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PLATFORMED NOSTALGIA: AUTOMATTIC-ERA TUMBLR AND THE COMMERCIALIZATION OF HISTORICAL SOCIAL MEDIA NOSTALGIA

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Introduction

Drawing upon an analysis of the microblogging and social networking platform Tumblr, this paper offers a conceptualization of *platformed nostalgia* as a platform branding strategy that commodifies historical social media nostalgia, in combination with discourses of corporate social responsibility, to gain or regain social acceptance, symbolic value, and desirability amidst a social media landscape marked by controversy, crisis, and distrust.

My analysis will suggest that examples of platformed nostalgia espoused by Tumblr, as one of the last-standing darlings of the ‘millennial internet’ (Parham 2023), can elucidate what platforms see as their role and influence in the imagined past, present, and future of the social media platform economy. I also argue that platformed nostalgia is emblematic of the increasing commercialization of a ‘digital nostalgia’ (Niemeyer 2024) that centers an imagined past of social media prior to the ascendancy of Big Tech and its concomitant crises.

In this paper, I will conduct a critical technocultural discourse analysis (Brock 2018) of Tumblr in order to consider how Automattic-era Tumblr (from 2019 onwards) has platformed popular anxieties about platform capitalism and sociotechnical change via its marketing and governance. This paper will ask: to what extent, and in what ways, has Tumblr *platformed* historical social media nostalgia? What wider sociocultural contexts and discourses have shaped the platform’s engagement with, and co-optation of, historical social media nostalgia? What does this suggest about how the platform wishes to be understood and interpreted within the cultural imaginary?

Background

In their longitudinal study of social media, memory-making, and nostalgia, Jungselius and Weilenmann (2023) distinguish between *personal* social media nostalgia (how *I* was) and *historical* social media nostalgia (how *it* was), arguing that many users engage

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in both. While many social media platforms encourage and nudge users towards *personal* social media nostalgia, given their function as repositories of memory, of user-generated narrations of individual and collective life experiences, the fast-paced and perpetual beta logics of many platforms poorly equips them to nudge users towards historical social media nostalgia.

Tumblr, on the other hand, which has deliberately maintained its core aesthetic, functionality, and affordances throughout its 18-year history, is technoculturally better positioned to do so. Additionally, this nostalgic impulse has been intensified by the centrality of discourses of decline and stagnation within Tumblr's imaginary, most often in relation to the platform's 2019 acquisition by Automattic for US\$3 million, compared to Yahoo's 2013 acquisition for US\$1.1 billion. Tumblr's perceived obsolescence and lack of commercial success has enabled it to accrue symbolic value as one of the last-standing remnants of a supposedly simpler era within social media history prior to platform capitalism as we know it. What Tiidenberg et al. (2021) subsequently term 'Tumblr nostalgia' has been articulated by users, journalists, and academics alike, who have positioned the platform as a counter-cultural foil for larger social media platforms like Facebook, X, and Instagram (Watercutter 2019; Hannell 2024). What this paper explores, however, is recent moves from the Tumblr platform itself to court and co-opt this vernacular discursive framing.

Methods

In order to address my research questions, I will conduct an analysis of Tumblr's marketing (for example, its newsroom, About page, and official cross-platform profiles) and governance (Community Guidelines, Staff blog posts, and more), which will be supplemented by trade press and news coverage of Tumblr (particularly coverage of interviews with key employees). My broader approach builds on what Brock (2018) calls critical technocultural discourse analysis: a method that draws upon the principles of critical discourse analysis to focus on the ways that both designers and users 'perceive, articulate, and ultimately define the technocultural space in which they operate and exist' (1016). As Tarleton Gillespie (2010) notes, the language that platforms (and platform employees) choose to publicly describe themselves to stakeholders, including both end users and advertisers, is consequential (also see Gillespie et al. 2020). The discursive work undertaken by platforms represents real and substantive attempts to establish the very criteria by which these technologies will be judged, which warrants sustained analysis. My analysis will focus on the platform's addresses to the public across its marketing and governance in the period following Tumblr's acquisition by Automattic in August 2019.

Preliminary Findings/Analysis

My preliminary analysis reveals that Tumblr's marketing and governance has, in recent years, discursively platformed both personal and historical social media nostalgia. My analysis will focus on the latter, which forms the basis for my conceptualization of *platformed nostalgia*. I will argue that platformed nostalgia operates as a commercial co-optation of what Keightley and Pickering (2012) call a 'popular' or 'vernacular

nostalgia', which in this context is produced by, and articulated by, social media users in relation to an imagined utopic and egalitarian past of social media (see Adelman et al. 2025).

My analysis subsequently offers insight into Tumblr's recent attempts to negotiate and accrue symbolic (if not monetary) value through its co-optation of historical social media nostalgia and its positioning of the platform as one of the last-standing symbols of an earlier, and supposedly simpler, era in internet history. While the viability of the platform is in doubt, it has nevertheless been making clear and substantive interventions into how its past and present is imagined in a fluctuating social media ecology, working within distinct 'discursive registers' (Gillespie 2010, 355) of nostalgia to manufacture a revival, or 'renaissance', of the platform. Across its marketing, Tumblr has been attempting to lay out a cultural imaginary within which Tumblr is imbued with symbolic value and affective resonance vis-à-vis historical social media nostalgia. For example, this register is at work in an August 2024 press release about Tumblr from Matt Mullenweg, CEO of Automattic, which asks: 'Do you *yearn* for the days when people owned their corner of the internet and expressed themselves in wild and wacky ways?' (Automattic 2024; my emphasis).

I argue that this discursive positioning of Tumblr, initially by social media users and later by Tumblr itself, intensified following Elon Musk's acquisition of Twitter (now X) in late 2022, sparking popular and academic discussion about platform decline, fragmentation, and migration. The platforming of Tumblr nostalgia has enabled Tumblr to discursively position itself within the cultural imaginary as *the past in the present* and as a liberal foil to increasingly illiberal competitors like X. Here, Tumblr reconfigures itself as a folk hero (rather than failure) amongst the giants; its obsolescence no longer evaded but celebrated. These discursive interventions allow us to elucidate what Tumblr views, or *wants us to view*, as its role and influence in social media history, even if this does not necessarily gel with the platform's internal priorities and policies in practice. Thus, while Tumblr has *platformed* historical social media nostalgia, making gestures towards social anxieties about platform capitalism writ large, its efforts to do so are nevertheless underpinned by the logics it ostensibly critiques: a mission to retain users, differentiate, and profit.

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