

# out of the blue

## How Tumblr Rose, Raised Us, and Fell Off

By Ava O'Malley

Across generations, alternative young people have had a knack for finding discreet spaces to convene. At the turn of the millennium, millions flocked to the internet to share interests, meet like-minded people, and express themselves freely. MySpace and LiveJournal, as well as various online forums and blogging platforms, were the cornerstones of social media as we know it today.

A handful of these sites were particularly attractive to creative, alternative, or outcast types. In the early to mid 2000s, the Scene, Emo and Cybergoth subcultures flourished on MySpace. DeviantArt welcomed young artists, particularly those interested in anime and manga, to share their work. LiveJournal and WordPress stood as pillars of the personal blog, and provided spaces for netizens to write about whatever they wanted.

After MySpace fell from popularity in the late 2000s, Tumblr, founded in 2007, was one of the platforms that attracted the creative and alternative users that were looking for a new place to share visual, audio and written content. Tumblr, unlike the other blogging platforms, was much more visual and media-focused, and placed an emphasis on photos and gifs. This helped beckon new users to the platform through Google image search results, but also prompted the formation of “aesthetics,” or niche internet concepts solidified by visuals.

As more and more bloggers joined Tumblr in the early 2010s, the aesthetics and off-beat essence of the website began to creep into other social media platforms, creating the closely held “Tumblr era” that most millennials and early Gen-Z folks identify as the years between 2012 and 2016.

It's hard to boil down this aesthetic to a stapled set of items, albums, outfits or photos. Indeed, black and white images, grid print, knee socks, “Born to Die” and “AM” played on Crosley record players, pastel hair and glittery LUSH bath bombs capture the essence of the era. Deeper than that, though, the golden era of Tumblr for many can be described as a time of deep self discovery, interpersonal connection, and finding a place in which one belonged.

The magnetic draw that Tumblr had on people from all different pockets of the internet resulted in a social website uniquely driven by self-expression, allowing users to cultivate their own pages with greater personalization, and encouraging the blending of interests, conversation, and media through its first-of-its-kind tagging system. Tumblr sparked a fire for fans and

fandoms, something that the site ultimately became synonymous with.

At just 11 years old, I joined the platform to look at edited photos of One Direction and read self-insert fan fiction, oblivious to the butterfly effect that my registration would have. Even now, I haven't fully left the platform. I've been introduced to music that I've built my personality upon, established a spiritual path that has been a lighthouse through some of my most uncertain times, and made friends I still talk to on a regular basis. When I was fifteen, I met my first love on the website shortly after embracing my queerness, which I was encouraged to do through conversations with my new online friends. Tumblr shaped my political ideologies and personal values, how I dressed and spoke and behaved.

Some may remember the legendary battle between “Hipster Tumblr” and “Fandom Tumblr.” With all respect to the hipsters, fan studies expert Dr. Samantha Close cites fandoms as the backbone of the platform, and the reason that Tumblr had such a quirky and queer reputation.

“‘Quirky’ is probably to downplay it. But ‘queer’ was definitely very prominent. (There was) a vibe of lots of people who felt on the outs in their local communities, in these kind of more marginalized identity groups, found other people like them and found a larger group,” says Close, referring to the links between fan culture and queerness on the website. “(These people) were able to recognize, *hey, I'm not alone, there are a lot of other people who are experiencing these things, and we can kind of develop our identities together.*”

The people I met online became just as, if not more, integral to me as my real life friends. I am who I am because of this website. Being able to connect with other people that didn't quite fit in, had niche interests and a similar sense of humor, made the website feel like a second home. And I'm not alone in this.

Kon, 24, joined Tumblr in 2012, when they were in the eighth grade. Much like myself, Kon was brought to Tumblr through their fandom interests, especially when seeking out images and fan art.

“Originally I started blogging about memes and fandoms— DC comics mainly. Shortly after that, I made some friends on Tumblr that were in the LGBT community. Over

time, I got more comfortable blogging about personal things and opening up more, especially around people who were in similar situations as me,” he said.

“Tumblr had an impact on my personality and development more than anything else. Tumblr helped me come to terms with being not cis and not straight, which was huge at the time, because I was attending a Catholic high school and dealing with a lot of guilt. Tumblr also provided resources on topics that weren't as accessible or really talked about in my non-online environments. For example, Black Lives Matter and police brutality. Same with any LGBT issues. I couldn't get that information anywhere else and it had a huge impact on my development,” Kon added.

Hope, 22, who joined tumblr in 2014, said that the conversations with other Tumblr bloggers she engaged in regarding race, sexuality, gender, and social justice put her ahead of her peers, especially once she entered college, in political discussions. On top of providing education, Tumblr also helped Hope come to terms with her sexuality and led her to new interests.

“I don't know if I would've achieved as much, academically, if it was not for the social justice and literary topics I was introduced to on Tumblr,” Hope said.

Users began to slowly leave the platform for Instagram, Twitter and Discord around 2016 and 2017[1]. I began noticing a slowing down of the rate of content creation, as well as more and more of my mutuals deactivating, around this time. Tumblr's unexpected decline in 2016 and 2017 felt heartbreaking to me, especially after the election of Trump in the Autumn of my junior year of high school.

As a teenager, Tumblr taught me about feminism, rape culture, and consent. Tumblr taught me that it was fucked up that women were expected to be thin, hairless, and submissive 24/7, and that I was a victim of these demands myself, and internalized them to use against the other female-bodied people around me. As I was arming myself with new knowledge, I felt invincible. I felt prepared to fight the patriarchy before I even had my driver's license. When Trump was elected, the power in numbers that I felt among my friends and followed blogs seemed to turn into dust around me. The progressive, paradigm-challenging world that we had buried ourselves in at the dawn of our adolescence buffered, and a deep sense of hopelessness settled in as a political figure was inaugurated who symbolized everything I, and many of my online friends, stood against.

Around this time, I began to notice an increase of scrutiny against trans people, particularly against people who used gender neutral pronouns, on a much larger scale. Trump's election granted a sense of permission to millions of people who were eager to unleash their hatred and rage, in real life and online. Not only did his election inflict great harm against marginalized people and disillusion millions of hopeful young people, but it also changed the world's perception of what was and was not acceptable on social media. [2]

At the same time, Tumblr's earlier acquisition by Yahoo! set off a sequence of events that would eventually lead to the platform's value plummeting in 2016.

The migration away from Tumblr was accelerated by the website's banning of adult content in November, 2018, after the site's filters failed to remove child pornography. As Tumblr was one of the only places where artists, sex workers, and other creatives could post whatever they wanted, the ban of adult content, although for a sound reason, made the blogging platform unfriendly to many of its users. After the ban of NSFW was instated, users voiced complaints about their non-sexual content and accounts getting flagged.

"I stopped using Tumblr as much, probably around 2018. I still made the occasional vent post or reblogged things here and there, but most of the people I knew on there had gone to Twitter, especially after the NSFW ban," Kon said. "There was a huge drop in content and users on there. I made the move over to Twitter, even if I didn't use it quite as much."

Tumblr was driven by free expression, and this limitation on content felt like the final push to the end, and removed a significant chunk of both its value and user base. In 2013, a year before the site's true peak, Yahoo! Purchased Tumblr for 1.1 billion dollars. In August, 2019, less than a year after the NSFW ban, the site was purchased by the Wordpress parent company, Automattic, for a mere \$3 million. Perhaps Tumblr could be something of a sleeping giant. With the increasing instability of Twitter, following a change in CEO, and Instagram's extreme advertising ploys due to their new parent, Meta, some users have been returning to Tumblr. "I think Tumblr is one of the winners here," says Dr. Close. "Probably because of a sense of nostalgia that people have for the Tumblr era, of having a community that was so self-consciously radical, self-consciously queer, self-consciously young. A lot of these are things that Twitter could have been, but is not and is being discouraged even more."

With near perfect timing to accept the droves of internet users without a favorite platform, Tumblr lifted some restrictions of their NSFW ban. In November, 2022, Tumblr announced that nudity would once again be permitted, as long as users select the correct "community label" to filter content. Users active in 2018 may remember the controversial wording of the initial nudity ban. In 2022, "female presenting nipples" will no longer be flagged. Certain restrictions, such as showing genitalia or sexual acts, is still off limits.

New and returning bloggers are tentatively approaching the platform. The "Tumblr girl aesthetic" has gained popularity among TikTok Users, many of whom were in elementary or middle school during the so-called "Golden Age." The "Goncharov" meme, elaborate worldbuilding for a 1973 Scorsese film that never existed, was born on Tumblr in late November 2022 and made headlines for its well-developed, albeit fake, content. Even artists from the site's peak are touring, releasing new music, or back in the public eye: Matty Healy's at the front of mind again, as The 1975 embarks on their "At Their Very Best Tour," Lana del Rey has her fans salivating for the release of her latest album, and a 31-year-old Jesse Rutherford's name is everywhere once more, now that he's dating newly 21-year-old Billie Eilish.

"I don't think Tumblr truly will return to what it was during its height. Too many big creators that made the popular content are gone, whether they deactivated or moved elsewhere," said Kon. "The website itself has really been going downhill in the past years, especially on mobile. I find it nearly impossible to use with the ads, which is really too bad."

Hope echoes this belief. "There's been a change in the way that social media is run... Now, (social media) is a lot more about marketing oneself, which I think is due to the rise of influencers. It used to be about sharing your interests in very candid ways. I don't think this exists anywhere else outside of Tumblr, but that isn't the dominant culture anymore."

Aside from the fact that the mobile app is difficult to use and that the majority of my recent followers are porn bots, a return to the Tumblr era feels improbable due a change in the attitude of today's social media users. An anchor of Tumblr's essence, as well as the overall approach to social media in the early to mid 2010s, was the straightforward and open expression of passions that Dr. Close referred to. I noticed in 2016 and onward, a general harshness and push back against this authenticity.

Being labeled as "cringe," a term that's definition is still hotly debated over, became the dunce hat of the internet. In fact, Tumblr was the wellspring of "cringe content" for many of those hunting to ridicule. Tiffany Kaitlyn wrote in an article for *The Atlantic*, "first discussions of cringe ridiculed the many soft enemies of the edgelords: Tumblr users ('SJWs'), fangirls, furies."

Opportunities for lengthy discourse, which was a common, regularly expected occurrence across Tumblr communities, were shut down by this new wave of online hall monitoring that seemed to ask, "why care?" Internet memes became more and more steeped in irony and cynicism as a surge of right wing creators, politicians and public figures became more vocal on social media.

On top of that, something is off about how these new Tumblr bloggers are using the platform. Many of them are coming from the short-form stylings of TikTok and Twitter, riding in the wake of a promised "indie sleaze" revival, with aesthetic off shoots like "coquette" and "dark academia" that feel like ghosts of pastel goth and grunge. TikTok content usually has a means to an end or a specific goal—become an attractive girl, become the best student, become insanely wealthy, make your relationships healthier—by following the steps listed in a ten second video. Tumblr, however, was a place to deepen the understanding of the self and get lost in specific interests.

I'm not sure if young people who were raised on Instagram and TikTok would have a smooth transition into a site that lavishes in jokes that have layers upon layers of background, or blogs that act more like diaries than highlight reels. On Tumblr, it was okay to vent about how depressed you were, or how unaccepting people around you were, or how lost you felt in life. There was a stronger focus on "here is what I'm interested in," than "here is what I look like," or "here is what I do."

"In a way," Kon told me, "I prefer that it doesn't return to what it was during its height. It was so perfect and it's so nostalgic to look back." 🐾