active audience member. I am more of a passive member, if such a thing exists. (#15, male, age 24)*

*I definitely dedicate and invest a lot more of my time in these movies and franchises than the average Joe, but I think to be defined as an active audience member, you definitely need to be actively contributing something to "fandom". (#23, female, age 23)*

This demonstrates how conditions of participation are established amongst the online community, with users expressly identifying that their online activities did not 'offer' anything to the wider audience community. It is interesting to note, then, that the audience awareness of their labour practices was not positioned in relation to media producers, but rather in relation to *other online users*. Though we have seen evidence in earlier

observational material that the Tumblr community is more than willingly to engage in critique of media powers, it is telling that interview participants did not engage as directly with their own position in industrial processes – namely, how their contributory activities might serve the interests of media producers, who will promote ‘magnanimous’ relationships with audiences in order to elicit free promotion and circulation of their content (Bird, 2011:507). Instead, a familiar dynamic was observed wherein audience attention was directed more towards addressing ‘personal responsibilities’ for producing (or engaging in) online discourse. In this way, participant #20 stated that she believed active audiencehood was a ‘choice’ taken up by individuals who wanted to do more than simply ‘consume’ the media text:

*I think its people that think about a movie outside of actually sitting and watching it. Like some people just go to a movie and then watch it and go “that was good” or “that was bad” and then move on with their lives, that to me is the “general audience” and not “active audience”. Active audience to me is the people that talk about the movie beforehand and afterwards, engaging with marketing and adding to the conversation. For us “active” audience members, the 2 hours you spend watching the movie is only a small percentage of the time you spend engaging with it. I’m an audience member when I watch trailers and TV spots, when I read articles and interviews, when I talk to other people about it and make my own discussion, fanart, etc. (#20, age 21, female)*

Repeated iterations of active participation as ‘personal responsibility’ seems to indicate that the online audience are developing their own dichotomies between ‘active’ and ‘passive’ engagement, setting boundaries between those who ‘qualify’ as active participants in media circulation, and those who would simply ‘spectate’. Though the online userbase ultimately find cohesion in their communal discourses, these attitudes are concerning as they suggest that online audiences might be ‘gatekeeping’ forms of cultural participation. It was found that users didn’t show much acknowledgement of the fact that online engagement is not a ‘given’ for every audience member, and that some viewers might be alienated by their lack of technical ability (which, contrary to popular belief, is not ‘inherent’ amongst younger users (Wolstencroft and Zhou, 2020). There has been a long history of audience productivity existing well before the advent of the Internet, so this delineation around online audience engagement does seem short-sighted on the audience’s behalf. Though this audience cohort is undoubtedly ‘self-conscious’ in nature, then, the sample engaged here demonstrate an otherwise ‘insular’ understanding of audience activeness, which (given earlier reports on the ‘insular’ nature of Tumblr communication) can exacerbate concerns over ‘exclusivities’ of online communication.

This analysis shows how the Tumblr community have built up an ‘exclusionary language’ around audience participation, a language which I argue actually betrays some of the tensions and anxieties young adult audiences face in relation to their social and civic contributions. The next thematic section will explore how ‘generation’ has emerged as a predominant discursive framework amongst the Tumblr community, detailing how users play with the contextual effusion of memic content to alternately ‘ridicule’ and ‘enact’ perceptions of millennial identity. This work should not only provide further context for Tumblr’s visual communicative trends noted in previous chapters, but it should also reiterate how users have developed ‘communal reading strategies’ that foreground tensions with cultural authorities.

## 7.2 ‘I, A Cold and Callous Millennial’: Performing Generational Identity

This thematic section details a popular form of ‘identity play’ observed amongst the Tumblr community, which is the discursive performance of generation. Like Butler’s (1993) postmodern articulation on gender performance, it was found that Tumblr users discursive treatment of generational narratives worked to both ‘enact’ and ‘produce’ the form of generation itself (Butler, 1993:13). This discussion of generational discourses should reflect many of the themes addressed throughout this thesis so far, including reflections on media manipulation, ambivalence, nostalgia and commodification. This analysis is relevant to a study of online audiencehood as it not only sheds light on the ways that ‘shared experiences’ structure communal patterns of meaning-making, but it can also set contexts for forms of generational media use, offering necessary groundwork for audience studies to come.

Long-term observation of Tumblr showed that a considerable portion of site communication hinges around the subject of generation groups and how they are portrayed within mainstream media. Specifically, discussion on what it means to be a ‘millennial’ (also increasingly now a ‘Zoomer’ - a member of Gen Z born after 1997) (Figure 4) is woven into the fabric of community interaction. As touched on in the last chapter, narratives of ‘growing up online’ have proved popular amongst the Tumblr community as these biographical narratives can ‘cohesively link individuals together through their recognition of a set of shared, repeated, and meaningful references’, thus enabling Tumblr’s otherwise diverse userbase the opportunity to unite under a ‘common identity’ (Fonseca, Lukosch and Brazier, 2018). Time in observation of Tumblr showed that users would often come together to trade experiences of formative events in their lives, swap personal perspectives on global events, and submit a host of memes and other humorous content intended to ridicule the ‘defining legacies’ of the digital generation:

**Figure 19: Narratives of ‘growing up online’**

I can’t believe I actually lived though the full transition from VHS to DVD. Like there are people alive who have never seen a VHS tape....I remember when we were still tryna figure out how the fuck they got a full movie onto a cd.



<sup>15</sup> The intertextual contexts of the GIF come into play in this example: The GIF used derives from Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* series, wherein an immortal character recalls their part in an epic war. Deeper symbolic (and humorous) meaning is found through the reader's intertextual awareness, when it becomes clear that this user is comparing the OP's recollection to that of a war testimonial.

Growing up in the 90s/00s was like levelling up and unlocking new and better forms of technology and entertainment as you got older

a 90's kid? don't you mean sad adult?

70,000 people have reblogged this but no one is trying to defend themselves

There is nothing to defend

#i read a post once that described 90s kids as the generation of nostalgia #because so much technological advancement happened in such a rapid timeframe when we were growing up #that we can clearly remember having technologies that are now obsolete #like going from a corded hugeass phone to a small computer in your pocket just within our formative years is a major thing #and it sparks a nostalgia for our seemly 'simpler' childhoods #because so much rapid development makes it seem like it was a lot longer ago than it actually was

These biographical narratives, as determined in Chapter Six of this thesis, afford a common language, often unique to online users, that allows them to compare and contrast experiences of growing up at pace with the 'digital boom' of the late 90's/early 00's. In terms of reception, this devises a system of codes and symbols (commonly known a discursive 'repertoire') that audiences can draw on to engage in collaborative meaning-making. Though communities in online spaces are nebulous, representing a great diversity of social and cultural contexts, the online audience is still able to find 'cohesion' in meaning through repetition and elaboration of discursive generational frameworks. It is my belief that online communities have been central to the 'formalization' of generational identity in the current day, as online users have been able to successfully track continuities in life experience across an otherwise vast, multinational web of subjects.

The inherence of 'generational performance' to Tumblr users communicative practices cannot be understated. Thematic analysis of users extant artifacts revealed that generational discourses amongst millennial users tended towards topics of media literacy, nostalgia and apathy - subjects, it should be noted, that directly reflect current cultural discourses relating to the millennial generation (Baker Rosa and Hastings, 2018:922). As expressed in Chapter Three of this thesis, this age cohort has been subject to a host of negative social stereotypes – from the timidity of the 'millennial snowflake', to the excesses of the 'social justice warrior' (SJW), each depiction in the media seems to compound on conceptions of millennial youth as tech mad, entitled, superficial subjects (Gani, 2016). Rather than combating these stereotypes head on, it was observed that Tumblr users instead fell back on familiar practices of ironic commentary, choosing instead to produce content that 'leaned into' stereotypical depictions of millennial identity:



I, a cold and callous millennial, have no interest in face to face conversations, because i am constantly jacked into the information supersoupway, i ride the pale lightning, my body is a conduit for an unending stream of html

social media is destroying our planet! no one talks to each other. people's mouths are shrinking and vanishing. yesterday I sent a text message and a nearby tree fell over and instantly died. a sinkhole opened up because of the time we wasted on youtube

Posts such as these represent an 'objectification of a process of representation' (Vannini and Williams, 2009:3), whereby users can play with the contextual slipperiness of the web to subversively ridicule the impressions being made of them by mainstream media. It was found during the course of online observations that Tumblr users had produced a strain of generational discourse that *intentionally* played with notions of millennial 'superficiality' and 'commodification', a trend that (once again) relayed users 'ambient' understanding of their own marketisation:

i love when ur lying on ur side and a little tear rolls out for no reason its so cinematic and on brand

my mom: you don't need to wear that much makeup we are only going to the grocery store no one is looking at u

me: well if you've heard of Foucault's concept of the Panopticon u would realize that as citizens of a capitalist western society we are all surveilled and constantly viewed and judged 24/7 and even when we are not in a public place, privately we subconsciously monitor our own selves, our appearances, our social interactions, we discipline ourselves and conform this is how the modern day surveillance state works someone is always watching or else u are always constantly painfully aware of ur own self. also can u buy me \$50 foundation

\*deletes post after 1 minute\* limited edition

These posts are significant in framing how discursive identities amongst the Tumblr userbase frame the contemporary self as being both 'performative' and 'consumable'. At the heart of these ironic discourses is a critical theme that I've tried to maintain and build upon throughout this thesis: that young adults have a reflexive understanding of themselves as 'consumers', as subjects immersed in an increasingly performative, public-facing society, and that this self-consciousness of living as a 'publicised self' finds particular form in their online

communications. Though seemingly superficial, these user posts nevertheless represent acute tensions between entrenched contextual meanings and cultural critique. Prior work on discursive performances have illustrated how ‘parody’ often works to question the ‘naturalness’ of identity claims (Butler, 1990:188). Irony, in itself, is a form of subversive expression which signals towards implicit ‘non-acceptance of reality’ – in the words of Safina et al (2020): ‘irony [deprives a] situation of the status of reality, legality and seriousness with its explicit (demonstrated) acceptance and approval...now a person treats seriously neither [the situation] nor the emotions it causes in oneself’ (Safina, Gaynullina and Cherepanova, 2020). Though seemingly acerbic, Tumblr users ironic communication actually betrays deeper emotional anxieties over the state of the world and their place in it, at the same time that they work to subversively ridicule those logics that would dictate this reality. This form of ‘apathetic’ humour is indicative of what Bruenig (2017) terms ‘millennial surrealism’: ‘millennial surrealism is both mainstream and tangibly dark — it aims for wide swaths of young people, leaning into feelings of worry, failure and dread... Rather than trying to restore meaning and sense where they’ve gone missing, the style aims to play with the moods and emotions of an illegible world’ (Bruenig, 2017). Participant #5 actually framed this mode of ironic humour as a way to alleviate some of the anxieties of modern life:

*Ok so the world's gone to crap, right? [laughs] And it's not always acceptable to say that out loud, like, in everyday life, you can't be like 'lol we're all doomed' without people being worried, but online, I can say it, and I can mean it, but it can be taken as a joke, and it has that effect of letting me get something of my chest that I need to let out. You have to laugh or you'd cry, you know? (#5, female, age 23)*

There was a reiterated conception in these user dialogues of millennial subjects being ‘dismissed’ or otherwise ‘derided’ by cultural authorities. As represented in the previous chapter, the online audience’s attitudes towards cultural powers become increasingly strained, to the point that they can be seen to be generating ‘imagined producers’: mental conceptualisations of media producers as hegemonic presences, ambivalent and unwilling to engage in meaningful discussion with their audiences. Significantly, it was noted that community narratives on generation produced the *same* resistive discourses in relation to ‘older generations’, specifically those subjects known as ‘baby boomers’ (Pew Research Centre, 2019). In these examples, it is possible to see how generational differences were established around similar themes of ambivalence and apathy:

you kids these days with your rapidly growing concern for the state of the world and your knowledge of important issues at increasingly younger ages despite having been told your opinions don't matter by the adults who put you in this situation

ADULTS: record numbers of teens are depressed, we must find out why

TEENS: school is more stressful than ever, our parents screwed over the economy, the earth is on a path to total environmental destruction, and now we have to deal with actual fuckin nazis

ADULTS: it's the iphones isn't it

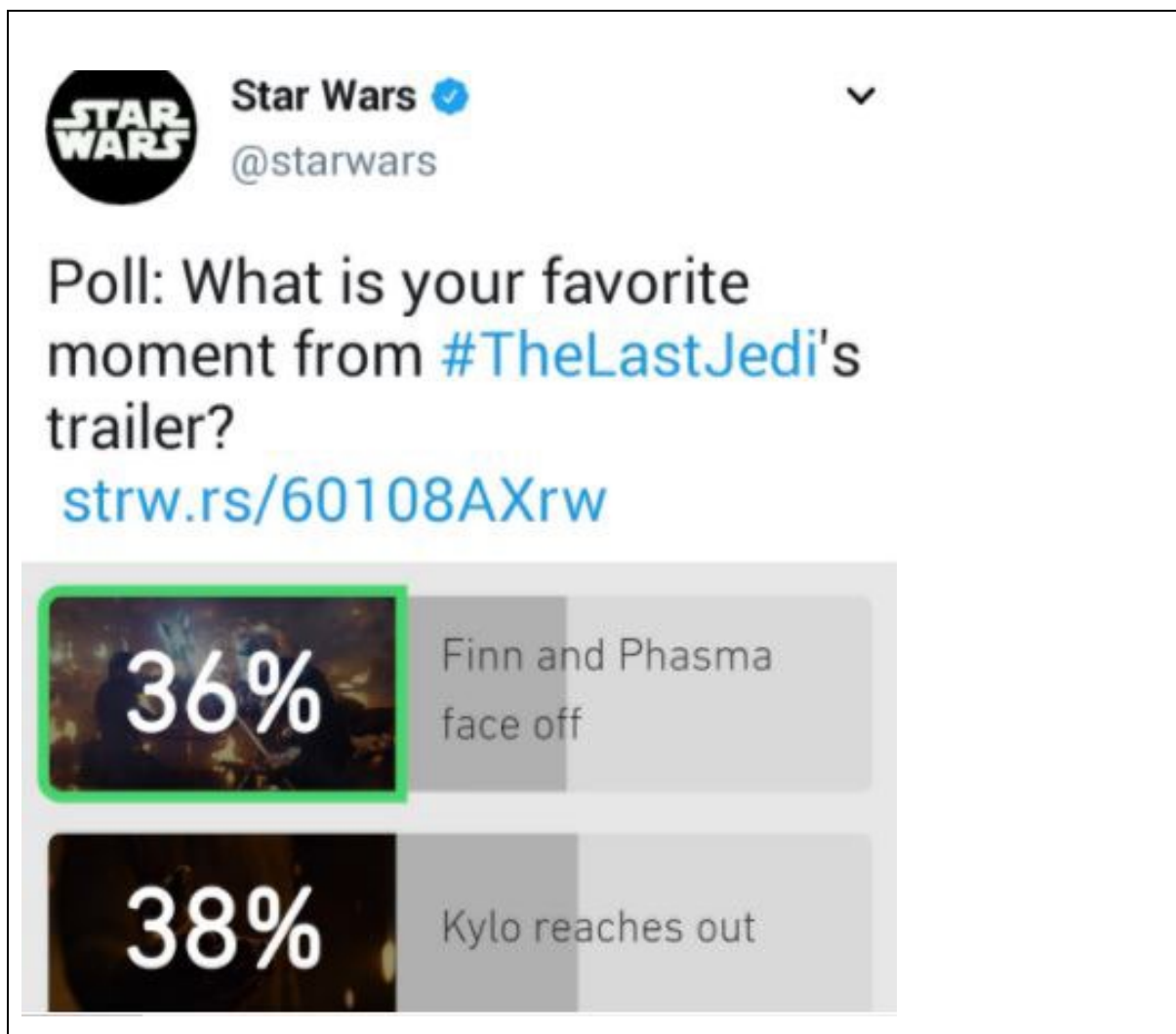
This presents as *yet another* conceptual dichotomy developed from within the Tumblr userbase – between audiences and producers, between ‘contributory’ and ‘passive’ users, and now between millennials and older generations. Tumblr engagement is, at its heart, a contradictory experience; a condition torn between ‘performance’ and ‘authenticity’, between ‘ambivalence’ and ‘action’. I further engage with these notions of contrary practice in the following thematic section. On the whole, what is clear from users discursive ‘performances’ of generation is how they impose a sense of ‘cohesion’ on an otherwise divergent media encounter. I would maintain that Tumblr users’ ‘performance’ of generation is a key stabilizing factor of the online community, as well as being indicative of a wider ‘phenomenising’ of generational identity that is playing out at both a cultural and a global level.

### 7.3 Outlaw Audiencing

We have seen examples throughout this thesis how online audiences alternate between conceptions of themselves as ‘active’ consumers and ‘marginalized’ social subjects. This alternating characterisation colours much of these users online activity. The impression cultivated of the userbase so far speaks to a mostly subversive community, who will work in granular ways to undermine or ‘objectify’ cultural powers. The extent to which these subversive activities actually have an impact on public life is still, however, unclear. As stressed in earlier work on the ‘participation paradigm’ (pg. 40), it is necessary that audience research is able to produce critical mediations on the role of ‘active audiencehood’ in shaping spheres of social, cultural and political life. This means asking ‘difficult’ questions about representations of audience activity in online contexts: do online audiences actually have new powers of authority over media producers, or are researchers simply mistaking the more subtle parameters of digital commodification for agency? (Bird, 2011). Can we truly consider online audiencehood a new way of participating in cultural life, or are online communities merely a ‘public sphere in appearance only’? (Halbermas, 1991:171). These questions represent, in Ien Ang’s terms, a way for audience researchers to ‘take seriously’ the power relations implicit in audience engagement (Ang, 1991:175). This final analytical section aims to address these issues by presenting a specific case analysis of online audience work observed in the run-up to the release of *Star Wars: The Last Jedi* (2017). As indicated in this study’s literature review and methodology chapters, films within the SW franchise proved especially popular amongst the Tumblr community; it is my hope that by producing a ‘situated’ analysis of this material, this study might be able to offer an embedded perspective on participative practices as they actually occurred. I wish to stress that the analysis that follows should not be considered an attempt to *negate* the participative practices of the online audience, as I still believe these processes represent a major sea-change in the nature of audience. Rather, this section is more an attempt to clarify how conditions of online audience participation inevitably differ from those of traditional audiencehood, with ‘barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement’ (Jenkins, 2011:3) being significantly lower in the digital sphere. Ultimately, the findings presented here conceptualised Tumblr user’s participative activities as operating on a ‘sliding scale’ of participation (Bury, 2019) from the ‘discursive performances’ evidenced in the previous section, to creative remaking (or ‘poaching’) of content, to more formally structured, collaborative ‘protest’ activities.

At the lesser end of Tumblr users participative practices are their ‘discursive performances’. As evidenced in the last section, these collaborate narratives are often subversive in nature, in that they deny the ‘naturalisation’ of heterogenous norms and beliefs. However, it should be noted that these subversive acts only result in minimal social resonances, effects that are mostly restricted to the boundaries of the Tumblr community itself, and thus unlikely to find traction outside of their use in developing an internalized ‘façade’ of resistance amongst Tumblr users. Though, again, these discursive activities do promote (vital) modes of collaboration between users, these ‘performative’ acts of resistance can sometimes have the contrary result of replicating the very ideological norms they initially set out to critique, as this first example will demonstrate. Set out below, this image shows the result of an official poll set by *Star Wars.com* gaging audience reactions to the trailer premiere of the franchise’s eight instalment, *The Last Jedi* (2017). In this instance, a Tumblr user had posted a screenshot of the poll results to their page, showing that a scene with the film’s unpopular antagonist, Kylo Ren, was currently leading the poll. Simply stating ‘you know what you have to do’, the user then posted a hyperlink to the poll page. When I checked back with this reblog thread only a day later, the OP (original poster) had already posted the update in the polling result:

**Figure 20: Poll results for *Star Wars: The Last Jedi* (2017)**

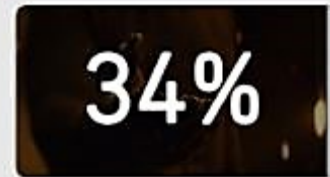


finnapologist:

you know what you have to do <http://www.starwars.com/news/poll-what-is-your-favorite-moment-in-the-star-wars-the-last-jedi-trailer?cmp=smc%7C1112565069>.



Finn and Phasma  
face off



Kylo reaches out



16

This example seems to draw on popular ‘hactivist’ sentimentalities of online denizens uniting to become disruptors or ‘aggravators’ of cultural power, a role articulated through Coleman’s iterations of online denizens as ‘hoaxers’, ‘whistleblowers’ and ‘spies’ (Coleman, 2014). It is concerning, however, that the audience were figuring this engagement as a ‘devious’ action when they were – essentially - undertaking an activity producer have *asked* them to fulfil. This represents one of the contradictions inherent in online engagement whereby the ‘simple equation of participation with empowerment [only] serves to reinforce the marketing strategies of corporate culture’ (Andrejevic, 2008:43). Though the online audiences are discursively ‘exhibiting’ their resistance to industrial powers, this practice becomes difficult to reconcile with effective action when the activities they engage in only further the industry’s causes. It is clear from this example that Tumblr users find value in alliances formed around their social interests (creating a new form of ‘Rebel Alliance’, if you will), however the ability for these collaborations to achieve more than ‘momentary’ acts of

<sup>16</sup> The GIF utilised here relates to a scene in *Episode II: Attack of the Clones* (2002) where the Sith lord Palpatine congrats his accomplice on the completion of a sinister mission, the implication being that Tumblr users have accomplished a similarly dastardly task.

resistance is troubling. In the next example, however, I expand on routine activities that are able to affect a more ‘visible’ threat to social powers, practices that seek to elevate the audience’s authority over the media text.

When working to thematise the civic activities for this findings chapter, I found that I kept coming back to Costello and Moore's characterisation of online fans as 'cultural outlaws' (pg. 38). The cultural outlaw is a take on Jenkin’s popular ‘poaching’ metaphor: these online audiences will collectively 'scavenge' the material of the dominant class to express their own forms of creative resistance to media powers (Costello and Moore, 2007:127). We’ve already seen such ‘scavenging’ at play in Tumblr users’ bricoleur activities: users will edit and remix existing material to perform individual interpretive work, thereafter adopting these ‘aesthetic artefacts’ into their own ‘identity exhibits’. These poaching practices can be adopted for wider aims than simply individualized expression, however. As detailed in the previous findings chapter, the Tumblr community has shown a particular affinity for challenging minority representation in cinema, a cause that has been socialized amongst the userbase, meaning it operates as a ‘frame of meaning’ that exists independent of the individual’s own social and cultural backgrounds. In observation of the site, it was noted that users would often collaborate to adapt, subvert and remake existing media content in alignment with these communal goals for representation. Allison McCracken observed that when media texts do not offer the Tumblr audience adequate minority representation, users will often ‘create it for themselves’ (McCracken, 2017:160). Similar findings were evident here, then, as community members were regularly observed producing queer readings of popular movies, creating fan art or edits that ‘race bend’ (i.e., ‘recast’) white characters with actors of colour (Figure 21), and actively encourage one another to seek out diverse representation in their consumption of cultural goods (e.g., literature, theatre, films, TV, music etc.) It has been argued that these creative forms of ‘content-related participation’ (Wasko and Mosco, 1992:7) are just as significant as a form of civic engagement as more structurally impactful forms of audience participation, because these creative activities allow young people opportunity to refine and revise their civic values (Carpentier in Nightingale, 2007:193). Throughout the course of investigation, it was made apparent that Tumblr users use popular culture as a means of tapping into modes of civic participation.

**Figure 21: ‘Racebending’ the character of Rey from *Star Wars: The Last Jedi* (2017)**



*Included with permission from creator: [deanpinterester.tumblr.com](https://deanpinterester.tumblr.com)*

Tulloch and Jenkins (1995) suggest that the creative ‘reworking’ of media texts as a form of audience participation is often spurned by an audiences’ awareness of their ‘lack of agency’ in the face of media authorities, who (as discussed previously) will rarely engage with audiences needs and desires outside of their fiscal potential (Tulloch and Jenkins, 1995:168). There emerges from this activity, then, another conceptual link between millennial ‘mythologies’ detailed in the last section and the discourses being bandied around Tumblr regarding the audience’s ‘dispossessed’ standing – both perpetuate an image of audiences as manipulated, displaced subjects, who must seek out subversive means to make their voices heard. Gray, Sandvoss and Harrington claim audiences are acutely conscious they have fewer resources with which to win this battle of cultural wills and will therefore adopt ‘guerrilla-style tactics’ to challenge media powers (Gray, Sandvoss and Harrington, 2007:1–2). Remixing is one such tactic: as detailed in Chapter Five, remixing is a mode of DIY content creation which works ‘through’ the mainstream media itself, reshaping existing textual fragments in the image of audience desires. During time in observation of Tumblr I noted the following ‘remixing’ example, which was produced by a community member in reaction to the official ‘poster reveal’ for *The Last Jedi*. It was noted that many Tumblr users were dismayed to find this poster had ‘minimised’ the franchise’s actors of colour in favour of the white male antagonist, a ‘wrong’ that one Tumblr users sought to correct:

**Figure 22: Example of resistive remixing**



fixed it for you!

In this post, the poster on the left represents the actual promotional material put out by Disney and Lucasfilm. The poster on the right, however, is a Tumblr user's creative remixing of the original content, which places the franchise's POC characters at 'centre-stage'. Lopez designates this type of ideological remixing a form of 'counter-media' and suggests that it represents a fledgling form of protest common to the Tumblr community (Lopez, 2011). If we draw on the history of this type of 'counter—media' as it has transpired in Cultural Studies, it is possible to interpret this form of remixing within a long history of subcultural communities using art, fashion and pop culture content to challenge dominant logics – not necessarily through the employment of explicit acts of activism, but more 'obliquely', through experimentation with forms of 'style' (Markham, 2017). I would maintain that as the Tumblr community has made it a particular 'mission' to orient themselves to issues of racial representation, and as this is representation that can often lie outside of their own self-interests, this is a form of resistive activity that can only be seen as 'political', being explicitly counter-hegemonic in its employment. In this instance, Tumblr users bricolage activities figure them as 'citizen-viewers', that is, individuals implicated in the creative 'rewriting' and circulation of public knowledge (Corner, 1991). Though still mostly 'bound' within the parameters of Tumblr use (though Tumblr's public content does, of course, offer opportunity for user content to be much more widely distributed), users subversive 'remixing' of existing (copyrighted!) content represents an initial 'stepping stone' towards more impactful acts of creative transgression.

The Tumblr community's potential as 'citizen-viewers' takes on more emphasis in the next participative example. In line with earlier findings, it was determined that Tumblr users would often draw on popular protest activities developed within online fan communities to



expand upon their practices of online activism. These tactics include: ‘honing their arguments through community discussions...educating themselves about every facet of their issue and relying on their trusted networks to provide a database of information’ (Lopez, 2011), as well as more ‘concrete’ tactics of digital resistance, including creation of online petitions, crowdfunding campaigns, vidding, doxing and DDoS strikes (Earl and Kimport, 2009; Brough and Shresthova, 2012). As emphasised in Chapter Five, Tumblr’s exhibitive communication model makes it an especially useful forum for pooling users ‘collective intelligences’ (Jenkins, 2002), whereby users could post collective ‘calls to action’ for other users to boycott (or otherwise disrupt) a film’s release. Below, we see an example of a classic Tumblr ‘call to action’ created in relation to *The Last Jedi*, which the initial poster objected to on the grounds of its ‘dismissal’ of major canonical elements of the original movies, as well as its supposed side-lining of POC characters:

hey so new game plan kids:

don’t support TLJ (*The Last Jedi*). dont buy tickets. dont buy the books. dont buy the magazines. dont watch the trailers.

If you want to torrent that shit, be my guest. but its clear that this movie was made to placate to the reylos, the neo nazis, and white supremacy in general. If you want to be a part of that? Go ahead and be my guest. But not me.

Significantly, these ‘calls to action’ demonstrate explicit attempts to influence audience revenue. Observation of users posts over time clearly showed the audiences consciousness of the economic influence they hold over media distribution. Efforts to ‘formalize’ discursive practices, then, tended to centre on ways users can better collaborate to exert their influence over media income:

They can’t predict us anymore, they can’t fool us or con us with bad, lazy, racist/sexist/homophobic/ableist/generally shitty products anymore, and they can’t have our money anymore unless they’re willing to *actually work for it*. And moreover, as consumers we’re now growing the power to destroy those products that are becoming actively harmful. If they don’t give us representation and quality deserving of that time and money, then we’ll starve their shitty products of oxygen and stay home and write fanfiction and make fanart and write meta and *create* representation and quality for ourselves. And they’re so fucking angry about it. They can’t monetise that. They can’t profit from our anger, they can’t make us suck it up and pay for shit we don’t want, and they can’t starve us of media until we’re forced to accept what they give us. Fans speaking up as consumers for the quality we deserve is not entitlement, it’s our right as the people you’re expecting to make money from. You get my cash when I get something worth paying for.

In each of these instances, these posts could have easily stayed at the at the level of ‘discursive performance’, providing a foil through which users could voice their frustrations and engage in cathartic communication with ‘like-minds’. However, it was observed shortly after these posts were published, that a link to a crowdsourcing website has begun to appear



Unlike the previous examples, this instance had notable consequences in ‘real-world’ productive dynamics, demonstrating how Tumblr users were able to leverage their collective intelligences – as well as their ability to ‘promote’ and rapidly circulate content – to challenge cultural powers. Though the community chose an (arguably) ‘trivial’ focus for their activist activities (Brough and Shresthova clarify that as fan activism will filter real-world issues through the lens of popular culture, these modes of activism as often trivialised by the popular press, despite being engaged in political goals of challenging hegemonies and provoking social change (Brough and Shresthova, 2012)), this example clearly shows how lines between ‘fan work’ and political activity have become increasingly blurred by contexts of online participatory engagement.

Outside the audience’s behaviours, something I find significant to highlight in this instance is the reactions of media producers, who offered heated (and in Rian Johnson’s case, mocking) responses to this audience-led campaign. This again emphasises divisions between producers and audiences – audiences obviously see themselves as cultural authorities, but producers are still inclined to view their participative contributions as ‘irritants’. Inabilities to establish a middle ground between these two perspectives is thus resulting in a swell of agitative media accounts that figure youth audiences as ‘entitled’ subjects. Barry Hertz declares the current audience environment as an ‘Age of Entitlement’, in which ‘audiences expect not only to be heard by those responsible for today’s culture, but also to be placated, soothed and obeyed’ (Hertz, 2017). This tracks back, as detailed in the literature review, to derogatory perspectives on fans as audiences that are acting in ‘excess’ and taking liberties with productive dynamics: ‘fans were seemingly entitled if they didn’t know their ‘proper’ place as an appreciative audience’ (Bennett and Booth, 2016:271). There is a sense then that audiences who are moving freely outside the borders of the text or genre are being treated as would anyone who barges into a space seen as ‘not belonging to them’ - as *transgressive*. These pathologies of audience entitlement are now clashing, however, with the ‘new normal’ of digital participation (Hills in Bennett and Booth, 2016:267) – a conflict which, of course, only further entrenches millennial mythologising of their cultural marginalization. This rhetoric cycle will only continue to reproduce until audiences and productive powers are able to engage in meaningful discourse about media content and production. In this regard, I would maintain that Tumblr’s online audiences are ‘active’, therefore, in that (whether they know it or not) they have enrolled in a ‘long-game’ of ideological resistance, renovation and transformation.

Overall, it was determined that Tumblr’s subcultural community can ‘function as base and training grounds for agitational activities directed toward wider publics’ (Fraser, 1990:68). The community offers a space to *work out* ideas related to identity, community, and relationships, and an opportunity to *develop tactics* to assert or adapt identities to configure oneself and other in general within broader spectrums of community and social activism (Renninger, 2015:1516). The social impetus of the community tends towards active, critical reflection of film content, and while this may be producing worrying practices of internalized community policing, it is encouraging in the broader sense of mass media audiences being critical towards normative structures of meaning. I believe the Tumblr community holds great potential as a ‘breeding ground’ for resistive activities, as well as a seat of ‘counter-cultural’ discourses.

## *Conclusion*

It has been part of the critical work of this thesis to define and interrogate levels of participation amongst the online audience, a subject I have sought to bring to the fore in this final finding chapter. It's tempting to declare the online audience – like any audience in the modern day – an active, participatory entity. Indeed, much of the audience activity recounted in the last few chapters has shown clear dynamics of audience creativity and active meaning-making - enough, I believe, to seriously reassess how *reductive* previous discourses on audience behaviour have been - but in order to make these assertions more rigorous, and so add substance to claims of online audiencehood representing a distinctive form of cultural reception, some disruptive questions regarding the nature of online participation needed to be addressed. We need to understand *how* online audiences participate in cultural life, but we also need to know *why*, and to whose interest. What this analysis should show is that whilst much audience activity may only operate at the level of 'discursive performance', the online audiences abilities to collaborate and channel their respective literacies into effective action is promising a new strain of political mobilization. Whilst much of this online activism may remain superficial, oriented more towards engagement with popular culture as a 'mediator' of social concerns, the cumulative impact of these practices in negotiating public and social concerns can speak to fundamentals of new digital 'citizenship', which at its core represents the tensions between authorial structures and social rights. This study posits that audience research should remain vital to media studies, therefore, as a subject that works at both personal (e.g., 'micro') and public (e.g., 'macro') levels to distinguish the routine practices, acts, discourses, creations, needs, goals and desires that make up the very basis of our cultural and political ecologies.

## 8. Fan, Critic, Citizen, Spectator - The Many Faces of Audience 2.0

*Audience research is bloody hard* - Martin Barker

In this dissertation, I have established how young adults have adopted social networking sites as a key component of their everyday media use, and the ways that this engagement is reshaping their relationship to media powers. I have considered how mediatory properties of the microblogging site Tumblr — namely its intersecting affordances of exhibition, performance, anonymity, bricolage and self-expression — play an essential role in 'making visible' dynamics of film reception, thus offering online audiences an exciting opportunity to redefine (and reassert) their relationship to film. I have emphasized how social media engagement intersects vital practices concerning identity presentation, interpersonal communication, and collaborative reading strategies, thus allowing for the development of new networked interpretative communities (Fish, 1976; Radway, 1984). These audience practices tread a hazy line between forms of traditional consumption and civic engagement, becoming a useful point of 'convergence' within which subjects can discuss, critique, and challenge cultural authorities. I suggest that this is indicative of an evolving trend of hybridised civic engagement amongst young people, particularly those millennial users who have become accustomed to using social media throughout the course of daily life. In this final chapter, I wish to summarise those findings that I believe are especially significant to the understanding of online audiencehood, and the ways in which these findings might be carried forward in future studies. My reflections are organized around three areas of interest: the lessons learned from this study's findings, the significance of this analysis to theoretical development of the research canon, and the possible futures of online audience study.

In the first section of this chapter, I summarise my findings in terms of the implications this data has in building up the understanding and significance of online audience activity. I wish to draw together the key themes that have cohered across the course of the study, to articulate how these elements provide an initial 'field guide' to online audiencehood. In the introduction of this thesis, I declared three theoretical aims which I saw as vital in progressing the conceptual and methodological evolution of audience studies. In the second section, then, I briefly review these aims and discuss the extent to which this study has achieved them. The final section utilizes these aims to propose possibilities for future research in relation to online audience research, addressing the necessary limitations of this study and how they might be expanded upon by work to come.

### 8.1 Overview of Findings

The impetus for this analysis was aimed at synthesising information on the *contexts* of online media engagement, the forms of the *texts* being engaged with, and the *meanings* the audience draws from these encounters. Together, it is argued, these elements of investigation can provide an embedded account of social media engagement as it presents in the user's everyday lives, thus offering a grounded representation of online 'audiencehood' (McQuail, 2010:431). Sites such as Tumblr can offer engaging new ways of articulating the audience's relationship to media texts, particularly in understanding how online audiences will make 'cross-cultural moves' to find greater meaning in the texts they consume, a process that Benkler (2006) suggests makes them more self-reflective and critical of the cultural role they currently occupy (Benkler, 2006:281). This online audience study has found compelling

evidence throughout that Tumblr users produce especially ‘self-conscious’ reception of film content, a consciousness that expands to many other aspects of their daily use and that, ultimately, informs their entrée into forms of social and civic engagement.

Tumblr has presented itself as a rich case study for this investigation. During the course of this study it was found that the site offered four significant dimensions of audience engagement, these being *performance and exhibition*, *self-expression*, *anonymity* and *bricolage*. It was found that these site ‘affordances’ were as much a product of audience intervention as they were fundamental aspects of the microblog’s architecture. This study borrowed from ‘mediation’ approaches to analyse the site’s platform design (boyd, 2008; Hjarvard, 2013), in order that I might be able to address the distinctive qualities of the website (anonymity, customisability, open platform design etc.) within a frame of meaning that also acknowledged the ‘active’ nature of the individuals engaging with it. As stressed in this thesis’s methodology chapter, it was essential that any approach to media design must also account for the presence and contexts of the audiences who were engaging with it, particularly as previous studies have discounted audience activity in favour of analysing the properties of the media technology. In most instances throughout this study, however, it was found that the affordances offered by Tumblr’s platform architecture only became affordances *through* audience intervention: Tumblr’s ‘lax’ curational design, paired with the liveliness of an audience who will ‘go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want’ (Jenkins, 2006:2), offered especial opportunity for participants to intuitively shape their Tumblr usage experience. This study’s first findings chapter offered several instances in which the online audience could be seen to ‘enact’ their own influence over the logistics of the platform. In the case of site anonymity, for instance, though Tumblr’s ‘old-school’ platform design meant that very little personal information was required to set up a Tumblr account, it was only really through the enactments of the userbase that this anonymity was able to be maintained. My findings showed that Tumblr users would provide very little identifying information about themselves, usually limiting their online biographies to names and ages only. Similarly, users rarely chose to promote their Tumblr pages outside of the ‘boundaries’ of the site itself, making it unlikely that friends or family would be able to locate and follow their Tumblr blogs. And lastly, Tumblr users would routinely indulge in discursive performances centred on preserving the ‘secrecy’ of the community, wherein they would actively encourage other users not to speak about (e.g., ‘share’) their use of Tumblr outside of the site. These enacted trends of anonymity were determined as being widespread across the community and were not limited to the participants involved in this study. In a moment in which it seems that everything is ‘observed’ (Duffy and Chan, 2019), Tumblr users’ intervention in the enactment of anonymity across the platform lets these users enjoy a rare pocket of ambiguity. This has proven especially meaningful to this study’s millennial users who (as detailed shortly) often feel constricted by social and cultural norms, and are therefore seeking out spaces of autonomy (Miegel and Olsson, 2012:488). The autonomous motivations of this site’s young adult demographic bring further context to the ‘character’ of audience practices evidenced on Tumblr.

One of the noted consequences of the Tumblr community’s ‘enactment’ of anonymity was that the user’s ‘mental conception’ of who they were addressing was often vague and abstract. A common symptom of social media design is ‘context collapse’, wherein the

‘public-facing’ architecture of site communication will fold private discussion and public dissemination into the same set of communicative practices (boyd, 2008). This essentially invites the audience into a state of ‘double articulation’, where they understand that they can both ‘see and be seen’ (Denzin, 2007), operating both as ‘observer’ of other’s content and ‘performer’ of their own. The anonymity of the site ensured that for Tumblr users, their ‘imagined audiences’ (the mental conception users must create to account for the visibility of their content amongst the public network) were usually conceived of as a ‘generalized audience of the Internet’ (Litt and Hargittai, 2016:2). The forms of content produced by users were often produced, then, within a self-conscious understanding of their online activity as ‘performative’; indeed, Tumblr users would frequently draw comparisons between their activity on this site and forms of acting, soliloquizing, talking out loud and more – all suggesting that they considered their online engagement as a form of ‘public performance’. This consciousness of their ‘social self’ would colour much of the interpretative and productive work carried out by this study’s participants. Being both ‘audience-performers’ is representative of the hybridized patterns of consumption that have come to characterize online interaction, whereby boundaries between once rigid social roles such as producers, audiences, participants, or users, have become increasingly blurred. This blurring between public and private communication is therefore a distinctive feature of online audiencehood – not necessarily because other types of audience practice do not accommodate participation, but rather because collapse between public and private is *fundamental* to the contexts of online engagement.

The findings suggest that Tumblr users have acclimated to (even welcomed) the ‘public-privateness’ of this social network; anxieties over ‘exposure’ and ‘public shaming’ are not as present amongst the Tumblr population as on other networks as, once again, site anonymity does the (relative) work of shielding users from potential social dangers. This ensures that Tumblr users are able to indulge in otherwise excessive forms of self-expression and identity ‘play’ that might not be well received on other networks – one of the many reasons traditionally ‘subaltern’ communities including non-binary folx and LGBTQ have tended to flock to this site (McCracken, 2017:151). It is the very ‘intensity’ of this work that makes Tumblr an integral site for audience reception research – users share their thought processes widely, emphatically and vibrantly, thus making their interpretive work more ‘visible’ (Mathieu, 2015). My empirical findings therefore align with current literature regarding younger generations using social media as a means of ‘performing identity’ (Hogan, 2010; Zhao, 2013), albeit within a particular set of circumstances wherein the ‘performance’ of the activity is both fully-realised and entreated.

As expectations for ‘cohesive’ identity performances on Tumblr are low, my findings reveal that the online community has cultivated a particular brand of visual ‘bricolage’ as their main form of identity presentation. Tumblr users have normalized a form of appropriative remixing, wherein they poach (Jenkins, 1992), remix (Lessing, 2008) and scavenge (Costello and Moore, 2007) existing media content to enhance their own identity exhibitions. As explored in chapter seven of this thesis, this is a practice which can often spill over into forms of resistive ‘counter-cultural’ work, wherein this ‘reframing’ of the text is an intentional ‘killing of the author’: a deliberate attempt to warp or remove the ‘frame’ of meaning created by producers, and thus transfer ideological influence to the audience. Other times, however, it is simply a process of ‘queering for queering’s sake’, wherein the user can enact their

preferred meanings and indulge in affirming practices of textual appropriation and identity exhibition. It was determined that film texts feature prominently in Tumblr users appropriative practices; users utilize both mainstream and cult film texts in their own personal projects of 'self-creation' (Giddens, 1990), often by removing the original film text from their ideological 'frames' and remoulding them into new aesthetic forms, such as the user 'edit' or 'GIFset'. My findings draw particular attention to the use of GIF's within the Tumblr community, suggesting that these 'dynamic' multimedia forms hold value for Tumblr users as mediators of reception. This activity signals to a third participative dimension to online audiencehood, wherein users can be both observers, performers and *editors* of media content. Overall, it was found that participant's daily use of Tumblr was oriented mostly around interpersonal communication and performances of 'self'. This 'self', it should be noted, is neither static nor complete, but constantly in flux – in many ways is an intrinsic representation of the postmodern self - patchwork and fragmented, constantly in assemblage. Tumblr, as a site and as a community, is positioned as meaningful to young adults' practices of self-creation, acting as it does as a 'prism that reflects externalities and refract within themselves, creating different colors, patterns, arrays, casting off in different directions' (Richardson, 2000:934).

The second findings chapter focused more explicitly on the online audience's 'reading' of filmic material. The empirical data that I gathered through my year-long online ethnography pointed to an emerging set of interpretative processes shared amongst Tumblr users. By utilizing multimodal content captured during observation of the site, this study's second findings chapter charts different 'modes' of audience reception to film texts, using Carolyn Michelle's 'consolidated' interpretive framework to help define the forms of reception taking place across Tumblr (Michelle, 2007). Michelle's model proposes the use of a 'common language' for reception that conceives of interpretative processes as functioning along a textual/contextual scale which evidences greater or lesser degrees of 'closeness' to the media text. The 'closer' the subject positions themselves to a film's content, then, the more likely they will be to accept the messages the film is laying out. Users commute between interpretative modes with regularity, as the 'autonomous' organization of the platform gives little structural context to audience readings - however, there were some 'stabilising' factors that impacted on interpretation across the study sample. For instance, one of the key points of thematic cohesion throughout this study was the intersections made between identity-work and reception. There were repeated associations throughout the data corpus that showed Tumblr users would integrate their readings of media texts within the meaningful ways they chose to enact their self (and their social) identity on the site. This study suggests that once again, the contextual collapse between public and private in online spaces, along with the ability for audience's to 'appropriate' content to produce their own identity 'exhibits', produces an environment in which 'text and context' can become intimately connected. The interpretative modes that follow were therefore found to rest heavily on the boundaries between 'self' and 'society', with each category identified showing greater levels of reference to either the subject's 'personal' identity, or their 'social' identifications.

The first interpretative modes identified were 'transparent' and 'referential' reception. Transparent reception implies a 'close' relationship formed with the film text, wherein audiences will evidence a mostly 'linear' reading of the content. Similar to Hall's 'dominant readings', this mode of interpretation will tend to follow the 'producer's encoded meaning'



(Hall,1973; Morley,1980). Though this does cause concern over the ‘activeness’ of the interpretation, I evidence how these linear readings can still be productive processes, as users will fragment and reassemble textual material to present their own creative content. Through the trend of the ‘imagine’ I demonstrate how these reassembled fragments, though they represent ‘linear’ readings of original source material, are often positioned to express the *audience’s* integration into the original source material, a process wherein the user will attempt to ‘write themselves into the narrative’. In this way, users are able to put the film text to use in the service of their own needs and desires. As it was determined that women were more likely to adopt this interpretive position than men, I suggest there is potential, even, to consider these interpretive activities as actively attempting to ‘re-centre’ narratives on female desire. However, as these creative ‘imaginings’ of the film text mostly align to linear interpretations of the original source material, the potential for resistive interpretation remains (for now) untapped.

Referential reception, similar to the transparent mode, requires a ‘closeness’ to the film text – however, it was found that this closeness often become dependent on the extent to which the textual material can adequately represent the user’s own lived experiences. This negotiation between text and context in this interpretative position has been found to invite forms of ‘storytelling’ amongst the userbase, wherein users will present biographical accounts which help ‘visualize’ their personal negotiation with the messages of the film text. This offers a ‘temporal’ aspect to these audience readings, as they often invoke the reading of a text within a particular time or place in the subject’s life, thus inviting more ‘immediacy’ into the retelling of the receptive encounter. The positioning of reception in relation to personal experience often meant, however, that those contextual experiences overruled the messages that the film text was attempting to portray. Often, audiences were shown to encounter a ‘lack of fit’ with the messages presented which will cause them to resist the narrative, thus broadening the perceptual ‘gap’ between text and context. In this regard, I find that Tumblr offers a compelling case study for understanding how in online space, the ‘personal’ can easily become the ‘political’ (Gunter, 2009), as these ‘disagreements’ with the text often lead to the user adopting a more proactive position to media consumption.

This study found that there was particular recognition amongst the Tumblr cohort of the film industry as an entity emerging from hegemonic systems (racial hegemony, patriarchy, industry and seniority), and frequent assertions that this system was being maintained by modes of production intended to ‘subdue’ marginal voices. Users who tended towards forms of ‘mediated reception’, that is, readings of film content that were informed through ‘intertextualities’ of reception (e.g., consciousness of the structures and features of other media texts), had a particular tendency to produce ‘imagined producers’ when laying out their interpretation of a text. Similar to Marwick and boyd’s imagined audiences described earlier, these ‘imagined producers’ provided a mental construct around which users could develop their critique of the film industry. Ultimately, this developed an entrenched conception within this audience community of media producers as ‘manipulative’ entities. What would often begin for Tumblr users as a ‘mini-review’ of a film they have watched, could quickly turn into a complex critique of the nature of the industry itself. It was found that mediated modes of reception, though very much invested in discourses surrounding cinema’s ‘masterpiece tradition’ (Allan and Gomery, 1985), enabled audiences to negotiate conditions of the text

*collaboratively*, ultimately enabling online users to produce their own ‘democratized’ reviews of movie content.

The cyclicity between the ‘micro’ and the ‘macro’ in Tumblr user’s receptive work was found to bring new intention and direction to online audience activities. For instance, the most predominant receptive mode evidenced amongst the Tumblr population was (by far) the ‘discursive’ mode. This essentially represents a ‘resistant’ reading of the film text, in which the user detaches themselves from the text almost entirely, choosing instead to present an ‘alternative’ reading that responds to the text in terms of specific social and/or cultural contexts (Michelle, 2007). The Tumblr audience showed themselves to be resistant to the centralizing of ‘whiteness’ in mainstream (e.g., Hollywood) cinema (Lopez, 2011), as well as showing particular sensitivities to ‘intersectional’ identities, and how signifiers of race, gender and sexuality could work in mutual ways to enforce social exclusion. These sophisticated readings, which were observed as being widespread across the Tumblr community, were key to asserting the ‘active’ nature of audience work occurring on this microblogging site. What was particularly interesting about the production of discursive readings as they appeared within this study’s audience sample was how they appeared to span across identifiers of race, gender and sexuality. While gender differences can and do exist in online spaces, this study could determine that most of the processes evidenced were common to both male and female participants, and that resistive readings regarding racial representation were especially consistent across material elicited from observation and interview. Lopez (2011) argues that the community’s attention to racial representation – particularly when present amongst Caucasian users – cannot be anything but a political stance, as they explicitly extended past the boundaries of personal experience and into civic realms (Lopez, 2011). This points towards trends of interpersonal, or ‘socialized’ reception amongst this online audience population: Tumblr users would actively invite others with alternative life experiences to contribute to their personal readings and would thus work in mutually exclusive ways to challenge and ‘decentre’ the ideological messages of the film text. This, I suggest, is the articulation of a networked interpretative community ‘writ large’ (Markham, 2017). Though this study’s participant population was only small, and therefore it is only possible to gain a ‘granular’ perspective of these processes, these findings evidence the emergence of a distinctive interpretive culture, whose interpersonal and creative activities make visible the dynamics between individualised reception and collective ideologies (Yang, 2016:209).

The study was also able to offer findings on a more troubling aspect of online interpretative work. Whilst the employment of ‘socialized’ reception patterns obviously builds upon the community’s interpersonal relations, uniting them in their recognition of ‘shared’ causes, it can also be found to produce policing behaviours amongst the online community. Tumblr has gained its popularity as an ‘affirmative’ space because it was considered to include 'a particularly openminded group of people in a space that encourages them to be as much themselves as they can' (Miller, 2015:182). As evidenced, the community can be seen to actively align itself against heteronormative perspectives and actively advocates for equalities in minority representation. The more politically minded the community has become, however, the more unforgiving they have become towards users whose personal views appear to lack critical objectivity. This can be particularly damaging for younger users, in particular, whose socio-political identity is still in development. Though, of course, there is a strong

argument that any prejudicial or discriminatory perspectives should be actively challenged, lest they become normalized within the community or gain wider public attention, it is troubling to consider how willingly the community is to turn on itself. In policing its own members users may be unintentionally reproduce the authoritative discourses that they were initially seeking to challenge. Though this study did not have the scope to undertake a wider investigation of these practices, it did strike me that the Tumblr community's tendency towards 'moral policing' can find reflection in broader trends of criticism occurring across social media platforms, including aspects of 'trolling' and the new emergence of online 'cancel culture' (Ng, 2020). The final findings chapter evaluated some of these trends in closer detail, channelling analysis through audience studies new 'participation paradigm' (Livingstone, 2013).

The final findings chapter sought to expand upon online audiencehood as a 'meaningful practice' situated at the intersection between discursive performance and social action. Undertaking this analysis was intrinsic to the critical roots of audience studies, as it contextualised everyday usage and meaning-making practices within the wider social and political landscape in which they were situated. Drawing on the ideological divisions between audience and producer identified in the previous chapters, this analysis uncovers the reflexive discourses Tumblr users were circulating regarding their perceived autonomy and emancipation from media powers. This revealed some of the presuppositions about audiencehood that Tumblr users were bringing to this investigation and allowed me to make inferences between contrary themes of 'authority' and 'dispossession' that had been iterated across their online receptive work. This reflective discussion with Tumblr users revealed that these subjects were accustomed to the notion of pervasive audiencehood, as they considered their social media activity as an extension of the initial viewing event. A defining factor in these young adult's lives was the richness and ubiquity of their everyday media encounters, and this was reflected in much of their online interaction. Analysis uncovered that these young adult users regarded their social media activity as being 'inherently active', meaning any audience work they carried out online was regarded as productive work. Troublingly, this was developing 'rifts' in amongst the community, with this sample of online users suggesting that those who merely 'consume' movies were more complacent in their media consumption. This naturally emphasised the meaningfulness of their own subject positions, at the same time that it devalued the work of other audience members. It was suggested, therefore, that in line with the userbase's 'fannish' characteristics, Tumblr users could be seen to be 'gatekeeping', or 'exclusifying', aspects of the audience experience that persist outside of online spaces.

The insular nature of the online community was a common theme in many of the interactions observed during this study and emerged with particular significance when considering the Tumblr community's frequent deployment of 'generational narratives'. Reflections amongst the community on generational dynamics offered large groups of users to unite under a common 'sensitivity', producing cohesion and inclusion amongst otherwise diverse individuals, enforcing ideological divides and resistance to traditional authorities and gatekeepers. These discursive performances were found to be formed around themes of media literacy, dispossession, and apathy. It was found that generational identities were caught up in ironic pastiches of millennial stereotypes and perceived characteristics. In establishing these discourses, the site's millennial users could be seen again to be establishing conceptual divides between themselves, as an internalised group, and between a social

‘other’, this time specifically between themselves and ‘senior’ generations, in particular the ‘boomer’ generation (Pew Research Centre, 2010). It has been impossible to ignore the ‘divisions’ the Tumblr community erects between themselves and others; whether this be in the form of online vs. offline communication, Tumblr vs. other networks, audiences vs. producers or millennials vs. boomers - the locus of the Tumblr experience is built around creating deliberate ‘in-groups’ and ‘exclusions’ around their use of the site. This intrinsically shapes the character of the online community and should therefore be considered an aspect ‘unique’ to the makeup of this particular social platform.

## 8.2 Revisiting Theoretical Aims

In this section I revisit this study’s theoretical aims to discuss the ‘gaps’ in knowledge in which this study has situated itself, and how it contributes exciting new knowledge to the field of audience research. The original three theoretical aims were as follows:

- *To advance the understanding of online audiencehood*
- *To position Tumblr as a prospective site for online audience study*
- *To re-introduce reception of film texts into the fold of empirical audience studies*

This project employs an inter-disciplinary approach in examining audience work in the context of social media use. Specifically, this research commits to a radical contextualist framework (Grossberg, 1988; Ang, 1992), which offers a post-structuralist approach to meaning, emphasising reflexivity and critical intent as part of the epistemological process. The primary aim of this investigation was to examine the process of online audiencehood as a practice rooted in people’s everyday lives. I would assert that this study has maintained its commitment to understanding people’s ‘everyday audiencing’ (Bird, 2003), as I have sought to remain reflexive about my own intervention in the research process, and responsive to the perspectives of the audience members involved. The empirical findings presented here can therefore claim to represent a grounded, in-depth account of online audiencehood, which works to illuminate those often-complex processes audiences undertake when drawing meaning from their media encounters.

In terms of building a technical understanding of online audiencehood, this study has worked to align analysis of the specific ‘affordances’ offered by Tumblr in light of the study participant’s own experiences of usage, in order that this information might appropriately contextualise these subject’s ‘digital social norms’ (Peng, 2017). Prior literature has had the tendency to characterise the shift to online communicative practices as ‘considerably altering’ people’s social realities (Livingstone and Das, 2013:1). However, it was found that for this study’s audience demographic, online communication was simply an embedded aspect of their everyday lifeworld. Having grown up in the midst of the societal shift from mass to networked communication, millennial users were accustomed to digital media adoption, and this technical ‘savvy’ showed itself in this analysis in several meaningful ways. Whilst this does pose a necessity to study other age demographics in relation to online audiencehood, I would maintain that the information this study’s young adult audiences provide can be integral in advancing the understanding of social media use as an ‘everyday experience’ (Vromen, Xenos and Loader, 2015:81).

Engagement with social networking platforms revealed a bevy of new interpretative and productive practices which signal to the distinctiveness of online audiences as a unique

cultural entity – practices, it should be noted, that would have typically been associated with online ‘fans’. Despite the distinctive contexts in which online audiencehood occurs, the study revealed that many of the practices undertaken by online users were simply continuations of traditional audience processes expressed in creative new ways. On the one hand, online audiences can conform to traditional frameworks of ‘passive’ consumption, undertaking superficial activities such as scrolling, skimming, liking and reblogging. Yet, at the same time, they can also remix and create content, engage with producers on a first-hand basis, and leverage the collective power of the online community, all of which infringe on productive dynamics. The online audience is - at one and the same time - a distinctive cultural entity, governed by social trends and contextual factors that align themselves with the specific affordances and competencies needed to navigate online spaces, and also a recognisable extension of audience practices that have persisted since the earliest day of entertainment consumption. This study has reiterated that seeking further participation with media texts is not unique to the modern media climate, and instead marks only the latest iteration of the audience’s attempts to participate more fully in cultural life. For this reason, I feel justified in asserting this study maintain the title of ‘audience’ to refer to its subjects, as this work can then builds on continuities in the history of audiences that speak to their significance in the mediation of ‘identity, sociality, and power’ (Livingstone and Das, 2013:1).

Audiences have often maintained a hybrid identity (Denzin, 2007; Silverstone, 1994). The hybrid positions the online audience takes up in this study is an expansion on the producer/audience dynamic offered by previous studies such as the ‘producer’ (Bruns, 2009) and the ‘prosumer’ (Tofflin, 1980). This study has revealed that online audiencehood can incorporate a paradigm of ‘performance’ into the audience-producer dynamic often recognised amongst online populations (Hogan, 2010; Zhao, 2013). This is inspired by the intrinsic breakdown of public and private communication occurring across social media sites, whereby users are able to recognise the visibility of their content in amongst the potentially ‘limitless’ audience of the Internet (Marwick and boyd, 2010:2). This denotes an aspect of ‘self-conscious’ engagement which colours much of these users productive and interpretative processes. I would suggest, however, in light of this study’s findings on the emerging civic activities of the Tumblr userbase, that it might not be fruitful for audience studies to keep delimitating the audience’s purely role in connection to their relation to media texts. I would argue it would be more productive to the ongoing evolution of the study to emphasise the hybridity between the ‘audience’ and the ‘public’. As stressed across the course of the thesis, the boundaries between ‘audience’ and ‘public’ are becoming increasingly opaque (Livingstone, 2005). There are critics who would not see the two concepts aligned – there is a long history of literature which regards audience research as doing little more than describing differences in consumption of taste (Habermas, 1991). The productive and participative qualities that online audiencehood pertain, however, to the introduction of a mediatory domain between the two positions, one that consolidates the ‘discursive’ influence of the audience with the ‘mobility’ of the public. This study’s findings can offer embedded perspectives on online audiencehood as an emerging ‘civic’ position, a crucial ‘pivot’ for building up our understanding of social and cultural processes (Livingstone, 2005 :21). In this regard, I believe this study holds great potential for future audience studies.

The second theoretical aim was to introduce Tumblr as a prospective site for online audience study. The fact remains that literature on Tumblr is still scarce (Attu and Terras, 207); which

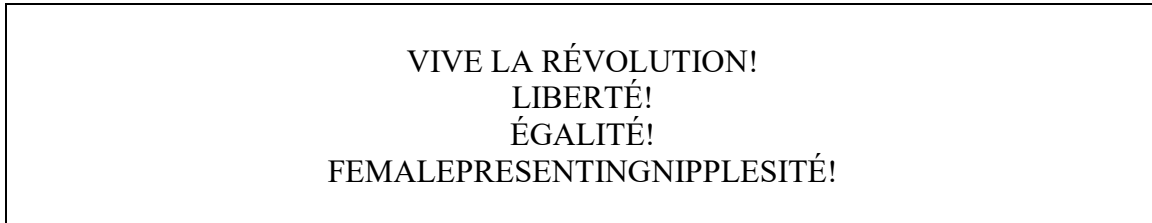
on a (very) superficial level makes this study of immediate relevance to social media studies. Where I believe the value of this study truly lies, however, is in being able to offer a complex, in-depth perspective on the site and its distinctive ‘audience culture’. This study offers an entrée into the world of Tumblr: it provides an entry point for engaging the site’s insular community culture and a roadmap for navigating its vibrant visual culture: a world of macros, GIFs, edits and memes. It proposes an initial framework for understanding how media messages are interpreted, reimagined, and resisted by site users, and the abstract and experimental forms that this receptive work takes. It articulates how Tumblr users both reflect and refract forms of traditional audience practice, undertaking dynamic processes that blur the lines between spectator, producer, and performer. I believe this study offers great insight into the forms of interaction occurring on Tumblr, and the distinctive nature of the site’s ‘audience culture’.

When reviewing what was learned from Tumblr, I found it significant to engage once again with the site’s socio-political leanings. One of the significant findings of this study, I believe, is how ‘relational’ some of the interpretations of this audience sample were – both the observation sample and the interview sample represented a diverse body of young people, all from different walks of life, representing a range of experiences and attitudes, yet it was still possible to track ‘coherencies’ across the data corpus (Michelle, 2007). A theoretical development I hope to offer for future studies on Tumblr is an understanding of the site as cultivating a community of ‘citizen-viewers’ (Livingstone and Lunt, 1996) whereby the community emphasises their encounters with popular culture texts as part of the formation of a social and/or political self. Another significant aspect of Tumblr’s audience culture was the userbases performative discourses regarding generation. Though there is an amounting body of research into millennials social behaviours, it is significant to note that concepts of generational identities have only recently begun to achieve integrity (Vittadani et al, 2013). This study advances discussions on generational identity, by providing further information on the ways this age cohort will utilise social media to trade narratives on their social experiences, and thus ‘discursively perform’ their shared identity as millennials. Tumblr offers not only a glimpse into the socializing activities of its ‘marginalized millennial communities’ (McCracken, 2017:151), but also offers input into theories of ‘generational semantics’ – that is, how people make sense of their experiences through the sharing of experiences within generational peer groups (Siibak, 2009; Vittadini et al, 2013). The study can also offer perspective on ‘inter-generational’ relations, which have been posed as a divisive issue by the Tumblr userbase. Overall, I am confident that the attention to Tumblr as a popular site amongst young adult users has produced some enlightening findings that should progress research in this subject area.

As useful as Tumblr has been as a case study for this thesis, I do, however, have to address an unfortunate issue regarding the potential ‘longevity’ of the platform. Tumblr, in the course of this study, has moved from an underground, subcultural site, to a burgeoning mainstream network, and back again. The rapid crest and fall of Tumblr's mainstream popularity was attributed, in specific, to an 'adult content' ban that was enforced at the end of 2018, only a few months after the denouement of this study's online interviews. Tumblr’s colloquially known ‘porn ban’ was enforced soon after the mobile app was removed from Apple’s download centre due to detection of child pornography on the platform. The new policy

specifically banned any NSFW<sup>17</sup> content, including pornography, nudity, and media showing ‘real life human genitals or female-presenting nipples’ (Tumblr, 2018). Naturally, this went down well with the Tumblr community:

**Figure 25: Memic response to Tumblr’s ban on explicit content**



Jokes aside, in erecting this porn ban Tumblr was accused of alienating two of its key demographics – fans and LGBTQ+, who had flocked to the site primarily because it allowed individuals to experiment with their understanding of their self and sexual identity through forms of art, narrative and other content creation. Notably, it was the enforcement of LiveJournal’s own explicit content ban that initially drove users to Tumblr, meaning that the ‘exodus’ of users away from the site following the ban has followed a fairly predictable pattern. It’s recently been reported that a fifth of the user population has left the site following the content ban (Cuthbertson, 2019). Unfortunately, then, like Myspace and Friendster before it, this study may well be assigned to that sample of social media studies whose immediate relevance lies in the work done to effectively ‘archive’ what the usage experience of the site entailed, so that future studies might be able to draw inspiration from the analysis and extend the trends and practices denoted here to other networking sites (boyd, 2008; Davis, 2008). Whilst I am confident that Tumblr will hold on for the foreseeable future (the algorithms used to enforce the adult content ban are notoriously poor, flagging anything from needle spools to desert slopes as explicit content), there truly is no way to know where the site will be several years from now. It has long been my hope that this study will be able to provide an initial groundwork on the forms of online audiencehood, and whilst the research has drawn particular attention to the ways Tumblr (as both platform and community) has shaped the outcomes of audience engagement, I still believe that this project can provide the framework that is needed to advance knowledge in this subject area. Whilst I cannot speak to the persistence of Tumblr, then, I feel confident in the persistence of some of the

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<sup>17</sup> NSFW (not-safe-for-work)

norms and processes identified in this study, which should hopefully prove this study's use in the years to come.

My final theoretical aim was to find a 'middle ground' in theories and approaches which will help incorporate 'film reception' back into fold of empirical audience research. As suggested in this study's literature review, understanding of audience has been split between cultural studies and film studies approaches, with one deferring to the contexts of the audience encounter, and the other referring to the contents of the text – and never the twain shall meet. The idea of 'continuity and discontinuity' has shaped much of my thinking throughout this study. It's been impossible to ignore the series of disruptions and tangents, transitions and clashes that have come to embody this study's findings. From a contextualist perspective, this is of course to be expected, as the 'assemblage' of social reality was never not going to be complex (Davis, 2019). I have developed my approach to online audiencehood in connection to recent ethnographic theories and methods, particularly that strain of audience research concerned with 'radical contextualism'. This approach ensures that the perspective on audiences does not tend towards 'essentialist' descriptions, such as those promoted by media effects research, accounts which were determined by the 'linearity' of traditional modes of mass communication, and which therefore offer little perspective on contemporary audience/media relations. By adopting reflexive ethnographic methods, this study revealed the following 'non-linear' phenomena: the reflexive repositioning of the self to the social/civic, the interpretative 'remixing' of film content, the spatio-temporal 'conditions' of Tumblr engagement, and the 'discursive performativity' of the generational dialogues. None of these findings would have been possible without an embedded enquiry. Whilst I would maintain, therefore, that this study's contextualised approach can be extended to a number of media texts *as they appear in the online space*, the middle ground in which film viewership and social media consumption meet is still hazy and requires further investigation. In aligning myself with contextualised approaches, I have had to essentially 'give some ground' in my battle to unite film studies and cultural studies. The simple fact of the matter is that film studies does not yet have an adequate empirical framework capable of addressing the audience experience. In fact, I would argue that the field's dependence on textual analyses is repeating processes of audience 'abstraction' that have followed film studies approaches throughout the years. One of the primary issues of adopting a film studies approach is that these approaches are oriented more towards apprehending the complexity of the film *text*, rather than articulating the experiences of the film *viewer*. Throughout this study's literature reviews I have countered film studies inability to account for the fact that both external influences (e.g., sociocultural factors or issues of cultural value) and internal factors (e.g. audiences emotional investments) can impact of reception and audience behaviour. I also challenge the dependence on textual interpretations of film content, articulating the varying ways audiences challenge and rework the film text, and how online environments give researchers the option of 'following the audience's lead' when it comes to analysis, rather than building the analysis of reception on either a) the ideological cues of the film text or b) my own 'expert' understanding of the text. This reflection on the history of film studies should hopefully show how textual approaches and notions of 'masterpiece' traditions have done the work of removing the audience from the analytical interpretative frame. The audience becomes an afterthought - their responses a 'by-product' of the operative functions of the media text. Whilst there is certainly some promising philosophical thought emerging regarding the convergence of film in the digital landscape, these frameworks still remain



theoretical, and have little practical application. It has been my intention to show that social media might be the necessary 'middle ground' through which film studies and cultural studies might converge. However, until there are more studies like this, this convergence will have to remain a 'potential', rather than an eventuality.

### **8.3 Recommendations and Implications for Theory, Research, and Practice**

This study revealed various avenues for further study. The site itself, the method of investigation, and the nature of the content posted all offer routes for further investigation. This study could be directly expanded upon by comparing and contrasting audience practices between Tumblr and other social media sites, thus producing more 'generalizable' findings regarding the forms and effects of online audiencehood. Alternatively, future studies could narrow the focus of this investigation by exploring the reception and productive practices surrounding specific film or television texts. As stressed in this study's methodology, this study has taken a range of film texts as its focus, mainly in order to highlight the inherent 'intertextuality' of online engagement - this does not, however, mean that other studies could not refine upon this dynamic by pinpointing specific media texts to engage with. Potential for future studies to expand on gender dynamics in online reception, to gain further insight into 'coherences' of interpretation amongst online audience communities are all possible and would surely provide greater depth and critical weight to ongoing investigations.

The circulation of counter-hegemonic discourses to media messages identified within the course of this study would prove incredibly useful if these were studied over time, or cross-compared with material from other social networks. I, personally, would find it interesting to see the possible evolution of 'post-cinematic' perspectives on social media, that is, further articulations of the convergent relationship between cinema and new media; in this respect, I would again emphasise, as I have throughout this study, the value of studying Tumblr as a 'hub' for film content and discussion, a site that not only offers significant inroads for approaching film audiences, but a new appreciation of how film content circulates in the 'sharing spaces' of the Internet. Such studies could expand upon the convergent relationship between old and new media, thus positing 'cohesive' routes to understanding which *build upon* previous accounts of mediation and technological use, rather than making breaks with tradition. I have hope that this study has demonstrated the necessity of 'filling the gaps' between theoretical and methodological approaches to audience, showing how these theoretical and conceptual divisions have been imposing specific boundaries on research which have made it difficult to produce a coherent account of contemporary audiencehood. My intention throughout has been that this study will come to revitalise the 'interdisciplinary' nature of reception research, in order to show how processes of meaning-making transcends multiple audience groupings, contexts and mediums, and how the subject might therefore take on renewed relevance as a means of interrogating the interlocutions between everyday meaning-making activities and the structure of wider systems of social, cultural and political power.

This study can complement quantitative studies on social media use (of which there are many) and add a situated analysis that will be necessary for advancing embedded perspectives on online audience activity. Though '*Audience 2.0*' admittedly offers a granular approach to the subject, I am confident that many of the trends and patterns established here can be generalized to wider online populations. Particularly as the participants represent a

'trifecta' of influential demographics (millennial users aged 18-28, currently represent both the 'young adult film audience' (Stafford, 2009), the highest demographic of mobile media users, the highest proportion of social media users in the western hemisphere (Pew Research Centre, 2010) the findings related to their online processes/practice are to some extent representative of a much larger group of 'digital natives', who will carry through these online practices across time. Further research could develop this generational approach by comparing perspectives of other age cohorts, or by expanding upon the 'performance' of generational identity, perhaps through exploration of the subjectivities between different online audience/fan communities, or even extending the investigation offline, comparing generational discourses in the same family or

The possibilities are seemingly endless. I have tried to advance knowledge in this area by proposing an integrated model whose aim is to be exploratory, in order to lay the groundwork for a long-sought after but little achieved audience study that can be adapted and expanded upon to produce more generalizable results as time goes by and our knowledge and use of digital media evolves. Of course, the online space is constantly adapting - media technology is constantly changing, social climates and contexts continuously shifting, and so the audience will change in tandem with it, adapting new techniques of viewership and processes of social and cultural engagement as they go. I cannot speak, therefore, to the longevity of sites like Tumblr, or the specific trends at play on the site (which is partly why this study has never sought out generalizability - I see little point in building a monument on shifting ground), but I do believe the nuances of usage identified here will prove to be 'ambient' processes in media engagement to come, particularly amongst those young adult users who will carry forward the lessons learned in their long-term interactions with social media. Hermes (2009) reflects that it is often the case that 'everyday media use yields its investments and meanings only in the long run and through theoretical refraction' (Hermes, 2009:113). In many ways, then, this study has been built up as an open invitation to other audience researchers; the intention has always been that this study will develop a foundation on which further studies can expand, elaborate and, of course, critique.

I would like to emphasise that what I mark in this dissertation is not an 'end state' for online audiencehood. Audience work will continue to be transformed by structural and social changes resulting from the interplay of new technologies and new communicative trends. As addressed in the first literature review chapter, additional shifts are already under way. VOD, and the increasing availability of online streaming capabilities, mean we may very well be entering a new phase of online viewership that might be able to complement forms of online audiencehood more directly. Although VOD has been on the rise for a number years (Horeck, Jenner, Kendall, 2018), the increasing costs of cinema prices, TV licensing fees, as well as the inevitable cultural fallout of the Coronavirus pandemic, means that on-demand platforms will likely be moving into place as a predominant viewing medium. At the start of this thesis, I could not have foreseen the events that would lead to millions of people worldwide having online video as one of their primary sources of entertainment, and social media as one of their only routes to public communication. What could have been a phenomenon relegated specifically to younger media audiences has – suddenly - become a fundamental form of media engagement for a considerable share of the global population. At the start of this study, I was hoping to develop an approach to audiencehood that would 'ease in' the idea of audiences commuting between mediatory technologies, of online audiencehood moving out

from under the parameters of 'fan behaviour' and into the mainstream - little did I know that that transition would happen so suddenly, or under such catastrophic conditions. Whilst I would still maintain that online audiencehood would have become a practice that younger audiences would carry forward in their routine engagement with media, I am dismayed to find that online audiencehood might now become a sort of cultural hang-over from a period of significant global unrest. Cultural institutions like cinema and theatre have been hit particularly hard by global lockdown measures, and while I feel confident that over 100 years of audience attention to these mediums are not going to be eradicated by a few years of restriction, the sad reality is that the film industry that will emerge from this crisis period will be greatly changed. I highly doubt (judging by the critical history of the medium) that this change will be taken with much grace by authorities whose expertise rests on designating cinema as the be-all and end-all of filmic engagement. It's become suddenly crucial, therefore, that the research community open their minds to the possibility of adaptation and transformation in cinema, lest the 'new cinema' environment that emerges becomes immediately bogged down by the ideological discourses and conceptual divides that have blighted previous research. I believe it is essential, now more than ever, to open the door to further integrative studies on film reception and viewership. In this respect, I hope this study can offer a potential guide for those interested in pursuing these new convergent routes.

### ***Conclusion***

The aim of this thesis has been to understand something of the diversity, dynamism and complexity of audience activity in the current digital climate. This study proposes the necessity of generating integrative frameworks of audience engagement that can account for the nuanced and often contrary forms of audience work taking place in the postmodern moment, that we might produce the embedded, reflexive accounts required to appropriately contextualise and 'demystify' new media usage (Takahashi, 2002:295). At the heart of this investigation is the audience themselves. The audience base that I have taken as my case study have made for an engaging, intriguing, and often hilarious encounter. I would emphasise the potential Tumblr holds as a site for media research, not just in regard to its potential for ongoing audience studies, but as a sound representative of the innovation, creativity and richness that can be found in forms of online communication.

In Miller's words, Tumblr provides 'a reality filtered through the minds of the audience and recreated from their perspective – a reflection akin to a funhouse mirror' (Miller, 2015). This reflection is significant, as it shows the 'contours' of the minds that are serving as this study's mirror (online users aged 18-28), offering personal (e.g., embedded) insight and a reflective image of patterns of wider social and cultural meaning-making. The image that comes back is converse, it twists and turns around itself, but it is nonetheless clear. Tumblr users are contrary subjects to study, but they offer an emboldened version of what online audiencehood could achieve: Tumblr users are not passive, they delight in critiquing and dissecting the text and sharing their interpretation within the community. Tumblr users are empowered; they relish in taking productive powers away from the industry, and actively encourage other users to create their own meanings and content from the media material offered to them. It is my hope that ongoing studies will be able to work from the framework this study has provided, in order that we might work towards a more responsive, reflective, and dynamic understanding of contemporary audience engagement.

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## Appendix (A)



### Online Audiences - Interview Sign Up

These online interviews are intended to explore the ways in which young people are engaging as active media audiences in the current day, with a focus on film and the interactive potentials offered by social media. Data from these sessions will build an understanding of youth viewership and reception practices and how they are contributing to the landscape of audience studies.

We would be grateful for your participation in this project.

Name \*

First

Last

Email \*

Age \*

Nationality

Social Media

- Facebook
- Twitter
- Tumblr
- Instagram
- Pinterest
- Buzznet
- Myspace
- LiveJournal
- None of the above

URL

Skype

Please indicate your preferred interview date.

Please indicate your preferred interview date.

Please indicate your preferred interview time (GMT)

If none of the previous dates/times are suitable, please indicate a more appropriate interview date/time below.

**Data Protection Statement**

The researcher will have sole access to the data collected for these sessions. Data will be retained for the duration of the research project and will be used only in the context of the researcher's doctoral work. Any further distribution of the data collected will be used only with the prior consent of the participating individual.

Continue

## **Appendix (B)**

### **Research Information Sheet for Interview Participants**

I invite you to take part in this study as part of a doctoral research project on film reception and ‘online audience’ practices. This form will provide you with the necessary information needed to make an informed decision on whether or not to take part in the study. This form will explain the aims of the research, who is taking part in the project and how your content will be used.

#### **Who are the Research Team?**

All research is to be carried out by me; no third parties or other institutions will have access to the information collected during the course of this study unless express permission is given by the participant to include in publications or articles. My name is Jessica Crosby and I am a PhD researcher at Newcastle University. I am supervised by two Senior Researchers in the School of Arts and Cultures. The research has the approval of the School Research Ethics Committee. Further information about myself and my research project is available on the Newcastle University website under ‘current PhD students’.

#### **What is the research about?**

The aims of this project are to explore the changing nature of media audiences. The converging nature of our media technology in the current day has raised significant questions about what it means to be an ‘audience’ or ‘viewer’ in an ever-more interactive world. There are suggestions that online engagements are contributing to a new form of ‘online audiencehood’, wherein audience experiences are more palpable. This study will seek to determine how social media enables people to become ‘interactive audiences’ and why it is necessary to develop an understanding of links between film and social media as forms of ‘cross-media’ engagement.

#### **Who are the participants? When is the project running?**

Data collection for online interviews will take place between January – December 2017. I am inviting participants with active Tumblr accounts to take part. I am interested in the views and experiences of social networking users and those with an enthusiasm towards film.

#### **What would your involvement be?**

Your participation in this study will require you to take part in a semi-structured online interview. I have invited a sample of users active on Tumblr to speak about their experiences of film viewership and social media usage. I would like to know, other than your own opinions on media ‘audiencehood’ today, your degree of involvement with entertainment properties and the process of film production. Questions will also center on social networking habits, everyday usage and what attracts you to particular social networking sites. The interview will last about 1 hour and will be filmed so that I have a record of what was said. Participants have the option of being interviewed via chat messenger, email or via Skype, and may retain the option to take part in an ‘audio-only’ interview.

#### **How will the information be treated?**

All participants in this study will be treated anonymously. All participants will be referred to by a user or log number in order to protect your anonymity. Data taken from participants will be transcribed through the software NVivo, which processes unstructured information. Data will then be transferred to a password protected file on a secure computer.

I will transcribe the interview discussion and if you are interested I will give you a copy of the transcript. The transcript will only be read and used by me and not be used for any other purpose. The information from these discussions will be the basis of my PhD thesis which will be assessed in order for me to gain the PhD degree. The transcripts might also be used to write and publish articles in academic journals. You are welcome to see the final thesis and/or a copy of the articles before they are published.

### **Will everything said to the researcher be kept private?**

Yes, all information and interaction will be confidential.

The requirements of Newcastle University's ethical guidelines will be strictly observed. This means that at all times the researcher must observe the welfare of the research participants and respect the dignity and personal privacy of the individual. All data collected will also be stored securely and safely. All data to be published will be completely anonymous, unless otherwise stated, in order to protect the confidentiality of participants.

In practical terms, this means that:

- All the information that is collected will be kept strictly confidential.
- All the information will be stored and subject to usual security protocols (adhering to the requirements of the Data Protection Act via the use of passwords and encryption).
- All data will be fully anonymised.
- This is achieved via the use of usernames and/or log numbers.
- This anonymity is extended to any other individual or organisation referred to.
- The data will be used to advance academic knowledge and/or professional practice only and will not be used for any other purpose.
- With this express aim, anonymised data may be incorporated into articles or presentations.

### **What will you get out of it?**

You will have a chance to contribute to a new form of methodology for online interaction, as well as helping to develop an understanding of active viewership in the areas of social media and film. Participants have the opportunity to express personal experiences and concerns about film and digital culture.

### **Is this voluntary? What if you change your mind about taking part?**

Your involvement in this research project is voluntary and you are free to withdraw from the research at any point you wish. If you choose to do so, you do not have to give a reason.

### **What next?**

If there are any areas that require further clarification, you are welcome to contact the researcher at the contact email address below. I will be pleased to answer any questions. If you choose not to take part in this research, I would like to thank you for your time. You need take no further action. If you want to be debriefed, the outcomes of the study will be available from my research page (*spectatorsandco.tumblr.com*). I'd be happy to pass on the results.

On the next page is a Participant Consent Form. Please complete and sign both copies and we will each retain a copy.

**Contact:** Jessica Marie Crosby (Research Student), Newcastle University.

**Webpage:** *spectatorsandco.tumblr.com*    **Email:** *j.m.crosby1@newcastle.ac.uk*

## Appendix (C)



### CONSENT FORM

**Project: 'Audience 2.0' – Reception practices and audiences on social networking sites**

<b>1</b>	I have read and understood the information about the project, as provided in the Information sheet	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>2</b>	I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the project and my participation	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>3</b>	I voluntarily agree to participate in the project	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>4</b>	I understand that I can withdraw at any time without giving reasons and that I will not be penalised for withdrawing, nor will I be questioned on why I have withdrawn	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>5</b>	The procedures regarding confidentiality (e.g. the use of names, pseudonyms, anonymization of data, etc.) have been clearly explained to me	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>6</b>	The use of data in research, publications, sharing and archiving has been explained to me	<input type="checkbox"/>

<b>I consent</b> to participate in this project	YES	NO
<b>I consent</b> to any information I provide to the project being used in the writing up of the research, in publications, uploaded to websites and included in archives of research reports, <b>provided that</b> unless I give my express permission, my name and other identifying personal details will not be associated with the information I provide	YES	NO

### **Participant**

\_\_\_\_\_ @ \_\_\_\_\_  
 Name of Participant      Signature      Skype Name      Date

## Appendix (D)

### Interview Questions

#### ICEBREAKER:

*How long have you been active on Tumblr?*

*If Tumblr was a person, what sort of person do you think it would be, and why?*

#### ESTABLISHING:

*Age/nationality?*

*How often, in the space of a week, do you use Tumblr?*

*Could you describe your normal process after logging into Tumblr? What are your first actions? (e.g. check messages, activity, feed, hashtags, tracked tags etc.)*

*What subjects do you blog about the most frequently?*

**+ If blogging on film:** *Could you give me an example of specific films you blog about?*

*Do you ever create your own content? (e.g. fanfiction, fan art, GIFs, stills, videos, music etc)*

*Do you use Tumblr more as a public platform or as a private platform?*

*Do you talk to other users? If so, how often?*

*How do you typically watch films? Do you go to the cinema, watch at home or online?*

#### EXPLORATORY:

*What attracts you to Tumblr? What distinguishes it from other social networking sites?*

*How would you describe the site to a non-user? What does it offer the prospective user?*

*As someone who has been active on this site for \_\_\_\_\_, what impression have you formed of the online community?*

*How would you characterise the film community in particular?*

*What does film mean to you?*

*What would you say is your favourite film genre and why?*

*I've identified two film franchises - Star Wars and Marvel - that I see as being very popular amongst the Tumblr community. Would you add any other films to that list? Do you agree with my assessment of the two franchise's popularity?*

*What do you like about these franchises? What do you dislike?*

*What do you see as being the core message of each franchise?*

*Do you agree or disagree with the premise of this message?*

*What is your understanding of the term 'active audience'? Do you consider yourself an active audience member?*

*Could you describe in what circumstances you would typically consider yourself as being part of an audience? Do you ever think of yourself as an audience member when you are online?*

#### CONCLUSION:

*How influential do you see your posts on Tumblr as being?*

*To what extent do you feel your Tumblr page is representative of you as a person?*

*Is there anything you would like to add about the topics we've discussed?*



## Appendix (E)

### Approaches:

#### (DM)

Hi there, I hope you don't mind me contacting you but I was wondering whether I'd be able to ask you a few questions? My name is Jess and I'm a PhD researcher working on film reception and online audience practices. I'm looking for active Tumblr users to take part in a series of online interviews. These interviews will be focused on your day-to-day usage of the site, your impressions of the online community, and the ways in which users are discussing, critiquing or interpreting popular film. Any and all film is up for discussion but I am particularly interested on hearing your thoughts on the following franchises: Star Wars and Marvel. Would you be interested in taking part? If so, further info on the project can be found here:

[https://docs.google.com/document/d/1dPAgbSC\\_j7\\_r0FjbXTX4WHvkEiWFnstpR5luiVAQ4LA/edit?usp=sharing](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1dPAgbSC_j7_r0FjbXTX4WHvkEiWFnstpR5luiVAQ4LA/edit?usp=sharing)

and the registration form for interviews is here:

<http://forms.ncl.ac.uk/view.php?id=9710>.

If you have any further questions, please feel free to message me on Tumblr or via my email at [j.m.crosby1@newcastle.ac.uk](mailto:j.m.crosby1@newcastle.ac.uk). Thanks for your time!

#### (INBOX)

Hi there, I hope you don't mind me contacting you but I was wondering whether I'd be able to ask you a few questions? My name is Jess and I'm a PhD researcher working on film reception and online audience practices. I'm looking for active Tumblr users to take part in a series of online interviews. These interviews will be focused on your day-to-day usage of these sites, your impressions on the online community, and the ways in which users are discussing, critiquing or interpreting popular film. Any and all film is up for discussion but I am particularly interested on hearing your thoughts on the following franchises: Star Wars and Marvel. Would you be interested in taking part?