



# Conviviality through creativity: Appealing to the reblog in *Tumblr* Chat posts



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## ABSTRACT

Research examining linguistic creativity on the internet has tended to describe various forms of creativity found in online “chats”: that is, in technologically-mediated “conversations” taking place synchronously among multiple users interacting in the same virtual space. In this study however, we focus on a different type of “Chat”: a newer social media discourse genre, and one that is a built-in feature of popular microblogging platform, Tumblr. These “Chats” are brief, imagined dialogues, posted by a single user. Focusing on a representative selection of 90 popular (i.e., highly reblogged) Chat posts, we illustrate two common strategies used by authors of creative Tumblr Chats: intertextual references to a wide range of cultural phenomena, and those referring to “relatable” first-person situations (i.e., “Me” posts). Our qualitative, interpretive discourse analysis draws on central concepts from Bakhtin, and shows how authors of Chats rely on creative practices, such as polyvocality and double-voicing, in order to produce posts that other Tumblr users are likely to find humorous, and/or relatable.

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## 1. Introduction

Online discourse is often characterized as playful, humorous, and creative. Yet very few studies of digital media have focused primarily on this topic. In this article, we turn our attention to a type of social media post known as a “Chat” – a genre that now appears on multiple platforms, but which is one of the affordances built into Tumblr, a popular microblogging platform. Rather than referring to those virtual conversations taking place synchronously among multiple internet users interacting in the same virtual space, the “Chats” we refer to here are brief, imagined dialogues, posted by a single user. These types of Chats occasionally appear on other platforms as well (e.g., Twitter, Facebook), but only on Tumblr is “Chat” presented as one of several interactive options on its user interface. Focusing on a data set of 90 “popular”<sup>1</sup> Chats, our purpose in this study is to examine some of the discourse strategies that Tumblr content creators exploit in order to construct

playful and humorous texts – in other words, to create the kinds of posts that other Tumblr users will be most likely to like, share, or reblog. We concentrate specifically on those Chats which have elicited the highest number of responses, in order to restrict our focus to those which have achieved wide circulation.

### 1.1. From IRC to “Chat” posts

As Jones (2012) points out, “all creative expression builds on what has come before it” (p. 166) and, in many ways, the playful nature of the Chat post as a newer social media genre shares similarities with earlier forms of online chat, such as IRC (Internet Relay Chat), where ludic activity has been previously documented and described (e.g., Deumert, 2014; Goddard, 2016; North, 2007; Thurlow, 2012). For instance, in one of the earliest studies of creativity online, researcher Brenda Danet and her colleagues observed an online interaction, which they described as “a virtual party” on IRC (Danet et al., 1997). This interaction, which took place in 1991, included two individuals who, using the pseudonyms “Thunder” and “Kang,” engaged in a playful simulation of smoking a marijuana cigarette in an online chatroom. Danet et al. illustrated how Thunder and Kang creatively improvised, using a combination of textual and typographic resources, to co-construct this imagined performance. Thunder and Kang’s chat included both textual representations of actions (e.g., *\*puff\**, *\*exhale\**, *\*passes joint\**), as well as typographic simulations

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<sup>1</sup> We considered any Chat that had received over 10,000 notes to be a popular one. “Notes” refer to the total number of responsive uptake activities a post has received; this includes both “likes” as well as “reblogs.” By using notes as a measure of popularity, we determined that these Chats have been appreciated and/or widely-circulated by many Tumblr users.

(e.g., ssssssss, used to represent dissipating smoke). This type of “role-playing” interaction was far more relationally – rather than informationally – oriented, and it very much highlights users’ engagement in ludic forms of self-expression. However, a key difference between those earlier forms of chat (i.e., IRC) and the Chat posts that we are concerned with in this study, is that in IRC, discourse creativity is a co-constructed performance, whereas in social media Chat posts, discourse creativity is a solo achievement. This points to an interesting shift in social practices: one which locates creative performances online moving from collaborative, co-constructed activities (such as those documented by Danet in the early days of the internet in the 1990s and 2000s), to creative performances as individual accomplishments. Of course, we are not saying that people are no longer collaborating online to produce creative content; rather, our point here is that this type of social media Chat (as a solo-authored “invented dialogue”) is an online genre that appears to be newer, since it has – to our knowledge – not been previously attested or described in the research literature.

Today, Chats have become a cross-platform phenomenon, and can be found on a variety of social media sites, such as Facebook and Twitter. For instance, Fig. 1 shows a Chat post from the novelty Twitter account, @AcademicsSay. As is typical of Chat posts, the main function of this text appears to be one of entertainment, rather than the transmission of any serious information. In this example, the three “voices” represented are not those of individual people, but rather, they are playful, imagined personifications of grammatical voices (i.e., active, passive) – as well as an invented, humorous, “third” voice (i.e., *passive-aggressive* voice).

In what follows, we will illustrate how playing with multiple voices (i.e., “real” voices, fictional voices, imagined voices – and sometimes a blend of these) lies at the heart of Chat authors’ creative processes.

While it is difficult to pinpoint the exact origin of this genre, “Chat” has appeared as an interactive option on its user interface since Tumblr was first launched in 2007 (<http://storyboard.tumblr.com/post/22380369570/peter-vidani-on-the-evolution-of-the-tumblr>; <https://unwrapping.tumblr.com/post/52920837387/tumblr-2007>). An early Youtube video tutorial from 2007, which demonstrates how to use Tumblr’s features, includes a voice-over narrator explaining what to do with Tumblr’s Chat function (i.e., “You can create conversations...”), while simultaneously demonstrating a Chat dialogue between two imagined participants (“dude” and “chick”) being created in real time, presumably by a single user (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Te8p6hASiis>). Moreover, because Chat is *not* a built-in feature of other social media platforms’ interfaces, we speculate that this genre may well have originated on Tumblr – eventually crossing over and finding its way to other social media sites.

## 1.2. Tumblr

Under the umbrella of social media, van Dijck (2013) distinguishes between social networking sites (SNSs), whose main focus is on providing ways for people to connect and interact, and user-generated content sites (UGCs), which focus on the production of creative material. Tumblr is categorized as a microblogging site, which offers features of both SNS and UGC sites, with both dimensions equally emphasized. A user of Tumblr is afforded ways to directly connect with other users through direct messaging, and public “asks.” There are also less direct ways of interacting, through what Varis and Blommaert (2015) call “responsive uptake activities,” such as reblogging and liking (p. 35). In addition to these SNS features, Tumblr is well known for its unique, original user-generated content (UGC), which spans a wide range of

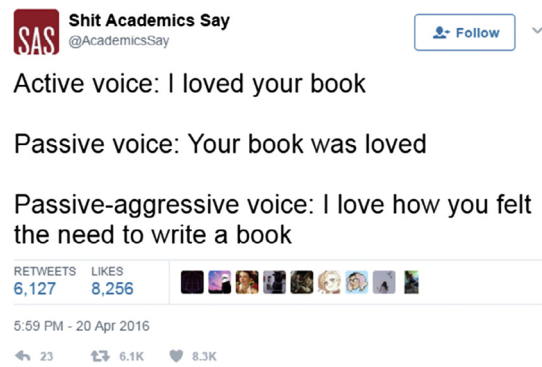


Fig. 1. Example of Chat Post from Twitter.

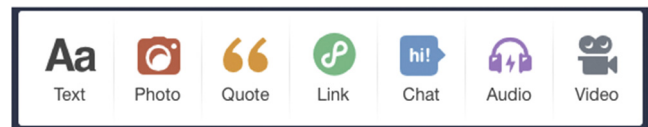


Fig. 2. Tumblr toolbar.

multimedia post types. Fig. 2 shows the toolbar from which users select the format they wish to use when creating a post.

As Fig. 2 demonstrates, Tumblr supports multimedia posts including photos, audio, and video, as well as gifs and gif sets (Tumblr.com, 2016). The most common post types tend to be Photo and Text (Chang et al., 2014).

Tumblr was founded in 2007 by web developer and entrepreneur, David Karp, who intended to create a site for “tumblelogging,” or short-form blogs (Tumblr, 2016; Bercovici, 2013). Tumblr membership is free, requiring account and username creation. After joining, users can not only create their own blog posts, as on a traditional blogging site, but they can also follow (and be followed by) other blogs. This follower/following system is part of what makes Tumblr more of a community rather than a collection of separate personal blog posts with restricted audiences. As Chang et al. (2014) have observed, Tumblr, with its dense network structure, is a more tightly knit community compared to other blogging websites. Once a user follows a blog, all posts by that blog appear on the user’s dashboard (similar to a home page), in reverse chronological order. The dashboard, shown in Fig. 3, is the main activity interface, from which users view, interact with, and create posts.

Scrolling down the dashboard, users see all the posts by all the blogs they follow, as well as their own posts. Users can choose to “like” or “reblog” these posts. Liking a post saves it to a personal archive that can be accessed later, while reblogging reposts that post to their own blog (then viewable by all of *their* followers, on their followers’ dashboards) with the option to add text/picture (s)/gif(s) underneath. In this way, each time a post is reblogged, it receives exponential exposure. If a user follows a large number of blogs, they are likely to see the same popular posts appear multiple times on their dashboard. Reblogging is different from “sharing”: when a user reblogs a post, the original post’s source is kept visible as a clickable link at the bottom of the post – and on Tumblr, reposting without the original source is discouraged (Deller, 2015). All user interactions with a post contribute to its total number of “notes,” which can range from zero to millions.

In terms of user demographics, a slight majority of Tumblr users are female (Bourlai and Herring, 2014). Many Tumblr users are also “millennials” – i.e., over half of Tumblr users are under the age of 25 (Chang et al., 2014; McGrath, 2016). One large-scale study of

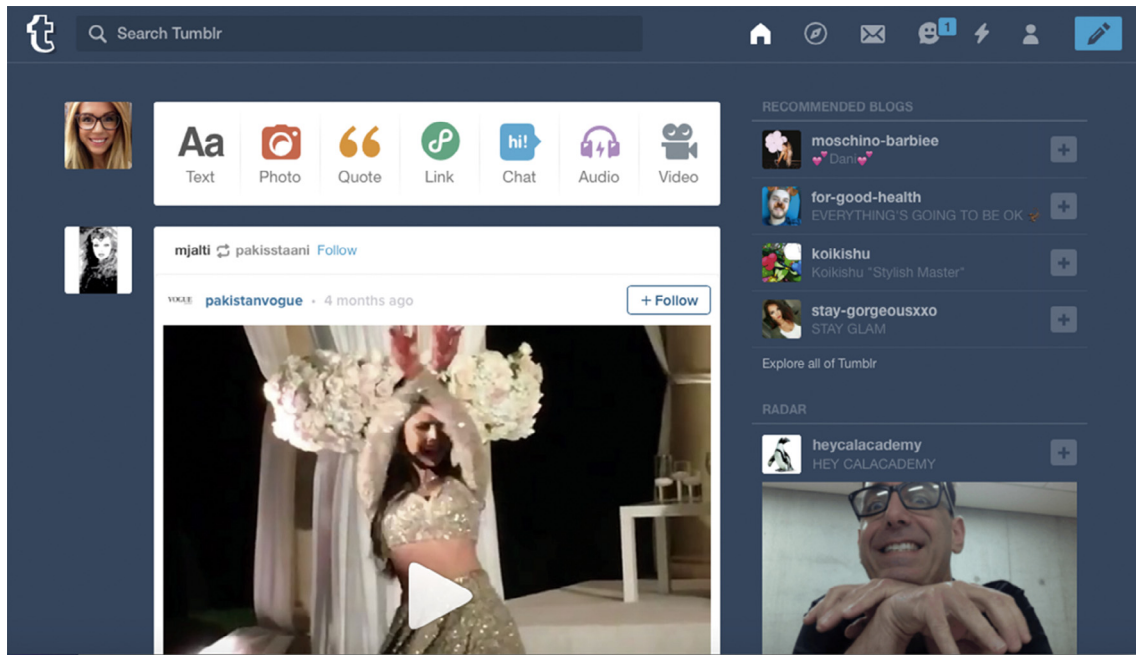


Fig. 3. Tumblr dashboard.

Tumblr users' behavioral patterns found that the most-mentioned tags on the platform included *art*, *fashion*, *photography* and *music*, leading its authors to conclude that Tumblr "is centered around user hobbies and interests" (Xu et al., 2014, p. 6). Related to this, Tumblr has also come to be associated with various fandoms, or groups of individuals who are fans of particular fictional series, music, etc. – forming online collectives, or subcultures (discussed in more detail in Section 1.4).

### 1.3. Tumblr Chat posts

As seen in Figs. 2 and 3, Chat is one of the options for post format. Chat posts tend to be concise, consistently formatted, pieces of text. Once a user clicks on "Chat," a form appears, as shown in Fig. 4, which can be filled in as a progressive interactive exchange.

Chat posts appear as dialogues (or, less frequently, as monologues), presented similarly to what one might see in a theatrical script, or a screenplay. On the left side are the names of real, fictional, or imagined participants, separated from their "utterances" (or represented thoughts) by a colon. There is an option to add a title to the post, which appears in a larger font at the top. Users can also tag the post, which makes it searchable through Tumblr's "Explore" option. Many Chat posts are comprised of text only, although some do combine both text and image (e.g., photo, screenshot, gif). Fig. 5 shows an example of a Chat post whose meaning relies on a combination of both text and image.

Another convention that appears in some Chat posts is the use of asterisks around segments of text which express non-verbal actions or feelings (as seen in Fig. 5) – a convention that dates back to much earlier forms of online communication (e.g., Danet, 2001). The number in the bottom left-hand corner of the Chat post in Fig. 5 shows the total number of "notes" (i.e., likes and reblogs) that the post has received: in this case, almost half of a million. Our aim in this article is, through an examination of Chat posts, to add to an understanding of Tumblr users' textual practices, especially those practices that involve the creative blending of various

voices. At the same time, our specific focus on those Chats which have been widely circulated additionally sheds light on some of the norms and values that operate in this particular digital environment.

### 1.4. What makes Tumblr unique

With over 300 million registered users (Statista, 2016), Tumblr is currently the second largest microblogging platform following Twitter. Yet scholarship on Tumblr remains relatively scant. A recent bibliometric study found that only 61 published academic papers made reference to Tumblr, compared to a similar study of Twitter, which identified over 1000 publications (Attu and Terras, 2017). None of the studies reviewed have highlighted, focused on, or drawn attention to the genre of Chats.

Tumblr is a digital context that promotes certain types of sociality. Over the last decade, Tumblr has become associated with various counterpublics<sup>2</sup> as well as a wide-range of taste communities, or fandoms. For instance, Renninger (2015) in his study of asexual counterpublics on Tumblr, describes the site "as a venue for in-group communication," citing several other studies which have discussed how "Tumblr is a platform used by feminists, queers, trans\* people, and alienated youth to communicate to each other, respectively" (p. 1520). This is likely in part due, as Fink and Miller (2014) explain, to the general ethos on Tumblr, which is one of acceptance and inclusivity. Still other scholars have documented how Tumblr is a vibrant, productive site for networked collectives of fans of movies (Kapurch, 2015; Thomas, 2013), television programs (Hillman et al., 2014a,b) and video games (Deller, 2015). Most scholars agree that these types of networked publics, or online communities, flourish on Tumblr because of the platform's distinctive technological affordances and constraints (Dame, 2016; Deller, 2015; Oakley, 2016; Renninger, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> Counterpublics are defined as small, public spheres of marginalized groups, which are often situated in conflictual relations with dominant groups (Renninger, 2015).

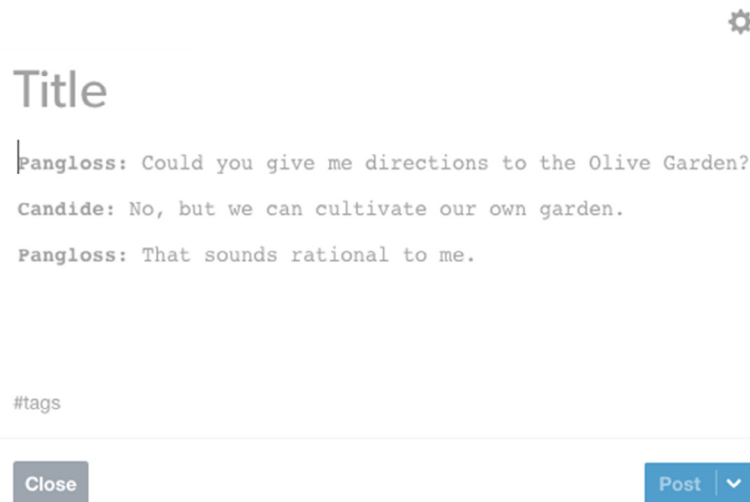


Fig. 4. Example of a Chat Post.



Fig. 5. Example of a Chat Post with Text and Image.

One of these affordances is pseudonymity, which tends to be associated with greater freedom of self-expression. Many Tumblr users equate this pseudonymity with their ability to “be themselves” on Tumblr, without fear of having their posts monitored by family and friends (Renninger, 2015, p. 1520). As Renninger explains, there also tends to be less context collapse on Tumblr because, unlike Facebook, on Tumblr users are not tied to their true identity through the use of a real name. Furthermore, on Tumblr, there is far less emphasis on users’ profiles than on many other popular social networking sites.

Related to this is another key affordance: Tumblr’s network structure, which is based “followers” rather than “friends.” This means that affiliations on Tumblr are driven by interests rather than real life connections. In the words of one of Hillman et al’s participants: “[Tumblr]’s more interesting than Facebook. It’s engaging because I’m looking at things about *my own interests*, as opposed to dumb things people I know are saying about their lives.” (2014a, p. 6, emphasis ours). Hillman et al. (2014a) explain that having “sharing interests” is structured quite differently on Tumblr, compared to Facebook, for example:

Sharing an interest in a subject on Tumblr is not exactly the same as claiming interest on Facebook. Tumblr offers no explicit way to “like” a general subject in order to build a personal profile. On Tumblr, users share interests by posting to their blogs and, eventually, following users who consistently produce interesting content. In a sense, Tumblr requires users to *show rather than tell what their interests are* (p. 9, emphasis ours).

One of the main ways in which Tumblr users actively perform their interests is by making intertextual references.

As several scholars have found, intertextual references are, in fact, a significant mechanism for community building on Tumblr – whether those references are linguistic, visual, or multimodal (e.g., memes, GIFs). Because “groupness” on Tumblr is discursively performed rather than explicitly claimed, communities on Tumblr tend to be “fuzzier” than those found on many other social networking sites: “Tumblr allows for fluidity of engagement and a community with no clear boundaries to define membership” (Deller, 2015, 3.6). In addition to its tag-based architecture (Dame, 2016), intertextual practices and shared references are actually what enables Tumblr users to discover others on Tumblr with shared interests, leading to the formation of loosely-formed communities. Citing Thomas (2013), Deller (2015) describes Tumblr as a site of “intertextual play.”

Beyond Tumblr’s technological features, a number of user-generated conventions have also emerged on the site, such as the previously-mentioned emphasis on reblogging (which attributes content to its original source) rather than reposting (which only links the content to the most recent person who posted it). As a “self-described creative platform,” it makes sense that Tumblr’s reblog system “makes the identification of creators, or at least original posters, more conspicuous than other SNSs do” (Renninger, 2015, p. 1522).

The aforementioned affordances and conventions not only allow “countercultures” to thrive, but they also foster “affective publics.” As Kanai (2017b) explains, Tumblr “is a digital platform that is particularly attractive for young people [... as a] largely anonymous space creating the conditions for affective flows and connections” (p. 2). Although individual users on Tumblr are not identifiable in terms of their name, age, or location, certain types of relational bonds are nevertheless “set up on the basis of *recognition of the feelings and experiences articulated in the posts*, rather than of the bloggers themselves” (Kanai, 2017a, p. 297, emphasis ours). As will be discussed below, most popular Chats on Tumblr rely on a sharedness of references, or a sharedness of experiences,

for their interpretation – rather than on knowledge of their authors' identity.

### 1.5. From *conviviality* to 'reliability'

As mentioned, Tumblr users build their blogs through posting original content and/or reblogging, liking, and commenting on posts that others have created. Interestingly, one computational study, which examined the trends associated with 10 billion Tumblr posts collected over a 4 month period, found that the bulk of activity on Tumblr actually consists of liking and reblogging; fewer than 7% of the posts in the study's sample comprised original content (Xu et al., 2014). Miller (2008) was one of the first scholars to observe this shift in social media community practices, noting that users do not just use platforms to talk to each other or to create content, but they also maintain their networks through interaction with posts by liking, sharing, reblogging, etc. Although Miller referred to such actions as "phatic" and "empty," more recently, Varis and Blommaert (2015) have argued that these kinds of online activities (which they call "response uptake activity," or RUA) serve an important purpose for users.

Referencing Malinowski's (1936) concept of "communion" (rather than communication), which stresses interaction that functions primarily to create and maintain group membership rather than to present propositional content, Varis and Blommaert (2015) argue that actions such as sharing and liking are "identity statements expressing, pragmatically and metapragmatically, membership of some group" (p. 35). Therefore, when a user reblogs a Chat post that features the voices of fictional characters from an 18th century philosophical text (as, for instance, in Fig. 4), that user is not only showing their appreciation of that text, but is also signaling their affiliation and membership in a particular group(s) of Tumblr users, by identifying themselves as someone who understands the reference.

Varis and Blommaert (2015) summarize this phenomenon of identifying oneself as part of a loosely connected group on social media as "collective conviviality":

Here we begin to see something fundamental about communities in an online age: the joint focusing, even if 'phatic,' is in itself not trivial, it creates a structural level of conviviality, i.e. a sharing at one level of meaningful interaction by means of a joint feature, which in superficial but in real ways translates a number of individuals into a focused collective (p. 43).

When a Tumblr user likes or reblogs a post, they become members of the collective of users who have also liked or reblogged that post. This serves as a loose link between not only writer and liker/reblogger, but also between all other likers/rebloggers of that post. The larger the collective for a post, indicated by the number of "notes," the more popular that post is assumed to be. Together, users who participate in RUAs contribute to collective conviviality on the platform. Why each individual user identifies him/herself as part of a collective who chooses to interact with a particular post can never be fully known. However, aligning ourselves with Kanai (2017), we argue that one likely explanation for this choice is the reader's recognition or identification with some element in the post – or with being able to somehow relate to the post's message. Where the former is concerned, as noted with respect to the Fig. 4 example, intertextual references to a wide range of cultural phenomena can serve as links between author and viewer, creating a bond through the shared background knowledge – or shared affinities – required to understand the reference(s). However, another feature of texts that seems to foster collective conviviality, and thus generate high numbers of RUA – especially on Tumblr – is their "reliability."

The word, *reliability*, has undergone a recent semantic shift. Having previously denoted an "ability to be related to something else," its current popular usage can now instead be glossed as "enabling a person to feel that they can relate to someone or something" (Merriam-Webster, *Relatable*, 2016). This latter definition has become especially prevalent among younger speakers (Zimmer, 2010), and it is a common descriptor of content that is employed by some Tumblr users. For instance, a Google image search of "Relatable Tumblr post" yields a multitude of user-generated posts from the blog, *so-relatable.Tumblr.com*. There are several other, similar Tumblr blogs, dedicated to the creation and circulation of "reliable" posts in a variety of formats – text, image, gifs, Chat posts, or a combination of these. Fig. 10 (discussed below) provides an example of one of these self-proclaimed reliable posts, which appeared in our own data set.

As Kanai (2016) explains, Tumblr texts which present "reliable moments" are those which "invite the reader to construct the world and the self in similar categories" (p. 6). The content of many of these types of Tumblr posts is presented as a first-person experience, yet, almost paradoxically, these personal experiences remain generic enough for others to be able to relate to them – ultimately leading to a sense of connection among Tumblr users. Kanai (2017b) describes the affective logics that undergird Tumblr: "This is a space in which a sense of commonality and likeness is offered through the circulation of texts, through Tumblr's reblogging and liking functions. Here, humorous moments are circulated based on their 'reliability,' constructing an intimate public in which likeminded readers are invited to participate, relate, and belong" (p. 5). Thus, the specific, individual identities of both authors and readers (which, as discussed earlier, are much less salient on Tumblr than on other social networking sites), are irrelevant, as "the ability to make meaning [is] based on personal knowledge that is social knowledge at the same time" (Kanai, 2017b, p. 13, emphasis ours). This notion of "reliability" is central to our analysis of Chats on Tumblr, especially to what we call "Me" posts (a category illustrated by the example in Fig. 5, shown earlier, and Fig. 10, discussed below). As we will show, reliability and intertextuality appear to be the dominant principles that characterize highly reblogged Chats.

### 1.6. Linguistic creativity, intertextuality, and polyphony

Linguistic creativity is often associated with great works of literature, or other forms of aesthetic production. However, a number of language scholars have recently turned their attention to more "everyday" forms of creativity (e.g., Carter, 2004; Cook, 2000; Crystal, 1998), such as joking and verbal play, which all competent language users are capable of. This type of creativity includes the formal properties of language (e.g., wordplay and puns, metaphors, alliteration, repetition, parallelism, etc.) as well as the larger ways in which "language is used in situated social contexts to create new kinds of social identities and social practices" (Jones, 2016, p. 62). The latter is especially relevant when considering instances of linguistic creativity in online environments.

Since the 1990s, the internet has been described as a space that invites creativity, playfulness and humor. As one of the earliest researchers of the topic observed, online communication is "especially conducive to the activation of a play frame," further explaining that, particularly in contexts where "identity is disguised, participants [...] can engage in 'pretend' or 'make-believe' behavior of all kinds" (Danet, 2001, p. 8). Although Danet was writing about interactions in IRC (internet relay chat) taking place in the mid-1990s, her observations about the creative, and often ludic, expressions and performances found online are no less relevant today. And on a site like Tumblr, where individual users' identities are masked through the use of pseudonyms, this language play

often involves the creative appropriation, adaptation and transformation of real, imagined, and fictional voices.

One set of discursive resources which are often mobilized by language users for creative ends are the related Bakhtinian (1984, 1986) notions of dialogicality and polyphony. Dialogicality, or “the intrinsic addressivity and responsivity of all texts” (Maybin and Swann, 2007, p. 442), encompasses any type of intertextual reference. Social media users often make references to popular culture texts, for example, when they post a line from a song, or a popular film, to comment on a situation in an online environment. Intertextual references are ubiquitous in many types of digital media (as summarized in Vázquez, 2015) – and figure prominently among Tumblr users’ social practices, as discussed earlier.

Polyphony refers to appropriating, mixing, enacting, or impersonating, the voices of others. This can involve incorporating the voices of actual individuals, or it can refer more generally, to the blending of different styles, genres, or registers. As Baxter (2014) explains, polyphony denotes creative uses of language wherein multiple “voices are juxtaposed and counterposed in ways that generate a creative energy, synthesis or productive outcome beyond the original” (p. 36). Creative processes are often associated with hybridity or blending, in other words, with “linking previously unrelated ideas, concepts or elements into new patterns” (Jones, 2012, p. 6). Examples of polyphony in Tumblr Chat posts include creative blends, when voices representing very different domains of experience are unexpectedly brought together in a single text.

Finally, a more specific type of polyphony is double-voicing, where “in one discourse, two semantic intentions appear, two voices” (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 189). Instances of double-voicing can be observed in many social media contexts: to give one example, when users “animate” a celebrity’s voice, as though they were speaking for, or “ventriloquizing,” that individual. Sometimes this appropriation of another speaker’s voice is done as an act of affiliation or admiration (i.e., uni-directional double-voicing); whereas, other times, it can function as critique or parody (i.e., vari-directional double-voicing). Double-voicing is used by the authors of those Tumblr Chats who seemingly present the voice of a single “character” (or participant), yet present two different – and often conflicting – meanings.

## 2. Methods

Because we were interested in understanding the situated practices and meanings associated with posts that appear – and are circulated – on a specific platform, our study is informed by both emic and etic perspectives.<sup>3</sup> As a collaboration between one researcher who has been a member of Tumblr for over 6 years (the second author), and a second researcher who has less direct experience with the culture of Tumblr (the first author), our analysis benefits from both insider and outsider perspectives. In the present study, our methods foreground a detailed, interpretive analysis of discourse, which is informed by the aforementioned Bakhtinian concepts of polyphony and double-voicing. Because social media discourse tends to be richly intertextual (e.g., Shifman, 2014), Vázquez (2015) suggests that when analyzing intertextuality online, it is helpful to be an insider (or at least a participant observer) in the specific online community under investigation, in order to be able to recognize instances of intertextuality in the first place, as well as to be able to understand their more nuanced, local meanings.

<sup>3</sup> As Angouri (2010) explains, “The terms emic and etic are widely used in the social sciences to refer to accounts that are either particular to a certain group or system (emic) or observations about a group of system from the standpoint of an outsider (etic)” (p. 41).

### 2.1. Data collection

The data analyzed comprise a sample of 90 Chat posts, collected over a 3-month period in early 2016. These Chat posts were identified using the “Explore” function, through which Tumblr allows for searches restricted specifically to Chats, and which also expands the search to a larger pool of Chats beyond only those Chats that appear in an individual member’s personalized feed. Individual chats were selected based on Tumblr’s built-in quantitative measure of popularity, the “note”: a “note” refers to a Tumblr user’s interaction with the post, by either reblogging it on his/her own Tumblr site, or simply clicking the “like” button. We saved only those Chats that had 10,000 or more notes, and we stopped once we had downloaded 90 Chats that fit these criteria. We used these sampling criteria – i.e., focusing only on the most popular examples, rather than including those which had received just a handful of notes – because our goal was to identify common features of those Chats that were found to be most appealing to (at least some subset of) Tumblr users. Jones (2012) explains the link between online creativity and conviviality: “To be considered creative, such practices must result in products [...] in which *some measure of value* – whether it be aesthetic, psychological, or social – can be discerned” (Jones, 2012, p. 165, emphasis ours). The “measure of value” in our case is determined by the RUAs,<sup>4</sup> numbering in the tens of thousands.

All of the Chats that fit our criteria were written in English. The Chat with the lowest number of notes had 10,423 notes, and the one with the highest had 601,362. The average number of notes in the data set was 175,930, and, as will be seen in the examples below, many posts had more than twice that number of notes. Considering the issues raised in AOIR’s guidelines for *Ethical Decision-Making in Internet Research* (Markham and Buchanan, 2012), we opted to neither gather any information about, nor elicit information directly from, Tumblr users.<sup>5</sup> Instead, our main focus is on the creative uses of discourse found in popular Chat posts.

### 2.2. Data analysis

Once the sample was collected, we carried out an inductive, thematic analysis of the posts in order to identify overarching patterns within the data, coding both for common themes as well as for repeated discourse patterns that we observed. Drawing on the related Bakhtinian notions of polyphony and double-voicing, we looked for the various ways in which authors of Chats appropriated, blended and re-mixed different voices in novel and unexpected ways. As Jones (2012) points out, “Creativity mediated through new technologies [results from] processes of combining existing resources to create new meanings” (p. 168). Often this involves the re-purposing of existing voices, texts, or genres in new discourse contexts.

Using open coding in our analysis, we then grouped related codes thematically. Working together, we identified several trends. We consolidated our data into two main categories: those Chats that relied primarily on intertextual references (which included references to cultural phenomena such as Harry Potter, McDonald’s, etc.), and “Me”-posts, where (ostensibly) some aspect of the author’s personal experience served as the primary locus of meaning. Furthermore, all of the Chat posts consisted of one of two types of dialogues, either: (a) multiple “participants” interacting with

<sup>4</sup> RUAs, as defined earlier, refers to “responsive uptake activities.”

<sup>5</sup> The dominant convention for self-identification on Tumblr is the use of pseudonyms, as discussed earlier. Respecting the privacy of individual Tumblr users, we have refrained from including their pseudonyms with the data reproduced here. (For a fuller discussion of ethical considerations related to representation of online data sources, see Chapter 8 in Kozinets, 2010).

each other, or (b) single participants interacting with (different versions of) themselves. As we will illustrate below, participants whose words, thoughts, or feelings are represented in Chats can be either real or imagined, animate or inanimate. While many of the Chat posts in our data set rely on intertextual references to mass media and/or popular culture phenomena to communicate their meaning, the majority of the posts (N = 74) in our dataset included “Me,” as either one of the participants, or as the sole participant, represented in the Chat. The following section begins with the analysis of three typical examples of Chats that rely on intertextual references to popular culture to communicate their meaning, and concludes with the analysis of two typical “Me” Chats.

In the following section, we illustrate our categories with close interpretive analyses of five representative examples. We identify recurrent discourse strategies that authors use to produce creative – and often humorous – texts, as well as to create some type of connection with their audience.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, since our focus is specifically on those Chats associated with tens of thousands (and, in many cases, hundreds of thousands) of “notes,” our analysis sheds light on particular forms of creativity in these texts that are most likely to lead other Tumblr users to reblog, like, or share them.

### 3. Findings

#### 3.1. Intertextual references to (popular) culture in Chat posts

The Chat shown in Fig. 6 is a typical polyphonic post, with multiple voices represented. It relies on several intertextual references to convey its meaning, and it is exclusively text-based, rather than multimodal.

This Chat post simulates the discourse structure of a police interrogation, as it is often represented in U.S. films and television programs, while incorporating an indirect reference to the (now completely re-entextualized) title of internationally famous singer, Shakira’s (2006) pop song hit, “Hips Don’t Lie.” The Chat author creates three separate “characters” with unique viewpoints within the dialogue, each with their own role: a police officer (“cop”), Shakira, and Shakira’s hips. By juxtaposing a usually serious conversation taking place between a police officer and a suspect, and inserting an improbable imagined participant into the dialogue (by animating, and giving voice to, Shakira’s hips),<sup>7</sup> the writer co-constructs a humorous situation with the reader, drawing on their shared knowledge of the title of the song “Hips Don’t Lie,” which is referenced only indirectly here. The language play is rooted in the contrast of the concept of lying, which is shared both by the song lyrics and the discourse situation of an interrogation. In the original context of the song, Shakira’s hips not “lying” was a metaphor suggesting that her dance movements were not contradictory of her true feelings. However, the denotation of “lying” is different when situated within the frame of a police interrogation, where “lying” typically refers to someone not telling the truth about their knowledge of a crime. Here, in the imagined context of a police interrogation, the imagined entity of “Shakira’s hips” literally do not lie, as they betray Shakira by telling the truth – thus contradicting her alibi.

<sup>6</sup> It is worth mentioning that the majority of Chats in our dataset relied exclusively on text in order to communicate their meaning (i.e., 86%); far fewer (14%) combined text with other semiotic resources (i.e., images, graphics, or emoji), as in Fig. 5. As a result, our focus is on the Chat as a primarily textual genre. Therefore, a discussion of multimodal Chats is beyond the scope of our study; however this promises to be an interesting direction for future research.

<sup>7</sup> This animation of a celebrity’s body part is not an isolated instance of internet humor. As soon as Angelina Jolie was seen at the 2012 Oscar Awards wearing a gown with an extreme thigh-high slit, a novelty account for *AngiesRightLeg* appeared on Twitter. The author of this account humorously posted several tweets, writing from the perspective of Jolie’s leg.

Shakira is represented as expressing her dismay at this betrayal, at the end of post, by uttering the first part of an epithet, *son of a . . .*

Creativity here results from creating a new discourse out of two existing discourses (Toolan, 2012). More specifically, this example blends voices from two completely unrelated domains of experience: Shakira song lyrics and an (imagined) police interrogation. As Forceville (2012) explains, this type of unexpected conceptual blending is often at the core of many creative processes. Furthermore, the rhetorical trope of animating, or giving voice to, a body part (i.e., Shakira’s hips) is a device which may be associated with more literary forms of creativity; however it occurs here as part of an “everyday” act of creativity.

In order to understand the intended humor in this post, the reader must have knowledge of mass media representations of police interrogations. The opening question, *Where were you last night?*, followed with an alibi of being at home sleeping is a stereotypical adjacency pair found in cinematic and television representations of dialogues between police officers and suspects, and is therefore immediately recognizable to individuals who have been exposed to multiple iterations of this formulaic discourse structure. Yet, the reader also must be familiar with the song being referenced, because even though the humorous message is reliant on the concept of lying, nowhere in the post can the actual full song title (or even the word, *lie*) be found. This requires not just recognition, but also additional inferring by the reader(s) of the post. Finally, in order to fully appreciate the post, the reader must also be familiar with the colloquial expression, *son of a bitch*, which is often used to express frustration, and in this instance, adds to the already humorous exchange by signaling Shakira’s exasperation at her inability to control her own hips – which have become unexpectedly animate and ever-truthful. Without knowledge of these intertextual references as well as the texts and genres from which they originate, it would be impossible to grasp the author’s intended meaning. Indeed, by appealing to shared background knowledge among users, this Tumblr author forges a sense of connection with his/her audience. Users who have the necessary knowledge of popular culture (i.e., specifically, knowledge of this particular Shakira song) to understand why this is humorous are then more likely to like and/or reblog this post, thus indicating their comprehension of the message; in this case, almost 400,000 other users shared or liked the Chat.

Unlike the previous example, which involved playing with multiple voices, the post shown in Fig. 7 is one of the relatively few monologic Chats in the data set, where there is only one “participant,” with a single “turn,” represented.

Even though on the surface this text is monologic, the author of the Chat uses “double-voicing” (Bakhtin, 1984) to create an imagined speaker, who is a personification of the Internet video genre, “Youtube Makeup Tutorials.” Rather than identifying an individual speaker by name, the author substitutes the name of the e-genre in the Chat format, as s/he epitomizes the discourse structure and features typically found in these videos, normally spoken by the narrator of the video (i.e., a makeup artist/beauty blogger).

To create a humorous effect, the Tumblr author juxtaposes the casual tone that is typical of makeup tutorial narrators (e.g., first person references, colloquial expressions, evaluative language), with the outrageously expensive products described. The narrator starts with clauses that would normally indicate that what follows will not be difficult to achieve (*Now, this look is very easy. . . , All you will need. . .*); however here, they are used to create a contrast. This juxtaposition can also be seen in the claim that a set of make-up brushes that cost *five-hundred dollars is such a bargain*. The reference to the *Chanel* brand further indexes very expensive, luxury goods. It is the juxtaposition of expensive items – e.g., 24 horsehair brushes, 24 karat gold eyeshadow – with the author’s performed casualness or nonchalance, that creatively constructs humor in this

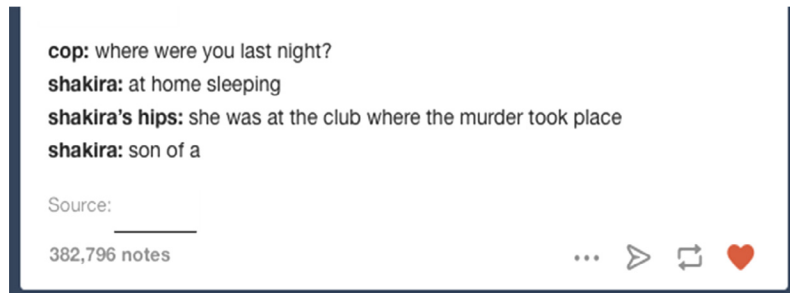


Fig. 6. 'Hips Don't Lie'.

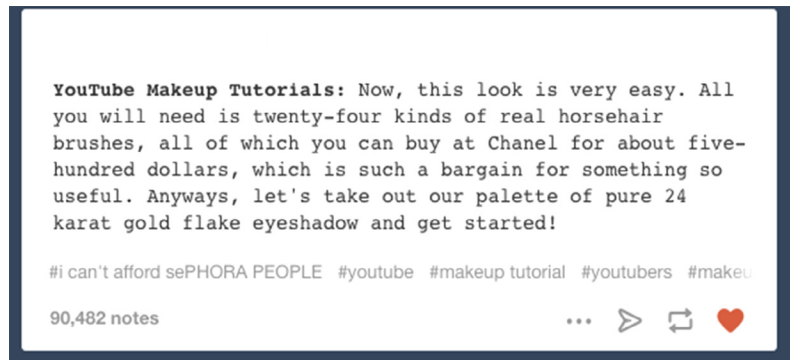


Fig. 7. Youtube Makeup Tutorials.

Chat: a parodic imitation of a YouTube makeup tutorial. This is an artful example of vari-directional double-voicing, or an instance of a single speaker using two “voices” in order to mimic or criticize, where “the second voice becomes the object of criticism, ridicule or attack” (Baxter, 2014, p. 30). In this example, hyperbole and contradiction (e.g., *five hundred dollars...such a bargain*), which are identifiable features of linguistic creativity (Carter, 2016), help to achieve this double-voicing, and simultaneously, they contribute to the “denaturalization” – or “a making strange” – of familiar kinds of texts (Toolan, 2012, p. 18): in this case, YouTube makeup tutorials.

Fully appreciating this post requires that readers not only know that *Youtube* makeup tutorials exist as an internet genre, but that they also recognize the particular discourse style that is characteristic of these videos (Kelly-Holmes, 2016). Moreover, only those individuals with an in-depth, first-hand familiarity with the genre will also be aware that these YouTube tutorials have a reputation for using the most expensive makeup products on the market (i.e., brands found in department stores, rather than in drugstores), which many viewers may not be able to afford. Although the cost of the products used in most YouTube makeup tutorials is not as exorbitant as those referred to in this Chat Post, readers who are familiar with the video genre will likely recognize (and, by extension, relate to) the post’s exaggeration of this characteristic feature. Thus, this post appeals to a fairly narrow population, which is limited to a rather specific group: Tumblr users who are also viewers of YouTube Makeup Tutorials. And very likely, this is the reason why this particular Chat has comparatively fewer likes/reblogs than the Chat in the previous example.

Although the Chat shown in Fig. 8 relies primarily on popular culture references to convey its meaning, it also includes a first person participant (i.e., “Me”) in the imagined dialogue.

The content of this Chat is based on several intertextual references to the children’s animated cartoon, *Scooby Doo*, which has aired on U.S. television since 1969. In this polyphonic dialogue,



Fig. 8. Scooby Doo.

the author animates the voices of four of the cartoon’s characters, in addition to his/her (i.e., the author’s) own voice. Each character on the program has a trademark exclamatory word they use when something surprising – and frequently, surprisingly bad – happens. The author titles the post to give readers a sense of what it is about, and proceeds to list each character along with their trademark exclamation, building up to the last utterance spoken by “me” – presumably, the author of the post. In contrast to the child-friendly exclamations of frustration produced by the other characters in the “Scooby Gang,” the author’s utterance contains a discourse marker of uncertainty, *well*, followed by the expletive, *fuck*. The author contrasts the inappropriateness of this expletive with the list of the other characters’ speech to create a humorous effect. In the fictional world created by this author, the inappropriateness of the author’s utterance would thus lead her/him to be “kicked out” of the characters’ group, the “Scooby Gang” – as

indicated by the title of the Chat. As illustrated in both this example and the example in Fig. 6, the juxtaposition of two planes of reality, along with the insertion of an unexpected or incongruous element, as well as the inclusion of voices which represent strikingly different registers, are devices that are exploited by authors of many Tumblr Chat posts, in the crafting of imagined humorous scenarios. Once again, it is the unpredictable blending of two different domains (i.e., the reality of experiences associated with “me,” and the fictional world of Scooby Doo) that results in a creative text. This creativity is further underscored by repetition – another discourse feature associated with creativity (Carter, 2004; Toolan, 2012) – realized, in this case, as not one, but four, repeated instances of the characters’ trademark expressions.

Rather detailed knowledge of “Scooby Doo” is required to understand the humor intended in this post. Not only does the reader have to recognize that the author is talking about Scooby Doo through the use of “Scooby Gang,” s/he also needs to know the names of the main characters and their trademark exclamations. In order to understand the contrast, the reader also needs to know that Scooby Doo is intended for children, and that an expletive like *fuck* would never appear on the program. These shared intertextual references, and the background knowledge they entail, connect the author of this Chat with other Tumblr users (i.e., 299,706 of them), who respond by marking their identification with, or ability to relate to, the content invoked by this author, by liking or reblogging the post.

Chats which rely on intertextuality for their meaning include one or more instances of a wide range of cultural references, often from the mass media, or other digital media. However, these intertextual Chats also exhibit some variability: they include both monologic and dialogic formats, and some include a first-person author (“me”), though most do not. As seen in the examples described above, many of those Chat posts which use intertextual references to generate their meaning are also characterized by polyphony, or the juxtaposition of multiple voices, often from different cultural domains. As Baxter explains, “polyphony calls attention to the co-existence in any text or talk of a plurality of voices which do not fuse into a single consciousness, but instead exist as different style or registers, generating dialogical dynamism among themselves” (p. 36). However, in a few other instances (e.g., the Youtube makeup tutorial), Chat authors exploit a form of double-voicing in which a single participant is represented as speaking with two “voices,” in order to express two different meanings. In these cases, the effect is usually parodic.

### 3.2. “Me” Chat posts

Unlike the preceding examples, which rely on shared understandings of particular cultural references, “Me” posts are somewhat different. Rather than relying on shared background knowledge of a specific mass media text (or a set of texts, or a larger textual genre), “Me” posts instead invite readers to consider a sharedness of experiences or feelings. Whereas the previous examples tended to be more polyphonic, involving the impersonation of (multiple) others’ voices, the following examples tend to rely much more on double-voicing within a single “speaker”: i.e., *me*.

The Chat post shown in Fig. 9 is written in the first person, yet it enacts a dual perspective, as the voice of a single imagined participant (i.e., “me” and “me 10 min later”) is constructed to represent two contrasting stances.

In other words, a kind of double-voicing within the same represented “person” occurs here, in order to present the author (“me”) in two different mindsets: “me” acts as a different interlocutor, with a different reality, than “me 10 min later.” “Me” first presents her/himself as being *a very private person* in a short, simple, one-line utterance; whereas “me 10 min later” provides a paragraph

of text comprising a detailed personal story, and ends with an offer to share another lengthy narrative, as well as personal credit card information. A humorous effect is created by this obvious contradiction between different versions of the same self. The contradiction in stances is further supported by contrasting temporal references, such as *now that we’ve known each other for exactly 10 min...* (i.e., a very short time) followed by the offer to tell a *4-h story* about a personal psychological state – something that people who have known each other for 10 min would likely not engage in. Besides presenting two contradictory voices, imagined as emanating from the same “self,” hyperbole and exaggeration (Carter, 2004; Toolan, 2012) are at the core of this author’s creative process.

In addition to the humorous effect, there is also another layer of meaning in this Chat. By using “me” to illustrate this contrasting message of viewing oneself one way and acting in another, the author is expressing an individual, personal criticism. Double-voicing is the strategy used to accomplish this contradictory presentation of self, which illustrates the author’s admission to vulnerability and personal flaws. Presumably, those Tumblr users who choose to like or reblog the post, either appreciate this performance of an internal contradiction – or they are able to relate to the larger message that we are all, at some point, likely to behave in ways that are inconsistent with our own ideas and beliefs about how we are. As was illustrated earlier in Fig. 5, “Me” posts often involve some type of self-deprecation, or showing oneself in a non-flattering or negative light. As Kanai (2017a) explains, themes of social awkwardness are common on Tumblr posts of various kinds. Such posts “... demonstrate a high degree of self-monitoring and a heightened competency in singling out minute, slightly awkward situations for the amusement of others. Failing in time management at university; eating too much; gaining weight; being bad at flirting; staying at home rather than going out and being the life of the party – these mild transgressions that are revealed [...] are neutralized, through a self-aware, self-deprecating Humor” (p. 298). These types of situations or experiences, which blend the personal and the social, are likely perceived by many users of Tumblr as “relatable” – especially those that have received high numbers of notes.

Finally, the author of the last example of a “Me” post (Fig. 10) explicitly references this notion of “relatability.” Similar to the example in Fig. 9, this monologic post is crafted from a first-person perspective, and represents two separate actions – or, more accurately, projects a represented feeling (i.e., *gets sad*), followed by a represented thought or statement – both of which were ostensibly experienced by the author, i.e., “me.” Yet beyond this level of interpretation, the Chat also metadiscursively reveals the author’s knowledge of the social *significance* of “relatability” in this particular online context, as discussed earlier. An example of vari-directional double-voicing, the first line (*\*gets sad\**) seems to be conveying an earnest emotion, however the subsequent text attributed to the same author in the next line, projects a contrasting stance of cool, detached irony, as s/he simultaneously mocks, or critiques, “relatable” posts. By further adding a hashtag before the word, *relatable*, the author suggests that this post will be just one of many, in a sea of other, similarly-tagged, “relatable” posts, which ultimately lack any real, personal meaning. Thus, the author’s cynical metacommentary offers a Tumblr insider’s critique of the perceived phoniness or superficiality of so-called “relatable” posts, through which their authors accrue social capital on Tumblr, by (perhaps intentionally, or even disingenuously) exploiting personal problems, self-criticism, or self-deprecation with the hopes of gaining more likes and reblogs. Because most of the popular “Me” posts in our data set were indeed found to be self-deprecating or self-critical (as illustrated here in the examples in Figs. 5, 9 and 10), and because these posts were associated

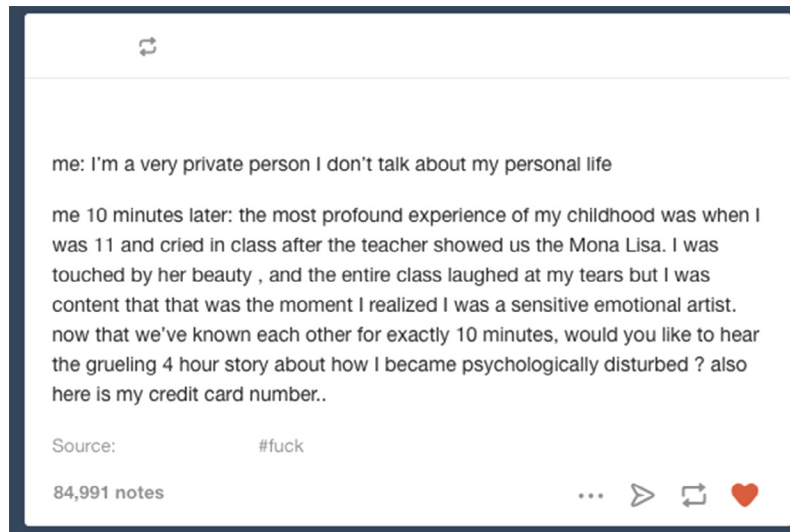


Fig. 9. Private person.



Fig. 10. #Relatable post.

with high numbers of notes, Tumblr users do seem to find something relatable in these first-person messages of vulnerability.<sup>8</sup> In “laying bare the device” (Shklovsky, 1965) – by literally drawing attention to the artifice of the text itself – through vari-directional double-voicing, the author of the Chat in Fig. 10 demonstrates for us precisely how these context-specific practices and values operate in the social context of Tumblr. In addition to vari-directional double voicing, verbal irony is the key creative feature in this example.

#### 4. Conclusions

This study contributes to existing research on various forms of linguistic creativity in online contexts, by analyzing a different – and possibly newer – type of “Chat.” Although Tumblr is the only social media platform that offers Chat as a built-in feature of its interactive dashboard, these types of Chat posts now appear on many other social media sites as well. As we have shown, on Tumblr, the authors of popular Chat posts create opportunities for connection with other Tumblr users in two main ways: (1) by making intertextual references to popular culture texts, which are likely to appeal to other users of the same platform who happen to share the relevant background knowledge and/or an affinity for those

cultural products being referenced; or (2) by creating scenarios that are somehow “relatable,” which although attributed to an individual author (i.e., “Me”) are nevertheless general, or generic, enough for others to identify with them (Kanai, 2015, 2016, 2017a,b). The majority of these “relatable” posts tend to show the author as somehow vulnerable, or cast him/her in a less-than-flattering light.

More specifically, our analysis has highlighted the various ways in which authors of these popular Chat posts appropriate and mix different voices in their texts. In general, Chat posts rely on two main types of voicing. In polyphonic Chat posts, multiple voices are brought together in a single dialogue, one of which is usually unexpected or somehow incongruous with the others. In contrast, in texts which exploit some form of double-voicing, the same “speaker” communicates two different meanings within the same post; most often, one of these voices is used to mock, or parody, the other. Being able to effectively mock a particular genre (e.g., YouTube make-up tutorials, or “relatable” Tumblr Chat posts) requires that the author has in-depth knowledge of that genre. In other words, these types of verbal performances that make use of vari-directional double voicing rely on the author’s insider status in the community that either produces or consumes that genre. Interpreting the intended message also entails the audience’s familiarity with the genre, as Planchenault (2015) elaborates:

Indeed, to enjoy fully a performance of voice, readers and spectators must first decipher the diverse meanings and linguistic

<sup>8</sup> We found multiple references to *sadness*, *loneliness*, and *anxiety*, along with themes of social awkwardness and existential angst, recalling Renninger’s (2015) observation that subgroups of “alienated youth” are among Tumblr’s users.

associations that are encoded in the performance. To recognize instances of staged language and genres requires enculturated audiences (Coupland, 2004), whose familiarity with varied registers (in and out of the realm of media), developed through socialization and cultural experience (such as repeated contacts with films, the written press, or a particular magazine), enables them, for example ‘to read the semiotic value of a projected persona’ (p. 39).

Although Tumblr is often associated with images, and other types of visual content (e.g., Chang et al., 2014), our analysis here has shown that there are also highly creative textual practices currently taking place on the same platform. Jones (2016) observes that “part of the creative potential of digital technologies lies in the way in which they can facilitate creative intertextuality and ‘remixing’” (p. 73). As we have shown, in exploiting the possibilities of the Chat post format on Tumblr, some users blend multiple voices to create artful, stylized, verbal performances – and judging by their large numbers of reblogs – these performances *do* indeed appeal to at least some members of their intended audience. Chats may have originated on Tumblr due to its interface design, but they have continued to thrive as a productive form of everyday creative self-expression because of the cultural practices and community norms that operate on the site. Other Tumblr users show their appreciation of this creativity by liking and reblogging those Chats with which they can identify. These are interesting trends to consider, because as Jones (2012) has pointed out, in the present era of social networking, “creativity has, like never before, become an important form of social capital” (p. 166).

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