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What It's Like to Be Tumblr Famous

Written by

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"How do you know if someone is kind of flirting with u thru Tumblr?" read an email forwarded to me by my friend group's resident internet expert, about an acquaintance I'll call "Heather." Shortly thereafter Heather herself messaged me with a slew of questions so twee, we vow to share them only with each other and invisible audiences online.

Her email elaborated, "I have been rapidfire trading likes all day since I reblogged him on my Tumblr and now he's following me." I pause, my fingers poised over my keyboard, then respond, "so hip so dumb" and reassure her that "he prbly wants yr bod." Hers is a problem meant to be as self-effacing as it is flattering: Hey, we're 23.

When you're 23 and you're online, you speak in other people's voices. Heather's coquettishness on Gchat and Tumblr is a parody of girlishness, amplified through feigned ignorance ("kind of flirting") and corrupted through artful typos, ploce, and paroxysms of lucidity.

Imitations of girlhood are not unusual; the dictum that your Lolita message room buddy is probably a 50-year-old man with a gut is as close as the internet comes to fable. The problem becomes more scabrous when it's girls who are imitating girlhood. Heather and I are smart, capable women who recourse to Tumblr and other online proscenia to act like shitheads. This is particularly easy to achieve when you're only a reblog button away from recycling a violent GIF of a woman with an oversized cock from a Tumblr post called "glitter-vag."

Besides the obvious trendiness of flirting through Tumblr likes, the factor that makes Heather's story relevant is that for a couple weeks she was internet-famous. Specifically, her blog was linked to by a popular website and she got a spike in followers.

Her number of Tumblr identities shortly multiplied from one to four and she seemed excited. I was skeptical. "Aren't you miserable?" I asked. "Yes," she said. "But I'm addicted." What's the point? For those of us who do, why do we wish to be internet-famous?

Of course there are many different types of Tumblr celebrity, and I'm disregarding two sizable chunks of it: the tweens and the saccharine. So, with that disclaimer duly noted, what's the deal with the Tumblr famous?

When I asked Tumblr "it girl" [Molly Soda](#) why she began using the blogging platform, she said the appeal was melding personality with indifference. "I was looking for...something that didn't necessarily involve so much emotional outpour about being mad at my mom or how much I loved my high school sweetheart, etc," she emailed. "A friend told me about Tumblr, it seemed cool. It's like a neat little package for the contents of your brain/daily life/art work that doesn't read so much like a diary."

For fellow internet wunderkind [Bebe Zeva](#) (you may know her from "authenticity farm" [Hipster Runoff](#)), the decision to start blogging wasn't about keeping record so much as it was self-invention.

"I don't think I initially chose photography as an outlet for creative expression, I chose it as an outlet for self-preservation," she said in an email. "It made more sense to immortalize myself online, where a static photograph of myself could be accessed over and over again by people who were actually interested."

The guy behind [richwhitelesbian](#), Jimmy H. (he asked that his full name not be used), agreed that he rarely shows his heart on his sleeve. “The great thing about Tumblr is that it has very little connection to my daily life,” he said. “I think that’s what appeals about it to a lot of people. It’s hard to find someone specific on Tumblr, which is in sharp contrast to Facebook and Twitter.”

Which isn’t to say that Tumblr isn’t about identity—although Jimmy also claims that “the closest thing I have to an aesthetic (as somebody who primarily posts text jokes and nonsense) would be a ‘comedic voice,’ and I wouldn’t say I have one.”

But if Jimmy is to be believed, why are the Tumblr-ers blogging consistently enough to have identifiable brands? The answer may lie in a phenomenon that’s of particular interest to me, which culture critic Kate Durbin termed “the teen girl Tumblr aesthetic,” a term which Durbin and coauthor Alicia Eler coined in an essay on the arts blog [Hyperallergic](#).

The teen girl Tumblr aesthetic, they wrote, “hijacks the notion of adolescence, attempting to reinstall it into adults...through nostalgia, hypersexualized female bodies and fleeting, sugary feelings.” Or, in the words of a GIF still in the early stages of circulation, “Damn I look cute. But I’m far from harmless.”

Don’t be fooled by buzzwords, though. While the teen girl Tumblr aesthetic is most frequently employed by women, boyishness online often addresses the same themes. When I interviewed Durbin for this article, she stipulated that boyishness and “teen girl” aesthetics on Tumblr share a long list of signifiers, including Disney, Apple, fashion, celebrities, porn, and “abject uses of the body, like bruising.”

Anime, which is popular with male Tumblr users like [richwhitelesbian](#), is probably the arch-staple of the teen boy pantheon for many reasons. It’s nostalgic, it’s branded, and often it’s sexual. The moon-eyes of anime characters are equal parts absorptive and aggressively vocative, much like many of the Tumblr famous.

Likewise, successful Tumblr users tend to be playful. One image—it’s impossible not to find innumerable examples of highly rebloggable prototypes—is of a blooming pink rose with a wavy green line of Word Art that reads “Fuck me from behind.” Another is a GIF of a dancing bikini babe crashing down an escalator. It’s more than kitsch. It isn’t just comical for its diglossia with florals, it’s also facetious: Fuck me from behind, right in my rosebud, it says.

According to Durbin, this “tweaking,” particularly when it comes to sex, is pretty much the point. “You see a lot of pornographic images—butts turned into a mirrored prism, Sasha Grey twitchy GIFs, things like that,” she said. “The images are highly sexualized but I find it hard to believe someone would get off to them. I think the tweaked images are the most interesting to me—the way in which these sorts of fetishized cultural images are being messed with by kids who are sometimes undermining the original messages, or at least acknowledging (consciously or unconsciously) by tweaking them that they are malleable, that they are a cultural idea that can be shaken up.”

Jimmy—the outlier among my interviewees—says Tumblr culture conditions its users to confuse irony and sincerity. “Tumblr and the personae people use on it create this endlessly repeating series of layers of sarcasm and irony to the point where nobody is ever sure if they’re being serious or not because they don’t feel like sorting out the context and motivations behind their words, they’re just acting on conditioned reflex and intuition. I’m no exception,” he said.

Tumblr may be about identity, but it’s playful, not personal. Similarly, Tumblr fame seems to demand a high-wire act that balances flat affect and sincerity. Molly Soda, the most famous of my interviewees, is also professedly the most sincere.

One of the moments in Bebe’s interview that caught me off guard was when she repositioned irony as a response to “haters. “Most internet presences would rather be seen as ‘quirky’ and ‘hilarious’ than ‘beautiful’ and ‘provocative.’ It is simply safer....part of the internet experience is assuming a

critical audience," she said. "If there were no critical audience, everyone would act genuine at all times."

Although Bebe is probably the personality most concerned with "haters," all three of my internet celebrities admitted that Tumblr had become a critical component, if not of identity, then of self worth.

"It feels like I'm happier since I started Tumblr but I think that's not necessarily a direct result from popularity," said Molly. "Although, Tumblr and my presence on the Internet has played a huge role in the development of my life, especially post-college and to not acknowledge that that has somehow improved the way I feel would be silly."

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Jimmy and Bebe are more upfront about the validation they get from reblogs and "hearts," which are Tumblr's version of Facebook's likes. In a rare moment of sincerity, Jimmy lamented, "There was a time when I had a big head about it and I alienated a lot of people." (He wouldn't elaborate.)

Bebe, on the other hand, was positively gossipy, stating, "I am only valuable if I am liked....The digital arena has made it easy for women to harvest the validation they are taught to desire from strangers....If I don't have any new notifications, I take it extremely personally," she wrote.

"Since buying an iPhone in February of this year, I have experienced dramatic mood swings throughout the day because I am more able than ever to measure and remeasure my self-worth according to quantified attention," she said. "As my audience's interactions with me fluctuate throughout the day, so does my confidence and temperament. I always get extremely angry at around 2 PM PST because very few people are on the internet are responding to my content."

But it's not just a numbers game. "Sometimes the 'likes' I get on Facebook and Tumblr do the opposite of making me feel validated," Bebe said. "If the people who 'like' the photo are uncool in my eyes, I feel misunderstood and frustrated. I wonder, 'why would this photo appeal to this person? Did I miss the mark and accidentally create something approachable?'"

Bebe, who wrote me a total of nine single-spaced pages and toggled quickly between self-effacement and celebration, is certain that she is "not nearly as well-known as someone like Molly Soda." I'm not sure Bebe's right about that, but one of the reasons Molly may be more Tumblr famous than Bebe is that Molly doesn't preach identity as an empty capitalist construct. For Bebe, playing with identity means "rebranding."

Bebe isn't wrong to connect capital and selfhood, but if the zeitgeist is about what Kate Durbin calls "tweaking," branded identities can pose a problem: You can't ironize or even evolve something that doesn't exist.

Although Bebe constructs herself as pure invention, playfully capitalizing "Real Self" throughout our exchanges, it's obvious that her experience of selfhood online hasn't cemented. How could it? Her audience is too diverse. Her last sentence to me was written in a different font and probably copy-pasted: "You know how a regular person sees the internet as 'just this thing' they use for maybe two or three hours a day? That's how I feel about real life."