The Desire to be Desired:

A Socio-Linguistic Understanding of Gay Men's Perpetuation of Hookup Culture

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Abstract

This thesis examines how Queer men articulate their experiences with desire on the platform Grindr, within the framework of modern hookup culture. Despite a stated desire for long-term romantic connections, Queer men find themselves limited to platforms, like Grindr, designed for short-term encounters, leading to frustration and dissatisfaction. As it stands, there exists research exploring how Queer individuals engage with desire through mobile apps as well as research exploring the ways Queer individuals develop a sense of identity through language, utilizing their desire to perform and maintain masculinity. My thesis explores the impact of connotative language in institutional and interpersonal relationships during the coming-out process and how it can affect how individuals engage with Grindr, a crux established between both fields.

Through interviews with ten Queer men, my thesis compares stated motivations for pursuing connections with participants' lived experiences and analyzes the participants' upbringing and relationships with their Queer identities. Analysis reveals that individuals who had more open communication with their families growing up tend to acknowledge and accept their Queer identity at an earlier age than those who did not. It also shows that those who were met with opposition, particularly in the form of interpersonal language (homophobic slurs, bullying, etc.) or institutional language (like that of the Evangelical Church) then engage with their Queerness in a more reserved manner, leading to feelings of discontentment with Hookup Culture. This thesis sheds light on how nuanced language during pivotal moments in identity formation can shape limiting structures within relationships for Queer men, providing a platform on more quantitative research to be done.

Keywords: Hookup culture, Queer men, Desire, Grindr, Coming-out process

Introduction

"I'm seeing really good conversations about dating apps, especially Grindr, Tinder, and Sniffies… I prefer organic connection but sometimes I would dwindle down on my values and download these apps bc I craved connection, a lot of the times I felt empty and used after the sexual or communication transactions…" (Liranzo, [Threads], 2023).

Desire is a tricky business, riddled with double-entendre, innuendo, implication, and humans who become experts in the field of bush-beating. The art of romantic communication has become lost beneath layers of linguistic lacquer with the implicit intentions of getting to the right audience, at the right time, under the right circumstances. For Queer individuals, this becomes even more prevalent because one slip up in insinuating desire to the *wrong* audience, or at the *wrong* time, or under the *wrong* circumstances, could mean a sudden, harsh, and tragic curtain call. This is where the importance of language comes to light– where the "Friends of Dorothy" thrive, where the Hanky Code, the innocuous double tap under public restroom stalls, the YMCA, and bathhouses have developed into their own subcultural phenomena by flying under the radar of heteronormative society. For Queer individuals, to communicate the language of desire was to learn to do so in secret, was to be taught that our love and our ways of professing it were dirty, and wrong, and was to not see the light. It is imperative that we unlearn, we are untaught, and we live lightly as we go forward into the next acts of our lives.

I became acquainted with this subcultural world during the rise in online dating that happened during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 (Fortune Editors, 2021). Freshly out of high school and finally eighteen, I dipped my toes into the seemingly cool waters of experience that heterosexual friends of mine had been privy to for years. My sense of worth had, through time, become tied to my sexual identity; so much so that one of the first texts I received months into my college career was a simple "Have you lost your virginity yet?" from a close friend of mine. Grindr was seemingly the only option, and most certainly the quickest. Within moments of opening the app, a flood of nameless, faceless individuals surged upon

my freshly legal profile. I learned so much in so little time about "gay culture" and how to navigate

online, Queer spaces– learning to emphasize certain attributes and to hide others. It was then I grew to

question why this space was our only option for finding partners and how even in the online spaces

outside of it there was this sense of compulsivity especially in terms of how we communicate desire

through "thirsting" and innuendo on public platforms. With every fleeting encounter, there was an

emptiness that followed which only fueled the loneliness. The loneliness then led to seeking out more

comfort, creating a seemingly endless cycle. I found that while this feeling seemed so private and

personal, it was not mine alone. I grew enamored with the ways that we as Queer men articulate our

motivations and our sexual identities. I wanted to see how others within my community felt, and to ask, in

an open space, how we could move forward in such a way that our desire to be desired is less linked with

our sense of worth, and how we could avoid playing games within the confines of hookup culture if our

intention was truly to form a connection.

In order to begin discussing desire, it first needs to be defined. Desire will be defined in this paper

in a twofold manner: primarily, it is the longing for physical forms of intimacy, which manifests in

communications about physical bodies, as well as the act of sexual intercourse/sexual behaviors, also

defined as lust; secondly, it is the longing for emotional forms of intimacy or the interest in a romantic

connection with someone else which underscores the physical conversation and occurs more in an

individual's motivations, also defined as romance.

In this study, I will primarily focus on men who love/have sex with men (MLM/MSM), which

will also be referenced as "gay" or "Queer" (the umbrella-term for identities that don't conform to the

standard heterosexual, cisgender identities in dominant culture). There currently exists a realm of Queer

study that focuses specifically on how Queer individuals utilize language in the process of developing

identity and community (Cameron, 1997; Fogarty & Walker, 2022; Hennen, 2008; Klinkenberg & Rose,

1994; Kulick & Cameron, 2003; Lyons & Hosking, 2014; Maki, 2017; Motschenbacher, 2011; Simon &

Gagnon, 1986; Zaikman et al., 2016) and there exists also another realm of Queer study focused on the

ways Queer individuals express their identity through the means of desire on social media and dating apps (Adam et al., 2011; Bauermeister et al., 2011; Brubaker et al., 2016; Cassidy, 2018; Chan, 2018; Chan & Wu-Ouyang, 2023; Conte, 2018; Garcia et al., 2012; Griffin, 2016; Gudelunas, 2012; Licoppe, 2020; McGlotten, 2013; Poost, 2018; Shield, 2018). However, there is a lack of research focused on the crux between those fields, examining the expressions of desire through the lens of that language dynamic, focusing on how individuals describe their relationships and encounters on Grindr in both the empowering and inhibiting ways it manifests. This study hopes to explore that crux by centering an individual's experiences with Queerness around their coming-out process, the stage many Queer people go through where they come to terms with their own identity and choose (or choose not) to share that to the world through various means. It is at this point where Queer individuals seem to be most vulnerable to the language of interpersonal and institutional interactions of a positive or negative nature, which then seems to color how individuals view themselves and thus, how they seek relationships.

This study examines that relationship between expressions of desire and perceptions of language in the milieu of gay men when articulating their participation in hookup culture through a humanistic lens. Through in-depth interviews with individuals online, conversations highlighted how gay men communicate both how they desire and how they feel they are desired in the Queer realm. This study sought to answer the level of satisfaction in hookup encounters and what factors play into why individuals utilize Grindr as a platform for interpersonal connection. It also explored how interviewee's stated motivations for pursuing hookup culture compared to their lived experiences on the platform. Another question this study sought to answer was how gay men related to Queer subcultures that, on Grindr, are largely defined by physical characteristics (ex. Bear, Twink, Jock, etc.) when viewing themselves and potential partners.

This introduces the idea that the "Coming Out" stage of a Queer individual's life puts them in a space that is evermore vulnerable to nuanced language in their environments, which potentially causes the stereotype of hypersexuality present of Queer men in mainstream media. This phenomenon then can be

further developed in future quantitative research studies to explore the extent of the linguistic

vulnerability during this stage and potentially see if there is any concrete causation between negative

linguistic experiences during this stage and overt sexuality or participation in hookup culture later in life.

Methodology

The goal of this paper is to evaluate, from a humanistic lens, how gay men interact with the language in

their communities, which confronts both how they desire and how they feel they are desired. This will

examine the discursive ways that bodies are categorized and evaluated as well as how that may affect the

perpetuation within, and the life cycle of, hookup culture in the gay male population. It does this through

a series of in-depth interviews with a population of 10 participants online who identify as Queer/gay men

who have used Grindr (or a similar dating/hookup app with gay men as their target audience) in the past,

or who have participated in hookup culture in a different manner (i.e. cruising, chat rooms, Craigslist

personal ads, etc.). The participants were chosen by responding to subject-recruitment advertisements in

Queer online gathering spaces on the platform Reddit. They were then asked to submit an anonymous

digital survey form (see Appendix C) in order to gain additional information about their media

representations not discussed heavily in the interview (but important to contextualize their backgrounds

and exposure to Queer media), and their demographic information.

The final sample consisted of individuals aged 20-52, of various religious upbringings (while

majority being sects of Christianity), various ethnic backgrounds (60% White, 20% Black, 10% Hispanic,

& 10% "2 or more races"), and all with some experience in higher education. All were given the option to

choose their pseudonyms as well as the option to omit any information from the interview they deemed

irrelevant or identifiable (see Appendix A for a further breakdown of demographics).

The interview process itself was done to give more insight into individual navigation of language

within the field of communicating desire, therefore, due to the intimate information, it was important that

the space feel as congenial as possible so participants felt comfortable sharing their more personal thoughts and experiences on this topic. This was done firstly by assuring confidentiality and privacy by using an online personal meeting room and asserting with audio consent acquisition using participants' pseudonyms to maintain anonymity, that everything said was completely voluntary (See informed consent script in Appendix D). This meant that any of the discussion questions (See Appendix E) which followed the overarching themes of *Queer Identity, Representations, and Dating* and *Experiences with Grindr*, were able to be left unanswered if the participant did not feel comfortable answering. Additionally, participants were assured that they may stop the interview at any time. The interviews were expected to last between 45 minutes-1 hours each with a semi-structured style conversation to allow for an open-opportunity to give insight into the participants' lived experiences in regards to this phenomenon. However, due to the semi-structured nature, and the sensitive content involved, interviews ended up lasting between 1-1.5 hours on average. After the interviews, transcripts were made using Otter.ai and then analyzed using MAXQDA in order to analog keywords or thematic elements that were discussed as a way of generalizing across the 10 different interviews. The key words were then used to select quotes representative of the different themes that came up during the course of the interviews.

Literature Review

The Language of Sexuality and Desire

In order to understand how gay men knowingly or unknowingly perpetuate hookup culture through their use of language, it is important to set up an understanding of what language exists regarding sexuality and desire. Language, whether that means "if you know you know" terminology like "Friends of Dorothy" or through physical subculture labels within the LGBTQ+ community like "Bear" and "Twink," persists in developing the understanding of our own identities both emotionally and physically. Looking into the body as it acts as a method of communicating information about oneself, we can see what specifically Queer men are expressing in their actions and how they present themselves during their pursuits of desire.

Then, by zeroing in on the subcultures of gay men as a cultural anomaly, a proper introduction can be made to how these are then practiced on social media and through dating apps.

An Identity Developed Through Queer Linguistics

In following that definition of desire that explores a dual-faceted embodiment of longing, both for physical and for emotional intimacy, this section will view the importance of influence in the largely emotional motivations behind seeking out sexual relations. This is especially as it pertains to the development of identity in Queer individuals. Firstly, it is important to distinguish what exactly "Queer Linguistics" means. Queer Linguistics is not simply the LGBTQ+ approach to language. Instead it takes from the larger Queer Theory and Critical theory in general to see how heteronormative culture becomes normative.

Heteronormativity is not created in a vacuum. It is something that is continually performed over time through discursively-produced social pressure that then places both sexual minorities and majorities in the position to live up to its seemingly impossible ideals (Motschenbacher, 2011, pp. 3-5). It exists on the binary that humans love to create regarding what is masculine and what is feminine, between what is "normal" and what is "not normal" (i.e. what is "Queer") and thus, it establishes a divide on which none of us can truly live up to because we all exist somewhere on a spectrum.

In the very same way, Queerness is not developed in a vacuum either, it is developed through discourse and language (oftentimes in secret manners or outside the direct view of dominant culture). In Don Kulick and Deborah Cameron's book *Language and Sexuality,* we can see this discursive element as it actively shapes and influences Queer development of identity. Queerness exists in opposition to the larger hetero-dominant structures and it has survived in those secret corners of undercover night clubs, in lavender pocket squares, in that place somewhere over the rainbow, and in red handkerchiefs tucked into back pockets. However, it has changed over the years as a divide has occurred between those in the Queer community who reject "gayspeak" (avoiding describing things as "fabulous" or "lovely," and actively

evading the acquisition of "the gay lisp," and those who see these idioms and the media that perpetuates them as ways of connecting with others in their community. Those who continue to use these idioms do so in ways that often flout the understanding of their heterosexual counterparts (2003, pp. 75-78). When asked about the Queer use of language some individuals reported that the intention seemed to be to confuse individuals who weren't in the "in-crowd" and that the very idea that they were unable to decipher what people were talking about as a visitor in a gay space was unsettling (2003, p. 79). This lends itself to the larger argument that homosexual identity is shaped sometimes parallel to heterosexual identity, and sometimes in completely diverging directions. This idea is something that is only accepted by the dominant culture if they can understand it or are "let in on the joke," so as to not feel like an outsider (a feeling that many Queer folk are incredibly familiar with).

There is power and politics involved in language, as Kulick and Cameron point out in their second chapter, discussing how there is an incredible difference in the understanding of identity when one names themself as opposed to when others name them. The shift through the years from "homosexual" to "gay" to "Queer" has been one that has moved through self-identification processes as opposed to those of being outwardly identified, and it has shown that it is not in the language itself but through the context of how that language is used that influences identity (2003, pp. 27-29).

Queer individuals seem to develop their identities in some relation to the sense of heterosexual identity that is deemed inherent. In the same way, their sexual identities are also developed in relation to how heterosexual individuals perform their sexual scripts. Sexual scripts organize our understandings of sexual experiences and are shaped by the social environments we are placed into. Men in particular tend to place the concept of sex as an integral, central part of their identity, their performance as active sexual agents, or pursuers of sexual congress, entwines itself with their sense of status and self-esteem (Simon & Gagnon, 1986, pp. 8-15). This also explains why some studies have found that gay men tend to be more hypersexual even in situations where stated motivations are to find a romantic partner (Klinkenberg & Rose, 1994, pp.10-12). If men's sense of identity is entwined with their sexual drive and conquests, then it

makes sense that in relationships between two men things have the potential to get more sexual more quickly than in either male-female relationships where women are socialized to take things slower and attribute their sense of identity to their sense of "purity" or virginity, and also even in female-female relationships where neither individual is socialized to explore security in their relationship or identity through sexual means.

The Queer Body: Communicative Functions Through Physical Subcultures

What do we communicate to each other with our bodies? How important is the body to communication? Horst Ruthrof in their book *The Body in Language* discusses how semiotic elements are conveyed through our corporeal forms, how language in general falls flat without assistance from non-verbal signifiers. They assert that at the center of our understanding of meaning is the human body (2015, pp. 6-21). We convey our intentions, our desires, and even perform, to a certain degree, what we want others to pick up even if that is not the truth. When men articulate a persona that is linked with their desired masculine identity they tend to over-articulate masculine expressions, one of the largest of those being their sexual prowess (Kulick & Cameron, 2003, pp. 15-17).

Where in heteronormative relationships power dynamics are implied, in the Queer community this is communicated through the labels of "top," "bottom," and "vers/versatile" meaning one who penetrates, one who is penetrated, and one who enjoys both, respectively. Historically, these dynamics can be seen in Roman homoerotic expressions, with a sense of shame being linked to being the penetrated partner in intercourse, oftentimes a designated a position for the more feminine-presenting men, lower-class individuals, or prostitutes of the time (Kulick & Cameron, 2003, p. 22). In the same way Romans associated shame with being the passive recipient of intercourse regardless of the gender of the participants, today men also associate a certain level of shame to roles and behaviors they deem "feminine." In Deborah Cameron's article, *Performing Gender Identity*, she records a discussion between five college-age men. She found that when they used a term (or similar terms/insults/slurs) to point out an

individual as "gay," what they discussed had far less to do with the knowledge of their actual sexual exploits or even romantic pursuits and was far more related to what they communicated with their bodies. To the point where someone could be labeled "gay" simply for wearing short-shorts, or speaking in a higher tone of voice, or even something like not having leg hair (1997, pp. 5-10). So to perform as heterosexual becomes synonymous with performing not just in a masculine way, but in an anti-feminine way. This could also apply to gay men, whose sex-habits are rated as more permissible than their lesbian counterparts due to them perpetuating male gender norms (Zaikman et al., 2016, pp. 1, 18-19). In order to be seen positively, gay men must act according to their gender roles which largely consists of analogizing masculinity with hypersexuality.

In the formation of a culture based around physical bodies and how those were being perceived by outward groups, subcultures within the Queer community based around the differences found in our bodies also began to develop. It is important to understand Queer subcultures in order to see how the Queer body is communicated in terms of desirability and masculinity.

In an article addressed to potential counselors of LGBTQ+ individuals, Justin Maki lays out the importance of recognizing Queer subcultures as something that stems from social ostracization in dominant society. In moments where individuals struggle to identify themselves and categorize their feelings, available options help them feel included to a certain degree. Then, because the inside of the minority group of the Queer identity is still so vast, subcultures were defined in relation to the values held by the community, many of which are born from that desire to communicate and perform masculinity. Levels of hairiness, muscularity, general body size, etc. can be physical ways of placing people into categories, with certain levels in each area corresponding to a specific label (2017, pp. 4-5). Peter Hennen's *Faeries, Bears, and Leathermen* explores the dynamics of two primary hemispheres of homosexual subcategorization that have developed simultaneously: the hypermasculine and the effeminate. He addresses that, historically, gay men were associated with the feminine archetype as "women in men's bodies," which came to a head in the 1970s with gay men obsessively lifting weights,

dressing masculine, and promoting stereotypically masculine images like the construction worker, the

military man, and the cowboy in order to break out of that box of femininity (2008, pp. 11-13).

On one end of the masculine-feminine spectrum are bears and leathermen (modernly referred to

as leather daddies), among others: bears are the inherently masculine figures that are not as easily picked

out as being gay (physically characterized by their larger bodies, their abundance of body hair, and their

choice in clothing) and leathermen as the Queer manifestation of the perfect image of masculinity: "the

straight man on a bike" (physically characterized by their clothing choice and their traditionally more

rugged appearance). They existed to refute the dominant conflation of gay men with "Twinks," and the

dominant image of gay men as "fluffy" or "limp wristed," which began to code this performance of

hypermasculinity as inherently erotic (2008, pp. 137-140).

The other end of the spectrum consists of twinks, jocks, and twunks, among others: twinks are

characterized by their lithe forms, little to no body or facial hair, and typically by their youthful

appearance. Jocks perform their masculinity by participating in gym culture and congregating in

traditionally masculine locales such as sports leagues, gyms, and sports bars, but are also characterized,

because of their dedication to their bodies, as vain (deemed a more feminine trait). A twunk is a more

recent term made for individuals who still maintain a more feminine appearance in terms of their

hairlessness and less-rugged look compared to subcultures further up the spectrum, but have taken to the

gym also in terms of developing their physical desirability placing them physically in between twinks and

jocks (Maki, 2017, pp. 7-8).

The image of the bear or leatherman seems to be socially more related to heterosexual depictions

of masculinity, and are often accepted within their own group (whilst sometimes being eroticized or

fetishized) as an acceptable homosexual image. The image of the twink and twunk seem to be

interestingly only accepted, along with the "gay best friend" trope, by the majority because they do not

challenge straight men's masculinity or threaten them in their relationships, which could be why

Twinks/Twunks report less discrimination than their Bear/Leathermen/Otter brethren (Lyons & Hosking,

2014, pp. 9-11). However, the downsides were that oftentimes Twinks and Twunks were conflated with femininity and submissiveness which oftentimes leads to rejection within their own community when compared to Jocks, Leathermen, and the Bear community (Hennen, 2008, p. 117-118, 189). It would be interesting to see through the course of my own study if these standards still hold up with the rise of anonymous and physicality-centered mobile apps.

It's important to lay a foundation for what these communities are and what they stand for in order to understand how identification and the language of subcultures (the process of categorizing and labeling based on very specific bodily criteria) affects the levels of, and participation within, desire in the gay male community. These categories seem arbitrary yet sometimes also like a point of expressing pride for the body that individuals were born with and tired of feeling ashamed of. It's noted that this is something that's important and true for individuals and how they engage with their own bodies. However, when people who identify with a specific subculture feel pressure to contort their physical body through muscularity-oriented eating disorder (ED) methods or excessive body workouts in order to have a sense of belonging or feel desired (Fogarty & Walker, 2022), it is clear that this categorization and language has dire implications for the community as a whole.

Gay Desire Expressed Through Mobile Apps

In this section we are able to see a more active approach in the pursuits that have been defined by the Language of Sexuality and Desire. The body exists as just as much of a method of communication as our words and the ways we form them. Therefore it is important also to see how Queer words, Queer motivations, and Queer bodies actively communicate. In this section, hookup culture will be defined with the intention of contextualizing this study by exploring a brief history of both it and the ways in which sexuality has evolved throughout time, also in relation to the ways that the language of sexuality has evolved parallel to it. Then, just as it has been shown how Queer identity is *formed* through one's social environment, in this section we will see how identity is *expressed* through the medium of mobile apps and

social networking sites (SNSs). From there we will take a step deeper into how specifically desire is pursued actively by social media participants through the culture that exists on Grindr. The culture of physicality, the socio-technical views of leaving the platform, and the psycho-social ways it manages to influence, are integral to frame this study's conversations with participants.

A Brief History of Hookup Culture

In the modern "sex-positive" society where sex has been commodiously democratized through Twitter and OnlyFans, it is easy to believe that humans have always been sexually-motivated and charged creatures. It is easy to believe that sexuality and the expression of it is natural, and instinctual, and is not influenced as much by socio-cultural evolution as it is by biology. It is easy to believe when looking back at Greco-Roman language and culture, or even Biblical depictions of temple prostitution and the popularity of their services, that desire and sex is intrinsic and simply masked by a culture's values instead of influenced by them.

Through an article in Review of General Psychology: *Sexual Hookup Culture: A Review* it is laid out exactly where this modern understanding of sexual liberation was developed from. Hookups used in this context (and in the context of this study) are defined as "brief, uncommitted sexual encounters among individuals who are not romantic partners or dating each other." Importantly noted, hookups are defined primarily by their noncommittal nature and not necessarily by what activities are being participated in (Garcia et al., 2012, pp. 1-2).

Beginning with the rise of cars in the 1920's, the freedom of young adults to go wherever they wished with limited adult supervision allowed for a spark in the rise of sexual behavior among unmarried individuals. This spark was fanned into a flame with the circulation of erotic photography and film. In the 1960's, a movement for sexual liberation cohabitated the feminist movement with the introduction and mass-production of contraceptive devices. During both eras as well as the eras in between, as parental expectations regarding marriage and sexual purity became significantly more lax, the rise in sexual

expression and hookups were met with a public display of outrage and oftentimes measures to limit

sexual freedom. This included obscenity laws regulating expressions of sexuality on the screen and in

photos, as well as heightened levels of prosecution regarding more public displays of desire (2012, p. 2).

It is imperative to explore the connection between hookup culture and the gay male experience,

as, in the review, it's noted that non-committal frameworks for relationships are deemed more accepted

and seemingly more prominent in the gay community than with their heterosexual counterparts. These

frameworks supposedly allow for a simultaneous pursuit of sexual pleasure with the consistent foundation

of intimacy that a romantic partner provides. It is also noted here how almost ⅓ of Queer college men

surveyed reported encountering sexual partners in anonymous, oftentimes public spaces to hookup which

include, but are not limited to, bathhouses, public restrooms, movie theaters, parks, and gyms (2012, p. 4).

This phenomenon is also a staple theme in depictions of Queer sexuality in television and film. A pioneer

LGBTQ+ program, *Queer as Folk*, was known for being centered around both the seemingly free

expressions of desire and the discourse surrounding emotional baggage involved with those sexual

exploits. Hookups both in the back of *Babylon*, a gay club the boys frequented, and in the kitchen, a place

synonymous in heteronormative culture for domesticity and family values, showed how Queer

expressions of sexuality were in opposition to hegemonic expressions, and yet it also shows how they

begin to develop their own (Matos, 2017, pp. 5-7).

An Identity Expressed Through Social Media

The ways that the senses of Queer identity are developed through the language used is significant, but the

ways in which it is *expressed* through social media, as well as through the virtual "code-switching" and

shifting of identities performed, is even more so. This will frame the ways in which this study's

participants may express their identities in the online spaces discussed in the interview process.

In our modern milieu, especially in online spaces, masculinity is correlated with a certain level of

toxicity and while there is a nugget of truth to that (for example, look under any female comedian or

beauty influencer for comments posted under their videos), the concept of bromances show a divergence

from this toxicity. Masculinity is a form of identity expression that is not exclusive to only men, but

socially, men are typically those who want to exclusively be perceived as masculine. This learned

behavior sets young boys up to spend their lives learning to navigate how to best perform their

masculinity. Bromances provide an opportunity for men to participate and engage with their "femininity"

by providing an outlet for them to be playful, effeminate, emotional, even if it is just in a joking manner,

while also balancing that with hyper-masculine behaviors such as a sense of sexual compulsivity (or

hypersexuality),where hookups are depicted as forms of social currency. This is also seen in aggressive

in-person behaviors like wrestling or intense bouts of yelling (Poost, 2018, pp. 21-24).

It is crucial to note that the expression of masculinity and freedom of emotional intimacy in these

male-dominated spaces is something that is only socially acceptable for heteromasculine individuals, and

I would argue even for homomasculine homogenous groups, but not necessarily in the intermixing of

those two groups. This dominance of masculinity in online spaces is important in the context of social

media and dating/hookup apps especially when those mediums are predominantly filled with people who

wish to be perceived as men performing their masculinity.

The active performance of masculinity has to be in opposition to something else, an "Other" if

you will, and on the other end of that binary falls performances of femininity. When looking at how

identity is expressed specifically through the medium of male-dominated media, the concept of femininity

is either placed into a socially outcast category or is turned into a fetishization or exoticization. In an

article surrounding the gay dating app, Grindr, MT Conte describes a landscape that is defined primarily

by what bodies are socially accepted or desired, and which bodies are "Othered." He defines the

limitations of what we are willing to accept as a desirable Queer identity, which largely correlates with the

homogenous phenotypes found in the heteronormative culture: muscular, (mostly) White, masculine,

"passable" (2018, pp. 1-2). This culture found on the Queer sides of social media like Twitter and

Instagram and in gay dating apps like Grindr or Scruff has led to the widespread acceptance of phrases

like "Masc4Masc" or "No fats; No femmes," or even to the perpetuation of these endorsed images through platforms in terms of the advertising they put out to promote themselves. When Queer individuals look at those images, at the people who receive the most likes, the most engagement, even the most (and sometimes kindest) messages on the apps themselves, they place themselves into the category of either desirable or undesirable, and it has the potential, as Conte says on the first page of his article, to make someone feel "like my queerness was something that could be *wrong*" (2018). Queerness as a structure exists in opposition to the dominant culture, and yet it is incredibly and increasingly more influenced by it, replicating how certain bodies, certain expressions (typically those of masculinity) are accepted and the others are flagrant or "in your face" about it. As a subculture, the LGBTQ+ community has been converging the fundamental tenets of Queerness with the predominant beliefs about "proper" masculinity and femininity through social networks and the introduction of social media and mobile apps have only quickened that convergence.

To understand how gay men use social networks to express their identities *online*, it is important to lay a foundation for how they used them *offline*, when virtual intimacies were a mere fantasy and communication was laden with innuendo and hidden from the eyes of most. Elija Cassidy's book *Gay Men, Identity, and Social Media: A Culture of Participatory Reluctance* lays down three important chapters to see how these networks evolved over time. "The Hanky Code" of the 1960's was a form of public expression under the "if you know you know" code of social understanding, a way that gay men could communicate with placement and color of handkerchiefs everything from sexual fetishes, to positional preferences, to the type of activities one is looking to engage in. In the 70's, through the rise of the Gay Liberation Movement, Queer individuals were able to live a little more openly in "gayborhoods" in largely metropolitan cities, which led to the popularized "metropolitan model of homosexual identity." Therefore, individuals who showed expressions of "camp, body-obsession, club culture, etc" became synonymous with gayness. Then this image, in the 80's with the rise of the AIDS epidemic, was criticized, but not overturned outright and a division began to occur between those who wished to appeal

to the larger heteronormative culture in order for more freedom, and those who existed in opposition to what they perceived the larger culture to be (2018, pp. 23-25). In the 90's and 00's the metropolitan model instead of becoming an opposition to heteronormative culture, began to be the only accepted model for Queerness, with shows like *Will & Grace* and *Modern Family* that depicted humorous, largely sex-less side characters or reality shows like *Rupaul's Drag Race* that, with audiences, seemed to conflate artistic expressions of femininity with gayness itself, which has likely led to the divergence we see today of people desiring only those who stand against that stereotype, whilst also falling into the guidelines laid out by dominant politics of desire. It is a seemingly endless loop of not wanting to fall into what the dominant culture expects of you, while then falling into the dominance itself (2018, pp. 26-39).

When online social networking sites like *Gaydar* appeared in the late 90's, all of these conflicting senses of identity and the ways in which they are expressed came to an impasse. Cassidy introduces a term called "Participatory Reluctance" which is when individuals partake in a specific behavior under the influence of their social environment even when normally they would not participate in this behavior. It is a space between connection and disconnection where individuals are more likely to pursue things that go against their own values so long as they are not feeling left out (2018, pp. 1-22). On Gaydar, this culture of participatory reluctance consisted of how gay men formed their own spaces online. The move from club culture to a space in which you were allowed to connect with other people who shared your identity and desires all the time allowed social mobility and solidification of cultural norms to occur much faster than it had previously. Sure, there were social categories based on phenotypic characteristics and the ability to express desire in public spaces was present, but for the first time you could display in a profile what you desired and who you were. Gay men expressed their identity then, in the only way they knew how, in comparison to each other. In one of the only Queer spaces that was essentially open 24/7 with limited risk of becoming known (due to the ability to scale your level of anonymity) beyond your comfort level, they developed in relation to how each other performed. Certain characteristics were valorized and others were criticized. The men on the site were often perceived in stereotypical ways, the main sentiment

of "I'm a deep person, I'm not like the other guys on here" which implicitly or explicitly generalized the population of people as hypersexual, rude, shallow, etc. In the process of perceiving each other, gay men managed to limit themselves in their capacity for exploring an identity that felt true. In the throes of seeking and conveying desire, Queer men were more susceptible to participating and perpetuating a culture that ultimately went against some of their values for the sake of not feeling left behind (2018, pp. 40-68).

Grindr: Navigating the Arena of Gay Desire

Desire was previously defined through the twofold manner of physical and emotional forms of intimacy. In this section, desire is primarily going to be expressed in a physio-sexual way with the underpinning of emotional intimacy as a self-identified main motivator. Desire is pursued in four different stages which will be labeled "The Interest," "The Chase," "The Act," and "The Effects," and will then be followed by a discussion of Grindr as the platform of this study's interest where Queer men actively navigate politics of desire.

"The Interest" stage consists of the profile-making and filtering processes as well as the motivations people have coming into the online arena of dating apps. Oftentimes, people report coming to dating apps looking for casual and romantic partners concurrently, which influences the ways people present themselves as well as the activities they find themselves participating in (Bauermeister et al., 2011, p. 1). For gay men, social networking sites (SNSs) are primarily used to facilitate social, romantic, platonic, and sexual relationships, with many of these connections overlapping in some capacity (Gudelunas, 2012). It is curious, however, that despite surveyed participants reporting a greater interest in varied connections in online spaces, when navigating them, gay men tend to be more drawn in by the visual stimuli presented by profiles than to the biographies the profiles represent. Logics of consumption have managed to permeate online spaces of connectivity which include, but are not limited to, efficiency, attractiveness, variety, instantaneity, and novelty, all of which greatly influence the level of interaction

people have with the profiles of others in these spaces and how deeply they allow themselves to get

involved (Chan, 2018, pp. 3-4). People are primarily assessed according to how their profile presents

them and from there, their sense of identity is judged as either a match, and worth taking the risk of

sending a message to potentially move forward, or is pushed aside as a nonviable option. "The Interest"

stage is where a lot of the understanding of hookup culture is implicit or seemingly innocent. It is easy in

this stage for individuals to say how they are "looking for love" or "not like other guys" or push certain

body types or identity expressions or even races aside by justifying it as "just a preference."

  "The Chase" is where intentions become a bit more explicit, and social pressure heightens to

where participatory reluctance is more likely to occur. This stage is characterized by the messages that

people send whether it be sexually explicit messaging or otherwise. This is the initial facilitation of

relationships with the typical intent being to eventually meet up in person. In McGlotten's *Virtual*

Intimacies, he describes how historically, in Queer culture, this would be the stage most often correlated

with "cruising," or the brief, oftentimes anonymous sexual encounters occuring in semi-public spaces.

With a single glance, circling the block on the lookout for individuals they deemed attractive enough, gay

men were able to communicate their desire and move forward quickly into the next stages (2013, pp.

19-20). It was a quick chase, but one that was laden also with quick decision-making. Those seemingly

most influential to the frontal lobes being the longing for anonymity, the immediacy of gratification, and

the exclusivity which lends itself to the feeling of "being desired" (2013, p. 130).

  The exclusionary aspect is interesting to discuss, with people permitting and even promoting

certain behaviors by justifications based on physical levels of attractiveness. A participant from

McGlotten's analysis of the website *Douchebags of Grindr*, username "o rly" says, "It's one thing to be

racist, but to be racist when you're fat and ugly is simply unacceptable. Hope this one enjoys being single

for eternity" (2013, p. 132). The implication here being that it is okay to be racist, misogynistic, or

straight-up a terrible person… so long as you are considered desirable. When this kind of hypersexual and

carnal culture moved into the online space, you would think the larger scope the internet provides for

seeking out the types of intimacy one desires would have been realized. The pursuits of hookup culture

through the manner of cruising and things like "The Hanky Code" developed from a dichotomy of danger,

excitement, and instantaneity, as well as feelings of inadequacy or a lack of true intimacy so it would

make sense that the overabundance of options and general level of safety would limit the prior culture

(McGlotten, 2013, pp. 21-23). Hollis Griffin's fifth chapter of his book *Feeling Normal*, titled "Wanting

Something Online" emphasizes this idea by saying that all of these technologies are in some way or

another characterized by "lack," that "[This] is the very nature of desire: when the subject desires, he or

she wants something that can only be found externally. By consuming gay and lesbian apps, users pursue

any number of desires: love, sex, or sometimes little more than relief from boredom. But all desires, in

some sense, take users outside of themselves" (2016, p. 140). People in online environments pursue this

desire through the facilitation of relationships, sexting, and the processes leading up to a physical

encounter. Individuals participate in hookup culture as a pursuit of what they desire. For some, that may

be the act of sex itself, but for a larger number it appears that the thing being sought after is the feeling of

desirability, to be part of the "in" crowd, the ones deemed sexually attractive, even if they have no interest

in actively participating in this culture (Chan & Wu-Ouyang, 2023).

Even if someone does not value the culture itself, it appears that the desire to be desired lowers

inhibitions just enough for individuals to perpetuate, and participate in, a culture that they don't truly

value or want to engage with. Articles like that of Adam et al. have reinforced this idea by stating that

even if gay men don't actively go online to participate in hookups, the open discussion and fantasization

of sexual activities may cause gay men to engage with things they otherwise would not have (2011, pp.

7-8). The language and dynamics of "The Chase" intentionally influence when fantasies and seemingly

safe discussions become more explicit, and lead very much into the elements that characterize the meetup

itself and the emotions and effects to follow.

"The Act" itself is relatively brief (both to describe and in practice), as it is primarily driven by

the prior stages' conflation with intense interpersonal feelings of desire or lowered inhibitions. Gay men's

use of SNSs in practice is primarily sex-driven and this influences both the capacity provided by the

in-person meetup, whether that be a hookup or a date (Bauermeister et al., 2011, pp. 1-2). Klinkenberg

and Rose found that when perceiving a hypothetical date, gay men do anticipate physical contact,

typically intending to stop at making out, but when actually going on a date, gay men's "[initiation of]

physical contact" consisted of making out, which led to having sex, and then to staying the night before

making plans for a next date (1994, pp. 29-31). In the context of a hookup, where there is not as much of

a script set forth besides GO TO HOUSE, INITIATE PHYSICAL CONTACT, GO HOME… there are a

lot of limits regarding pursuing intimacy versus just pursuing physical release. The internet has made

things more accessible, for sure, but it has also made it near impossible to develop a sense of closeness

with others like you, trading community for eroticism (McGlotten, 2013, pp. 123-136).

This has led to "The Effects," or what the androcentric side of the internet would refer to as the

"Post-Nut Clarity" of hookup culture. In the same way that individuals who participate in aspects of "The

Chase," such as sexting or sending explicit images of themselves, may feel higher levels of anxiety,

depression, and pressure to be more involved in sexual practices (Chan and Wu-Ouyang, 2023, pp. 2-3),

so too could individuals who feel a pressure to participate in hookup culture, whether explicitly stated or

otherwise. Through the circulation of internet memes, Griffin also explored how users articulate their

experiences on the app. He paraphrases a subject in a YouTube series called *The Grindr Guide* that

discusses the aftermath of a Grindr encounter the subject intended to turn into a relationship. The subject

explores the idea of love as something that is "episodic" and "enthralling," that it "is often rooted in hurt

and pain. [The subject] stresses that love is often characterized by deficit, disappointment, and decline. He

suggests that we love, lose, and love again" (2016, p. 158). The aftermath is something that we are

chronically aware of going in, we have the language for it, memes of it, entire websites like *Douchebags

of Grindr* dedicated to it, because it is something we have felt before, and yet, the dance of bush-beating

set forth by the previous stages leads us still to the belief that perhaps… Maybe this time it could be

satisfying. Maybe this time it could lead to something more serious. And then it… doesn't, because apps like Grindr aren't sustained by a culture of "finding the one."

Grindr exists in opposition to more heterosexually-dominated apps like Tinder, whose sexual scripts have seen it evolve over time from being exclusively a hookup app to one implied to allow forward romantic progress for its users (Licoppe, 2020, pp. 11-12). Instead, Grindr is dominantly characterized as a "hookup app" where users are governed by the idea of sexual encounters being "brief" and executed within the "bubble" constructed in the messaging process: setting up intentions, limits, safe words, etc. so as to leave both users sexually satisfied but "relationally and emotionally unaffected" (2020, p. 6).

Grindr Culture therefore is facilitated by its brevity, its own manipulation of sexual circumstances and identities. Grindr Culture is one that consistently demands users present themselves through the categorizations that the app itself provides, making it difficult to express the nuances that come with identity expression (Griffin, 2016, pp. 146-149). Grindr culture is one that emphasizes physicality, showing "normal, healthy bodies" as hierarchically more desired and forcing users through their interface to address their own sense of lack (Shield, 2018, pp. 8-9). Grindr Culture is one that is characterized by both its hopeless inability to be escaped and also its hopeful provision of a chance to connect.

For individuals who do manage to leave, it represents a total shift in how they interact with their own sense of Queerness. "Visibility of the erotic becomes here, in quite explicit terms, the conditions under which sexual pleasure circulates" says one user who left the platform, which shows Grindr in direct opposition to the heterosexual script deeming it necessary to have a relationship before getting intimate (Brubaker et al., 2016, p. 5). Instead, the pursuit of intimacy starts in the bedroom or in the messages section of Grindr with the hopes of becoming something more. They also saw it as leaving a culture where people were constantly searching for the next best thing, leaving everyone dissatisfied with themselves and others, leaving a medium that was so "flesh-focused," where men were "dehumanized" and turned into pieces of skin for others to consider (2016, p.8). The culture of Grindr is one that is

associated with a tenuous balance of exploration, fantasy, identity, exclusivity, and self-objectification, and it is a representation of how the Queer community has been commodified and has developed a sexual script parallel to that of the heterosexual model.

Analysis

This section will present the findings of the qualitative approach for this study from the ten participant interviews with Queer men aged 20-52. Participants were presented with a series of interview questions that fell into two larger themes: *Queer Identity, Representations, and Dating* and *Experiences with Grindr* as a social networking platform. Overall, the semi-structured nature of the study allowed for individuals to have a platform to share their experience and describe the ways they connected with their Queer identities in their own words.

Participants explored various themes within the larger framework of discovering the breadth of their Queer identity, most of which occuring during the period of time after they came out where they appeared to be most susceptible to nuanced language. The coming-out process was expressed to be a pivotal moment for all of the participants, and the acceptance or rejection of interpersonal relationships during that immediate moment was something that seemed to directly affect participants' perceptions of themselves and their Queer identities. However, the other themes aside from the moment itself included the institutional language of the Church (especially in more "legalistic" sects like Baptism and Catholicism), the Heterosexual Model of relationships presented to them and their choice to adopt or diverge from it, and their exploration of their sexuality and interests through popular (and X-rated) forms of media.

Queer Identity, Representations, and Dating

Coming Out

Because the main focus of this study was grounded in how nuanced language during the identity-formation process of Queer individuals shapes how they then express their identities, most of the early half of the interviews was open to the participants sharing their experiences with coming out. The term "Coming Out" or "Coming Out of the Closet" refers to the point where Queer individuals tell their families, their friends, or their communities about their sexuality (or in other cases gender identity or sense of expression). It is different for everyone, and all stories about coming out are unique in their own senses, but there are some more general themes that can be noticed across different stories that are shared. This sentiment rang true for the participants of this study as well.

Coming out is not always a singular moment, and in many cases it is something continual that Queer people experience when they enter into different communities and relationships with people, which most certainly presents with it, multiple opportunities for varied responses. Noah Voss (20) expresses this sentiment when he describes coming out as bisexual first, then "more gay" later on because of the ways he looked at the men in the pornographic material he watched (more on this element in a later section), before settling into a more fluid sense of sexuality after careful reflection. He extrapolates saying, "I think that we're [always] learning more about ourselves. But I also think that sometimes things take experience and I think sometimes you have to be open to, you know, the possibilities of not knowing and being okay with not knowing." Nola Spice (28) had a similar experience, believing that he "genuinely was bi, and then that faded away… I think it was a phase." However, because of his circle, he decided to just come out on a case-by-case basis because it felt more natural and comfortable. Some individuals do not feel like they "came out" at all, instead, always feeling that their Queer identity was a part of them. Even from early ages some felt the idea of coming out seemed redundant when everyone around them seemed to be aware (in some cases even before they were). I feel like that may be the preferable option, as it puts you in

a space where you are allowed to just exist as you are, and have those around you recognize that early on. The interviews showed that having a strong, supportive circle around you proves to be incredibly beneficial in the security of marginalized identity. Phoenix (26) describes a "pretty positive overall" coming-out experience, talking about how "The response was kind of funny, because it was my mother being very, very loving and like pulling me aside after and making sure that I'm okay. My father literally just said, 'Yeah, we know, what do you want for snacks? I'm going to the store.'"

From looking through all of the interview data, it has been clear that individuals who describe coming-out processes where their families and friends are supportive, even in the midst of maybe some seemingly clashing identities or values (more in the next section), leads to a greater sense of self-esteem. This then affects their motivations and ways they then interact in their pursuit of relationships (and how they interact on platforms like Grindr). For individuals like Noah, Phoenix, and Nola, who all had fairly positive experiences at least with their families, what they went into the dating space looking for was different from other participants who described feeling the need to hide themselves and their Queer feelings. It was also shown that participants who described feeling comfortable with being more open to their families in a general sense came out at younger ages compared to those who did not grow up in open-communication environments (Noah came out at 12, Nola at 14, and Phoenix around 10). Manx (32) encapsulates this theme by saying, "My queer identity was something I was familiar with, ever since I was very, very young. My parents were very open and honest, so nothing was necessarily taboo" and because of that, he understood his identity around age 7.

For Mister X (32), who grew up in a Hispanic-Catholic household "with very much of the machismo mindset," it was surprisingly easy for him to come out. "Much to the chagrin of conservatives, I didn't have any traumatic backstory" he tells me. It was a fairly easy shift for his family to make, especially because he was the fourth Queer cousin in his family with many Queer elders in the lineage, so "it made it a lot more safe to come out. I wasn't breaking any trends. It was like, 'Oh, the fourth one. Okay great.'" That open communication and feeling of safely lended itself to Mister X feeling safe and

secure in his identity, which later very much affected his comfort when exploring Grindr as soon as he turned 18.

However, for the individuals I had talked to who grew up in homes where they did not feel a sense of open communication or freedom in exploration, they also did not really admit to themselves their identity until far later in their lives. They certainly had an idea of their Queerness, especially in retrospect, but getting to that point of admittance was difficult for them due to their social environments and upbringings. .

The Relationship Between Queerness and the Church

Among the individuals who described growing up denying their identities, a large reason behind why was their involvement in, and the language they observed around them from the institution of the Church (especially the American, Evangelical Church). It was and is such a large point of influence that even individuals like Manx who did not grow up religious have distinct memories of the rhetoric used:

> "As a child, you wake up early on Saturday morning to watch cartoons and then, if you get on early enough, you've got the televangelists screaming about how you know, gay people are going to hell, they're filthy, they want to hurt people. And this was also a very odd time where it was the late 90s transitioning into the 2000s. The AIDS crisis was still a very fresh wound that was healing in this country. So imagine me being 9–10 years old, going into the public library with my family, and I'm just trying to get, you know, picture books and whatnot. And there's little pamphlets from these religious organizations saying AIDS is God's divine intervention and punishment… And so growing up, I was initially very scared."

It is, of course, too simplistic to state or create a true divide between the Church and the Queer community, even in terms of their relationship to the AIDS epidemic, and it would be easy and understandable for individuals to see the Church as an opposing force due to the rhetoric of some of the louder branches. It is, however, crucial to remember that this is a multifaceted discussion and the

on-the-ground efforts of Christian individuals, Queer and heterosexual alike are documented to show the variability in response (O'Loughlin, 2021). That being said, while that truth of varying relationships within the scope of Queerness and religion certainly exists, the feelings expressed by the participants of this study are also true within the scope of their experiences. For Manx, although there definitely existed religious organizations that chose to help instead of condemn, the general understanding for him was to see this part of himself as something that was not going to be accepted in larger society due to the institutional language that encircled him[1].

Of the ten individuals that were interviewed, seven of them were brought up in religious homes, these homes being characterized as largely Christian. And of those seven, interestingly the four individuals who grew up Catholic now report subscribing to the belief system of Spirituality, Agnosticism, or the apathy of religion (as shown in Appendix A). For individuals like Dick (35) and Mauve (30), their experiences within the Catholic faith directly made them deny who they were until much later in life. Mauve stated that although he "watched gay porn, and definitely had attraction towards men, I still somehow believed that I'd be straight in the end when I grew up or something. So it was a very long process of coming to terms with–okay–I actually do have attraction towards men." As an adult, his friends always asked when he knew he was gay, and the answer was complicated due to being told explicitly in his household that "homosexuality was a sin" causing him to remain in denial, and, as he says, "Denial is a very powerful thing." Dick describes being involved in the Church and in Boy Scouts, which, as he states, "have not been, historically, very good to gay men" which then led to him suppressing his identity all the way through college until, by making friends through Reddit, he was able to come into his Queer identity around age 27.

Even for individuals who were not out to their families like Michael (52), growing up Fundamentalist Baptist caused a lot of "shame and guilt and all that stuff, because of my religious

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[1] Manx has a very interesting experience as someone who was involved in activism from a very young age as well. In addition to the language of the Church, which he would have been on the forefront of in his visits to the capitol and other government buildings, he was also subject to the institutional language of legislature as it dictated the level of care given to Queer people during the AIDS epidemic as well as in the fight for Marriage Equality in the US up to 2015..

upbringing. I kept all that a hidden secret to myself, basically" keeping his Queer identity secret through all of high school, into college, and into the other side of graduation, before getting caught up in online chat rooms and Craigslist personal ads.

It is incredibly difficult to have an open discussion with individuals about their Queer identities and not discuss the influence of religion to a certain degree due to how interwoven the two have become in the mainstream media. As I have mentioned prior, it most certainly is a nuanced conversation to be had, with some individuals like Dick, Mauve, and Michael expressing very strong feelings of guilt, shame, or unwantedness in the spaces they were supposed to find community. However, there are also other stories from individuals like Noah who describe the intentional wrestling with his own beliefs. For him, he was able to do it with the support of his parents, who at the time were a part of the Mormon church:

"They were a little bit unsure of what to do, as far as, you know, how our church went and what we actually believed about it. Ultimately, it led to many, many conversations about me wondering, you know, what if their church is wrong, and I ended up holding myself back my whole life, and then I die? And then I realize that God didn't care about it, and that I wasted, you know, my life out here. But then I also worried about what if I go for the men I'm attracted to but what if I die and realize it wasn't good? It wasn't right? So I had many of these existential conversations with my parents… I was stressed a lot about it. Lots of praying, lots of learning about church history, lots of reading, and reading the scriptures."

Noah was incredibly lucky to have that system of support behind him that allowed him to discover how his Queerness went in line with his beliefs. He was also grateful for the resilience to ask questions in circumstances that make it seem as though you are unable to. It was interesting to find that individuals who were subjected to the institutional language of the church, whether that be through pamphlets like Manx mentioned, or posts on social media, or in the interpersonal conversations with friends, family, and members of the church, or even through explicit exhortations (in person or in mass-mediated methods), were more likely to wrestle with guilt. Guilt about not only their Queer identity itself, but also the ways

they feel and articulate desire. It was found, especially right after being introduced to hookup culture,

individuals who described this upbringing went into that space seeking physical validation because of a

deficit in their self-esteem and sense of worth. I would say this dynamic goes very much in line with the

support system and feelings of open communication discussed in the prior section, where even

institutional language and the perhaps unintentional, or perhaps intentional, negative effects it can have

can be subjugated with love and freedom to wrestle openly with support from close friends and family.

The Influence of the Heterosexual Model

Stemming from the conversations I had with participants regarding the ways the institutional language of

religion shaped their coming out processes, and thus, their feelings regarding their Queerness and how

they navigate the arena of relationships, both emotionally and physically, there also comes the institution

of heteronormativity. The Heterosexual Model was one idea that popped up in the formulation process of

this research project when discussing my potential interview questions with Queer friends of mine. I had

felt that quite a few individuals I talked to in person and online about the phenomenon of Queer men and

hookup culture discussed this idea of Queer relationships being "different" than heterosexual ones. The

questions regarding this idea were formulated in line with Kulick and Cameron's *Language and Sexuality*,

which argues for the entirety of Queerness being in opposition to the heterosexual majority, and thus,

Queer relationships would also diverge from the model (2003, pp. 75-79).

In my conversations with participants, there arose two general lines of thinking that I would then

ask them to expand upon. Some individuals spoke about taking the Heterosexual Model and trying to fit

their relationships into that structure whereas others held the belief that Queer relationships are inherently

different to heterosexual ones, and thus the same "rules" don't apply. They describe a scenario where

you're playing a new game and have the opportunity to draft a rulebook on how to play it, leading to a bit

of confusion, sure, but a lot of fun.

Dick describes falling into the former grouping, saying, "I don't think it's inappropriate to steal those things, those visions, those examples from, you know, our straight friends." He told me about looking at his family members, his aunt and uncle in particular, and being able to see what makes a good relationship versus a not-so-good one, straight or Queer:

"You know, I have an aunt and uncle and they're straight, you know, three kids, very kind, very loving. They have their division of labor for household chores, they do things together, they still date, they're very affectionate with each other. You know, and that's, that's a great example of the kind of relationship that I'd love to find myself in long term because they figured it out."

Even Mister X. who did describe very early falling away from his Catholic upbringing and many of the tenets involved with that piece of his identity, one thing he still holds onto is that "traditional marriage in the sense of like, you know, two people at the altar, getting married in front of everybody… to enjoy all my friends and family." Noah also describes this sentiment, being the youngest of the participants and yet holding fast to the idea of marriage presented to him from his parents and others in his life:

"I do believe in the construct of marriage. I think that my roots as a Christian actually really influenced that… Marriage, I think, bonds you together in closer ways. I do want to get married one day, I plan to but I don't have anybody in mind for that at the moment…[However], the way I had to come up and think about all those things was different from the traditional male because of my sexual identity."

It was especially interesting to listen to the individuals who fell into the latter grouping, and how their understandings of relationships, how they oriented themselves within the scope of those spaces, also adapted through time. Nola describes this experience, from growing up in a monogamous household and idolizing that relationship model which is culturally associated with the heterosexual, nuclear family, to changing his mindset:

"I think in my early relationships, there was that sort of similarity and that normalcy… everybody I really know, at least that I know of, was monogamous. And I definitely, in those early

relationships, took comfort from monogamy. It was nice to have, you know, my person. I think, as

I've gotten older, and only until recently, really, did I really come to terms with and start to

consider the implicit possessiveness of that sentiment and of monogamy, like that idea that you

know– I can't– I'm not going to hook up with someone else because because there's a there's an

implied like, all of my romantic energy and sexual energy is now attached to this one individual

and all of theirs is attached to me.”

Despite wrestling with this "implied possessiveness" as Nola describes, he still found himself longing,

especially in his earlier relationships, for "the symbols" of what couples do, or what he grew up seeing:

walking somewhere holding hands, date nights, kisses on the cheek, etc. "That's like one of the things that

I think of, and I definitely, in my early relationships, when we were sort of confined to cars and parking

lots, that was something that I really longed for.”

For others like Phoenix, their understanding of Queer relationships is that they are "built very

differently.” In their experience, their relationships largely developed from some underlying level of

attraction with each other before exploring to what degree they felt comfortable and enjoyed each other's

company. They say, "I think that we have a different relationship towards sex than straight people do and

so it can kind of create this different thing.”

For individuals who go into the space of forming relationships building upon a sense of physical

attraction, and with motivations of primarily getting intimate and then figuring out the emotional

compatibility later, experiences within the framework of hookup culture were largely described to be

more enjoyable than those who held onto the idea of "the one" or a belief in eventually wanting to settle

down to love and be loved by one person, something they felt was unlikely to happen on the platform that

Grindr provided them with. Grindr is primarily founded upon those physical characteristics and the ability

to filter first and foremost by who you are sexually attracted to instead of focusing on any level of

emotional intimacy first, and that causes a level of dissonance within individuals who are, on either an

underlying or explicit level, seeking a romantic form of intimacy instead of solely the physical exploration of desire.

Sexual Exploration Through Media

Aside from their families and friends as guidelines, the media the participants consumed also contributed greatly to their understanding of how to navigate their first relationships. The media they engaged with was described to help many of them articulate their own sense of desire in varying ways. For individuals like Noah, they saw the potential of who they could be, albeit transposing the hypermasculine, entirely heterosexual characters he saw in television onto his own Queer identity. For others, like Phoenix, viewing characters such as Kurt Hummel from *Glee* helped them understand how to come into their identity as an effeminate Queer individual. However, many of the participants recall only seeing heterosexual depictions in relation to romance in mainstream television, literature, and film. Because of this limitation in what they saw, they also felt limited in their ability to express themselves through the medium of their desire, at least in the ways they saw others doing. Of the individuals interviewed, only three individuals stated that they did grow up seeing Queer representation in the media (as noted in Appendix B) and were able to extrapolate the types of characters they saw and how that related to their own understanding of Queerness.

Comparatively, seven of the ten participants stated that their first introduction to Queer "relationships" and expressions of desire was through pornographic material they found online, or were shown by another individual. Being introduced through this method had the dichotomous nature of giving them answers to their questions (especially for the individuals who grew up in the more non-communicative environments discussed previously), giving them words to describe their interests and identities, while also setting unrealistic expectation for how to properly pursue relationships in a healthy manner. Manx was very passionate about the disappointment he felt when coming into high school health classes with questions about Queer sexual health and being met with opposition, teachers who said they were not "allowed to [teach that] and could only describe heteronormative sexual practices." which were

also founded primarily in pushing abstinence. So his first introduction to how his sexuality worked was through pornography:

> "I was entering puberty, and I knew I liked boys, but I had no idea how any of that worked. And so it was me figuring out how to get around the parental block on the computer. And it was stumbling onto this entertainment at an extremely young age. But I think I was very lucky in the fact that sex wasn't anything that was taboo in my house, and we could discuss it. So I had a very healthy and open minded reaction to it."

However, for others like Muhteshem (27), his introduction to pornography early on was also a gateway into his first sexual experience at age 15, with an older man (23) in the suburb in which he was living at the time, discussing pornographic material in magazines:

> "And I'm like, 'Oh, magazines are something from the past, you know, we have the internet and you can see stuff on the internet and stuff like that.' So I started showing him some porn, but it was straight porn. But I kept on emphasizing the male genitalia… and, you know, we started to talk about all this and all that. [How] I've never had sex before, I've never had my dick sucked, or something like this. And then he was like 'Oh I have and it feels amazing.' And I was like 'Really?' I said 'I wish someone would do something to me.' I knew what I was doing, you know? And, and I was like, 'I wish someone would do it.' And then he said 'Would you want me to do it to you?' And I said 'Yeah, why not?' You know? And then that's how it happened."

For individuals who initially do not know too much about being gay, pornography seems to be a relatively (especially in the modern age) accessible option for individuals to begin to understand what the pursuit of their desire is "supposed to look like." This is especially given that many of the interviewees discussed not having healthy role models of Queer romance in mainstream media. At the very least this gave them names for things and helped them to understand what they were interested in doing and who they were attracted to. However, it appears as though it also had the potentially negative effect of greasing the wheel when it comes to associating Queer relationships with overt physicality. Now, many of the

participants also admitted to just being "horny teenagers" which seemed to influence their media habits at the time, but it is interesting the ways each of the individuals as adults say they were too young to be consuming that kind of content, and how it made them think about sexual things more often at younger ages than how they felt others would be. It also influenced them to hop into apps like Grindr as soon as they turned 18 (or for some, even before they turned 18).

The factors of this institutional language affecting how individuals in this study view themselves and their Queerness, as well as the model of heterosexuality and explicit media representations shaping how they engage with desire and relationships, seemed to have a direct impact on their level of self-esteem and confidence regarding their identities. This caused them to seek out connection with others, most oftentimes in a physical manner. All of these themes culminated during a period of life that seems to have a boosted level of social awareness and susceptibility to negative critique regarding how one's identity is perceived, and how they also will be perceived along with it. This will be extrapolated in the next section to show how this lowered sense of self-esteem affects how individuals' experiences on the app differ.

Michael put it best when discussing his motivations behind his years of pursuing hookup culture by saying "I feel good about myself when somebody wants to connect with me. If somebody wants to hook up with me then I know that I'm good looking, or wanted, or I'm needed by somebody." When participants were faced with a yearning for community or had a disconnect or loneliness in their day-to-day lives, platforms like Grindr, or online chat rooms, or cruising even, became the tools they had access to in order to satiate their desire.[2]

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[2] It is important to note this was in spite of extensive Queer communities existing, especially in larger cities. For the participants of this study, things like location, financial resources, or access to transportation made accessing community difficult, as well as an almost paradoxical fear of community itself outside of the given online context.

Experiences with Grindr

Desire and Loneliness

The participants all articulated experiencing Grindr in different ways, with various smaller factors affecting how they engaged with the platform such as their location (because it is a location-based service), availability of people, and how their bodies are perceived.

Location was one factor that very much seemed to affect how participants experienced loneliness. For individuals like Manx, someone they'd connect with could be even as much as thirty minutes away, and the others who were closer were, in the regions they were in, "White, middle-aged men… where almost all of them were married and having affairs on their wives." Mauve talked to me a lot about living in an area where there was not a lot of access to explicitly Queer spaces. The ones that existed nearest to him were either clubs or bars, both areas that he, as someone who does not party or drink, felt disconnected from. For Dick, his engagement with online platforms stemmed from that desire to not be known within his community, which he felt was largely conservative in nature, and the fear of being "outed" was very real. The options presented to him were to drive forty minutes away to watch a movie like *Love, Simon* where nobody would recognize him, or to interact with people on Grindr with a blank picture and a limited amount of information in his bio. And then for Muhteshem, who was raised in a country where being Queer was illegal, then moving to a majority Muslim country where it was taboo, when he finally moved into an area where there were more Queer people, his sense of loneliness decreased a certain degree (at least in regards to not having nobody around him to engage with).

Another factor that affected how participants interacted with Grindr as a platform, and fed into their sense of self-worth and feeling of being desired was the perception of their physical bodies. Individuals like Manx, Phoenix, and Dick all discuss that when they engage(d) with the app they were heavily criticized for their size, which had an effect on their self-esteem making them feel the need to settle with whatever they could get. "I didn't think that I was worth–you know–I thought that if I had any demands such as, you know, my boyfriend having all of his teeth and a driver's license was asking for too much" (Manx). Phoenix echoed this sentiment by acknowledging after being bullied by classmates for

their weight, "I had kind of convinced myself that I had no chance [with someone] because of how I looked. And so I didn't really try anything until 20, yeah, 20 I started downloading some of the apps." From there using it as a way to seek validation and attention, leading to a first relationship that was incredibly abusive and manipulative.

Even for individuals like Noah and Nola, who self-describe as "still still young and sexy," articulate being struck by how easily "you can eliminate and be eliminated" on apps like Grindr, throwing their confidence and sense of self-worth into a spiral. Something about it came from the age, being involved in Grindr during such formative years of their lives, coming fresh out of high school and facing an almost constant stream of rejection. Nola says that "you may face more rejection in twenty minutes on a dating app than you do in like twenty months, maybe more, in real life… I think at that age, specifically, rejection just feels a lot sharper… I think that took a toll on young, young [Nola]."

Noah also talked a lot about how the ways he viewed himself was molded by how others wanted him or viewed him, how it started off very awkward, and he found himself settling for individuals he normally would not have hooked up with or engaged with. Due to his circumstances, and that, oh so prevalent, desire to feel desired, he also found himself going through with it until he developed enough confidence to be able to stop engaging in those particular relationships.

It is important to note that when discussing how bodies are perceived it is also valuable to show how bodies become racialized and "othered" in online spaces, which was no different for two of my participants, Muhteshem and Dorrick (25). They described in length either being rejected due to, or victims of, others' racist beliefs, or, in some cases, being fetishized by individuals who attributed specific fantasies onto them. Muhteshem, in particular, described one appalling recollection of a man who told him (after engaging in sexual intercourse with him) that when he was young they would show them videos of children in East Africa, in war-torn countries to show support for the humanitarian missions they were engaged in:

"He said, 'Me being with you actually gives me that impression that you come from an African

country that is under war.' So, because of that I was, I was shocked and I had a nervous laughter,

and I was laughing at the time. I couldn't believe it because I've never seen war. I studied in

private schools that were really expensive. I studied abroad and I couldn't understand. So, actually

it gave me insecurities."

Muhteshem described many experiences, especially in Malta where he lived for a period, where

individuals would feel free to publicly express their desire to him specifically due to the color of his skin.

He tells me "Everyone wants to have fun, because some people have never had fun with a Black guy

before. And they've got a fetish." Yet, although many individuals he interacted with discussed wanting to

hook up, they were not interested in actually dating a Black man, because, as one individual said to him,

"It's taboo to date Black people." He still chooses to give them the benefit of the doubt, and he is open to

fun experiences regardless of how they interact with him as a person, as he is able to separate the

experience of fun from the person he is having fun with.

For Dorrick, it manifested more in the realm of outright rejection, with some individuals "who

think you are there for money, so the language is not friendly" causing him to change his profile picture

so he was not outright perceived as a Black man on Grindr. After he changed his profile picture, there

were more opportunities for individuals to chat with him before exchanging images, and at that point they

would either stop talking to him, or they would take the opportunity to get to know him more, hopefully

leading to a meetup. Dorrick had an open mind despite feeling disappointed by the rejection, because

when he came onto the platform it was largely to experience being on the app itself, testing every profile

and seeing how they differed.

From the perspective of someone who is not a person of color, but was able to recognize the

harmful stereotyping and fetishization of individuals on Grindr, especially in their area, Phoenix gave me

a quick explanation of where they lived in Canada:

"There is a very strong population of Asian people [in this province]. And what has happened

because of that is there is also a very large subset of older men who have a race fetish, and they

will actively only seek out Asian men. It's usually that they will see them as, like, submissive. So

when I first didn't have a photo of myself, I would have a lot of men who would see like my

statistics, the fact that I was younger, and they would just ask me outright, am I Asian? And, you

know, I'm not. So a lot of them when they heard that they would immediately just have no

interest."

This shows a factor that has the potential to ostracize individuals in the context of a community that is

meant to represent a beacon of safety for other Queer siblings, and it's disappointing to see both how

individuals of the study have been directly affected by racialized and fetishized language, as well as how

it may potentially affect populations of individuals as a whole who don't feel safe coming into apps like

Grindr for fear of being either turned away outright, or put into a fantasy they didn't consent to being a

part of.

These factors of location, access, how their bodies are perceived, racialized, and fetishized,

among others, culminate in a sense of loneliness that many individuals discussed as a foundational part of

their (at least initial) engagement with Grindr and hookup culture. Mauve describes it as a perpetual cycle

of hooking up with guys, yet not building relationships with them. "And it's kind of sad, because it's

like… Man, I wish I had a boyfriend. I wish that I just had a partner to be with, because I don't need to be

doing all this if I had a partner." He says there is not really a good outlet for the kind of yearning that he

feels every once in a while, that "friends don't fulfill those desires." Manx echoes this saying that apps

like Grindr help Queer folks' not have to "try to go through very complex life stages by themselves." He

says that, "Queer folks, a lot of times, can be very lonely," and that makes these online spaces more

popular with them, because it is at least a form of connecting.

Dick had a few stories that extrapolated a lot on the feelings of loneliness that he had as a gay

man, especially as a gay man who came into his identity later in life, which caused a lot of reflection

regarding "the things that I missed not being out in college." After coming into his identity, finding friends largely in online spaces like Reddit and in apps like Grindr, he was able to make connections of varying intimacy levels, but none of them made it to the level of intimacy that he was looking for. Instead, he would spend time talking to different individuals. One man he talked to for six months, exchanging some (not face) pictures and simply enjoying conversations with each other:

> "We would just talk back and forth, up on Grindr once a day… talk about everything from movies, to books, to what was going on in the community, and things like that. Never met the guy, don't know his name, don't know what [his face] looks like, I do know what his dick looks like. Then one day, he just never hopped back on and I have yet to see him since, and then his profile was deleted."

In the same way that it is easy "to eliminate and be eliminated," it is also true that it is easy for individuals to eliminate themselves. Grindr exists as this transitional, liminal space, a space somewhat outside of oneself where people can freely engage with their desire in a way they feel, for whatever reasons, unable to do so outside of it. However, there is also very little grounding it to some semblance of reality. Anonymity is a fairly regulated practice on Grindr. It is easy, due to the lack of attachment and the general environment, or culture of Grindr, for people you have connected with to disappear and never be seen again, and you would have no idea, in many cases, who they even really were. You could talk to someone for months and suddenly they could disappear from your life, as if they had never existed, and you are left then to start anew, a process that was described to be disheartening and tiring for many of the Queer men of this study.

For many of the participants, this longing for connection, especially emotional connection was present in their lives and Grindr was the platform most available and most well-known for assisting in satisfying that yearning. Although, for individuals like Dick, and Mauve, and Noah, and Manx, and Michael, it rarely satisfied it for good, and oftentimes led to them pursuing Grindr with a certain degree of expectation that their potential hookup partners were simply unable to satiate.

The "First Time" Experience

This sense of loneliness and unmet expectation was especially present as participants engaged with their first sexual experiences on Grindr. The general sentiment of individuals was that their first time was spurred by a desire to just get it over with. For a long time, they had been subject to conversations with individuals on the platform, but never had the opportunity, or the drive, to pursue them further. However, all of this tended to build up in the mind of the individuals, a majority of whom were fairly young when they started to interact with others on the platform (even as young as 17 for individuals like Nola and Noah). This largely resulted in first time experiences that were less than ideal (at best) and entirely regrettable and confusing (at worst).

The concept of virginity was something that individuals felt was fairly fluid, and very dependent on the quality of their initial experiences, with individuals like Noah and Phoenix all stating that their "first times" weren't really when they felt they lost their virginities, and the ability to choose was able to give them a sense of agency that they felt they didn't have in those initial encounters. Noah's story was particularly poignant and encapsulates the idea that many others expressed:

> "I don't think I was ready for it when I started. But you know, sometimes we get thrown into things in life we're not ready for. I threw myself into it, really. But also at the same time, he was a lot older than me. And I don't feel like he really knew how inexperienced I was. And I don't know if he should have, he probably should have tried harder to find out more about me… But I feel like if only he would have been a little bit more responsible. Maybe he would have either found out that I wasn't ready or that I may not have experience or that I was young or whatever. But I don't think yeah, he never really ended up knowing either about my age because I lied about it. So that is something. I don't think the first time was good."

The participants who discussed their first times did tend to discuss an element of distrust or dishonesty with their first-time partners preceding the act itself, with either individuals lying about how old they were or lying about that being their first time. When the expectations are not made clear leading up to the

moment it is difficult in that moment to address them, and it is expressed that sometimes when you do not have experience and you are, in a sense, pretending to, it is easier for participants to go along with things they would normally be uncomfortable with. This could tie into the level of self-worth and self-esteem discussed in the previous section, that because individuals felt it was, for some reason, beyond them to ask for men to meet certain standards or a certain level of care, they just settled for something they ended up regretting later.

This could also coincide with the discussion surrounding the relationship to the heterosexual model, where the "first time" is portrayed in popular culture in a particular way with clumsy teens after a school dance, or in the freshman year of college. I do not feel you would see an episode outside of *Queer as Folk* depicting someone's first time in the loft of a stranger you met at a nightclub, or in the bathroom of a local park. This dissonance between what it's "supposed" to look like and the reality of experiencing that intimate moment with a stranger creates an even more confusing disconnect.

For Nola, his first time sent him into an identity crisis. He discusses his first time by saying during his first encounter "I've never been more sure of my heterosexuality. I was like, literally in the middle and I was like, 'I think I'm straight…' Like, I'm not into this." He describes the spiral of confusion he felt afterward due to the age gap between him and the other man, and that dissonance between what he thought he wanted versus what he felt in the moment. Then he depicts an image that many of my friends I talked to before the formulation of this thesis (and myself even) described, going home to take a very hot shower, and trying to scrub away the feelings of confusion and achiness.

One of Mister X's initial experiences led him to entirely reshape how he went about seeking connection and relationships on Grindr. He lays out the scene of an individual he agreed to meet up with rather quickly, before showing up to a house with "sketchy vibes," but due to his "stubborn bottom" tendencies, he persisted and continued with the encounter. The man was much older than he stated, and did not look like his pictures at all, and while cuddling for a while before proceeding further Mister X made the decision to leave abruptly due to a tingling in his intuition. Reflecting on the scenario, he was

grateful to his younger self for leaving, but also recognized the fallibility of the young mind when making

decisions in the mindset of desire:

> "Thankfully [he left]. It could have been, you know, like a 2020 story. So at that point, I was like,
>
> okay, maybe I need to like, stop. Like, that could have ended up so horribly. And then that's when
>
> I kind of shifted into more serious dating and that's when, again, a couple months after that, or
>
> maybe a year after that was when I met my first boyfriend. But then that was also because I was
>
> just so young and naive."

One interesting thing that I noticed after discussing first time encounters with participants was that many

of their stories directly contrasted to what they said when we discussed the concept of participatory

reluctance. Participatory reluctance, as laid out earlier in the literature review, is when individuals partake

in a specific behavior under the influence of their social environment even when normally they would not

participate in this behavior. It is represented as a space between connection and disconnection where

individuals are more likely to pursue things that go against their own values so long as they are not feeling

left out (Cassidy, 2018, pp. 1-22). What was intriguing was that participants explicitly stated not feeling

many times when they did something they did not want to do, especially when they discussed encounters

they had in recent months or years.

However, when discussing their first times, even individuals like Phoenix who have pretty good

responses to hookup culture and generally positive experiences to talk about, discuss how their first time

was unequivocally not one of those experiences. They described their first experience being with a

colleague in their field of online entertainment, and while he wasn't described as necessarily a bad person,

the way he performed online was "awful" as Phoenix puts it, and their first time was incredibly weird and

awkward, which then was extrapolated by the individual they engaged with being "a horrible person to a

lot of my friends." He wasn't the type to really listen to Phoenix or allow them to take their time getting

used to the feeling of things before moving forward. Phoenix has since learned from that experience to

realize consent and boundaries are incredibly important to them, and if a potential encounter is not respecting those they are very comfortable speaking up or leaving when uncomfortable.

Mauve was also one of the individuals most vocal about not having many regrets in the moment of a hookup, or feeling pressured in any capacity to do things he was not comfortable with doing. "I'd say most of the time, it's a positive thing. I'm happy. I'm elated…and then sometimes when it was a bad situation I'm like, okay, I'm done." But when describing his first time, he tells me about a guy he encountered on the app who did not have very good communication skills about what exactly he was looking for, leading to an encounter that was incredibly uncomfortable:

> "He was really aggressive. He was, looking back on it, he might have been like, looking for a Dom/Sub situation, but he was kind of just doing it. And I did not like that. So he was very, very mean and just, like, kind of an asshole, and we hooked up and it was not good. And I thought I got an STD from him. Doctor said I didn't have anything, but I was having some symptoms. So that was not really great and he was just very bad."

However, in the moments afterward, and even with the level of regret that Mauve felt from the encounter as a whole, he still kept in contact with the individual for a short period of time before blocking him. Mauve says that he really did not know why he did that. "I probably, I don't know, was debating whether or not I liked the attention or something. Or, you know, he was the only guy that I had hooked up with, so if I wanted to have sex, this was the only opportunity. There's not a whole lot of guys around."

So for a few participants, they outwardly stated that they did not adhere to the idea of participatory reluctance, or that they did not go along with things they were uncomfortable with. And yet, for quite a few of them, in the initial encounters they had, they were significantly more likely to go along with activities or keep in contact with individuals they had no long-term (or even short-term at times) interest in pursuing. I feel like this is the type of experience on Grindr that ties in largely to both that feeling of loneliness discussed earlier, and the overarching lack of self-worth that individuals felt when expressing their desire on Grindr.

Expectations and Motivations

This sense of loneliness when engaging with individuals on Grindr also led to a difference in motivations and expectation for how the interaction, from messaging, all the way to the act itself, and the return home, would proceed. This was depicted a bit through individuals' first times, but I also want to look into how they interacted after those points, how their mindsets shifted or stayed the same as adults. Most of the participants reported being aware going into it what the app was primarily used for. Even Manx and Michael, who recounted when the app was first introduced, and having come from online chat rooms, and Craigslist personal ads, recalled learning very quickly that it was predominantly a hookup app. Grindr was not the space to search for dating relationships, or "The One," it was characterized by the ability to efficiently and quickly (and mostly anonymously) seek casual encounters with other Queer men.

Michael thinks that this is because he feels men in general are more sexually oriented, something that is fairly common when assessing peers in the scope of male gender norms (Zaikman et al., 2016). This is shown to be even more true with what is deemed socially expected or acceptable for gay men. Michael says it makes sense that when you put a bunch of men into a space, like the AOL chat rooms he used to frequent, or a platform like Grindr, it promotes that culture of overt sexuality.

It is noted the experiences of the individuals who went against the grain and attempted to pursue dating on Grindr, despite knowing what the app was predominantly used for. The dissonance they described reflected itself in how they described Grindr as a platform, as well as how they felt when leaving their encounters. At best there was a feeling of, "Okay, success. I did it. And that feeling continues on to the rest of the day" (Mauve) and at worst there is a feeling of "Dear God, what poor decision did I just make? You know, I'm not the model of Adonis, but sometimes if you're really looking to make poor decisions, you sacrifice what you're interested in and just take anything" (Dick). Largely going into Grindr with the expectation of finding something meaningful, at least for these individuals, has led primarily to disappointment.

However, for a few individuals, those who had no intention of seeking a relationship through Grindr, like Dorrick, Phoenix, Muhteshem, and Manx (for a good portion of his earlier Grindr days), encounters on Grindr went fairly well. Dorrick discussed the feeling he felt after coming home from an encounter with an almost-dreamy tone. He says, "Immediately reaching home after the meeting I don't know if it's a feeling of nostalgia. But I could feel I could lie on my bed and reminisce about the day. Also, if I had taken some pictures, I could go through them. If I wanted to reach out again I would." Nola describes a similar experience of him sneaking away during the pregame of an event to hookup with a guy and coming back he thought, "that was exactly what I needed."

It is definitely possible that a combination of age, expectations, and experience with the app itself could lead to varied levels of satisfaction from hookups. In general, the individuals who fell within the 25-29 age range all reported very positive experiences with casual encounters, and part of this could be because of that "young and sexy" factor Nola mentioned earlier, where these individuals are in their physical and sexual primes, being in good spaces life-wise to where the idea of settling down (if that's what they desire) or just the general sentiment of living life to the fullest is most prevalent. I feel Muhteshem puts it best of the individuals within that age range when he explains his own expectation behind engaging with individuals on Grindr:

"For me, when I'm meeting someone for fun, it's basically… I don't allow myself to have feelings, even if it wasn't bad. I don't know, I think my mind is it's, it's a bit complex on this one. Because when I'm meeting someone it is fun, it's fun, great. I don't expect friendship, I don't expect anything else. Even if I see the person and say that I really do like that person and I would want to be with this person. For example, I met one individual and the person was really good. We had an amazing time, but he wasn't looking for anything apart from sex. So when I finished, I just left for home, I left his place. And he never came into my mind, because I don't want to get myself heartbroken or try for something that is not there.

The age difference seemed to be more apparent when talking to Mauve, who, at the time of the interview, had recently turned 30. He says, "I used to be considered a twink. I'm 30 now, so… I'm officially gay dead. Now I'm just nothing. I don't know what I am." While this part of the conversation centered around Queer subcultures based around physical characteristics, it also set an understanding for how individuals in the 30+ crowd navigated the space of their Queerness in relation to identity and desire. This intersects also with those earlier discussions of upbringing and the ways they oriented themselves in response to institutional and interpersonal language during their identity formation processes. When your worth becomes placed in your physicality, your desirability, or your ability to make someone else feel good, when that fades you're left thinking of yourself as "nothing." How do you move forward if you believe you're dead to the gay world after 30?

For Mister X and Manx, who were, at the time of the interview, in long-term relationships, this pressure did not affect them as much. However, for Michael, who recently found himself in a relationship, but before then had made it to age 52 in the throes of AOL, Craigslist, and Grindr-facilitated hookup culture, he was able to express the dichotomy between feeling lonely, and wanting to be in a partnership with someone, and also being able to have fun. "I would say the right thing for me is well, variety is the spice of life. So I like a lot. I like variety. Not everybody's like that."

Overall, the motivations individuals were going to Grindr with, which appear to be related heavily with how they engage with their Queer sense of identity, show that those who have the expectation of just "looking for fun" as it is commonly phrased on Grindr and are "successful" in the sense that they achieve what they came there for which was sexual intercourse, it largely is characterized as a "good" experience, even if the sex itself is not amazing. Most certainly the quality of the encounter has something to do with the level of satisfaction received among the participants, but that was less emphasized than the other factors such as the level of communication before getting down to business, being clear about boundaries before engaging in the act itself (oftentimes done over messages, but also

done in person) as well as how well someone respects those boundaries, and the level of communication throughout the duration of the encounter.

Individuals like Phoenix, Dorrick, Nola, Mister X, and Muhteshem all continue to engage within the framework of hookup culture to varying degrees with a decent level of satisfaction, which correlated strongly with both their motivations going in, as well as their backgrounds in regards to especially the Heterosexual Model and how they actively diverged from that structure early on in their identity formation process. This likely allowed them to navigate that idea of seeking "only fun" in a way that was more detached from the emotional side of things, not wanting to get involved in a way that "could hurt me," as Muhteshem put it earlier.

For individuals like Noah, Manx, and Michael, who have engaged in hookup culture on Grindr, but no longer participate using that platform (due to their long-term relationships or desire to seek one outside of it), there was more of a mixed bag of experiences, with a lot of them being characterized as good when the intention was explicitly to "get off" and that was accomplished. However, because there was an underlying desire for more than "just a hookup," there also was a level of dissatisfaction with the lifestyle as a whole, particularly when they were engaging with it as a means of feeling wanted, which caused them to sometimes engage with individuals and in activities they would not have done otherwise.

Then for individuals like Mauve and Dick, who engaged with Grindr purely out of a feeling of loneliness and a yearning for an emotional connection with another person, there was a sense of "Okay, wow, I was just really horny" in the moment. Mauve explains further the longer-term implications:

> "This kind of behavior and this cycle… can create loneliness. And that's not something that's felt immediately afterwards, maybe occasionally, where, like, you've hooked up with someone and you're like, 'Man, I really wish I just had a partner.' I've definitely experienced those. But it's normally something that's kind of felt long-term."

Dick echoes this sentiment by closing out with his feelings towards his engagement with the culture as a whole:

> "I feel I have a lot of affection to give and I feel like it'd be nice to have an adventure partner to go do things with, because a lot of the people I hang out with are older than me… And at some point they're not going to be around and that's just life."

There are varying levels to which individuals in this study engaged within the framework of hookup culture through the platform, Grindr, but I feel confident in saying that the nuanced language of individuals' social environments plays an important role here. The factors of open-communication versus closed-communication in homes of participants showed up when individuals embraced for themselves their Queer identities, and then was further exacerbated by the nuanced institutional language of the media (both in representations as well as in the sentiments of the Church). This would then place the emphasis back on the language of interpersonal relationships, from close friends and family. If individuals were in socially vulnerable situations and then received no support (or felt they could receive no support because of the lack of open communication), they ended up withdrawing inwardly. For some, that looked like being in denial of their Queer identity for many years despite exploring that desire through pornographic means. For others, that meant losing confidence in themselves and their inherent sense of value and worth. This then led to their engagements on the platform Grindr being held in a fairly negative view, especially sexual encounters they had early on in their stories, because their true motivations for seeking community and connection were not in line with the expectations of the platform itself or were not being held in high regard due to the tendency to overlook ones' values for the sake of temporary release.

Conclusion

The intention of this study was always first and foremost to present stories and experiences of Queer men's engagement within the framework of hookup culture in a way that was less focused on the hookup culture itself and more interested in asking the individuals why they chose (or continue to choose) to engage with it. In an academic world that is primarily situated in the focus of Queer men's perceived

hypersexuality, few consider the possible roots behind it. The idea of language as it pertains to how it is weaponized against individuals, even in ways that may seem harmless, even in the withholding of affirming language that can combat the institutionalized ways systems "Other" individuals, is central to this study.

This study sought to establish a crux of research on the intersection between the fields of Queer Linguistics (and Queer use of language) as a form of creating identity and community and the fields of how Queer individuals express their identities through desire. The idea that one is only considered to have a sense of value and purpose if they are deemed desirable was something that was especially present in the analysis, and it shows how entwined our senses of worth are with our actions. It was interesting to see how Queer individuals engaged with Grindr as a potential solution for the lack of self-worth they developed from the nuanced language of institutions and individuals, and also how, when they engaged with it with that motivation, it manifested long-term in a cycle of loneliness and dissatisfaction.

This study sought to answer what factors go into the level of pleasure derived from a casual encounter, which outwardly was expected to be more focused on the quality of the interaction itself, but ended up being much more related to unanticipated circumstances like adherence to consent and physical/emotional boundaries, motivations/expectations of individuals going into the encounter, as well as potentially the age and experience with the app that a participant had.

When exploring how participants' stated motivations for pursuing encounters on Grindr compared with how they actively engaged with the app, it was concluded that individuals who were members of open-communication environments and decided to diverge from the Heterosexual Model presented to them in mainstream media, also tended to engage with hookup culture with a "looking for fun" and "no strings attached" mindset. This also correlated with better experiences on the app overall compared to individuals who expressed the underlying desire to be in a relationship, but would engage with hookup culture anyway. This was also greatly affected by one's sense of self-worth, and if they allowed themselves to go through with an encounter they were not very interested in for whatever reason.

The individuals whose experiences were dissonant from their underlying want for romance, or emotional desire, caused a long-term sense of loneliness and negative or apathetic feelings overall towards hookup culture.

Finally, this study also sought to explore how Queer men related to Queer subcultures that are defined primarily by physical characteristics (ex. Bear, Twink, Jock, etc.) when they viewed themselves or their potential romantic or sexual partners. Interestingly, many of the individuals had little to no strong feelings towards this idea aside from the distaste for many of them to the idea of labeling themselves or others. Many of the individuals I spoke with were in the Millenial age group, and one characteristic that two participants expressed to me was a foundational element of being a Millenial was the anti-label mentality. So the idea of others placing a label onto them was distasteful and uncomfortable regardless of the label itself, but they also understood the reasons why individuals feel the need to label themselves. Overall, I think this concept would potentially need to be explored more in a separate study entirely focused on how individuals engage (or do not engage) with Queer physical subcultures. The scope of this study became so focused on the coming-out process that it didn't have a chance to go deeper within the few conversations about Queer subcultures.

Like any study, this one has its limitations. One limitation is that 60% of the individuals identified as White, which would mean that the POC Queer male experience on Grindr could be different than what was expressed to me. Of the four POC participants I engaged with, two were immigrants from countries in Africa which could be a different experience than if I were to have engaged with more POC born in the western world, where all of my other participants were located. Another limitation could be the locations of the participants themselves, as the individuals were from varying locations which, due to maintaining anonymity, were not discussed at length, but could have had an effect on how they engage with Grindr as it is a location-based app. Finally, most of the participants are between the ages of 25-35, with only two outside of that range, so if a future study wished to recreate this one, it would be preferable to recruit more individuals from the 18-24 and 40+ range. One potential reason behind the demographics could be

because many of the participants in that 25-35 range had over 5 years of experience on the platform, and as such were more willing to quickly set a time to do an interview with me regarding their experiences on it (and follow through with the interview).

Future research within this crux of language and experience with hookup culture, as it pertains to the milieu of Queer men, should explore the quantification of that apparent vulnerable period post-coming out where Queer individuals are especially susceptible to the language surrounding them (interpersonal and institutional). I feel as though where this study emphasized the human experience, it is important for future research to take the experience of these ten participants and see how it varies statistically in a larger scale experiment with Queer men. It is also important, as this particular study could notget into the finer details of the experiences of POC, nonbinary and transgender identities on Grindr, for future humanistic research to explore how these deeper intersections may sway how individuals engage with their varying identities.

Appendix

A. Demographic Information

Name*	Age	Ethnicity	Sexuality	Religious Background	Current Religion	Education
Dick Grayson	35	White/ Caucasian	Gay	Catholicism	Agnosticism	Bachelor's Degree
Dorrick	25	Black/ African American	Queer	Christianity	Christianity	Bachelor's Degree
Manx Belgrave	32	White/ Caucasian	Gay	Agnosticism/Judaism	Spirituality/Not raised religious	Bachelor's Degree
Mauve	30	White/ Caucasian	Gay	Catholicism	Agnosticism/ Spirituality	Some college/university
Michael Mittens	52	White/ Caucasian	Gay	Christianity	Christianity/ Spirituality	Some college/university
Mister X	32	Hispanic/ Latino	Gay	Catholicism	Apatheism	Some college/university
Muhteshem	27	Black/ African American	Gay	Christianity	Christianity	Master's Degree
Noah Voss	20	2 or more races	Gay/ Bisexual	Christianity	Christianity	Some college/university
Nola Spice	28	White/ Caucasian	Gay	Atheism/Agnosticism/ Catholicism	Spirituality	Bachelor's Degree
Phoenix	26	White/ Caucasian	Gay	Not raised religious	Not raised religious	Bachelor's Degree

*indicates pseudonym

B. **Media Representation Questions**

Name*	Growing up did you see Queer/Gay Representation in the Media?	Who do you think of when you think of Gay representation in the media?	Most recent media you've watched starring a Queer romance?	Who is your favorite Queer couple from the media?
Dick Grayson	No	Elton John, John Barrowman, Neil Patrick Harris	Heartstopper or Red, White, and Royal Blue (both for the 1000th time)	Nick & Henry (Red, White, and Royal Blue) Nick & Charlie (Heartstopper) Simon & Wilhelm (Young Royals)
Dorrick	Yes	LGBTQ+ Community on Social Media	Happiest Season	Mae + George (Feel Good), It's a Sin couple
Manx Belgrave	Yes	N/A	Alex Strangelove	Albert and Armond (The Birdcage)
Mauve	No	Will & Grace	The Great North	Ham and Crispin (The Great North)
Michael Mittens	No	Will & Grace	N/A	Will + Grace
Mister X	Yes	Will + Jack (Will & Grace)	Bottoms	David and Patrick (Schitt's Creek)
Muhteshem	No	N/A	Sex Education	N/A
Noah Voss	No	N/A	N/A	N/A
Nola Spice	Yes	RuPaul Charles	Saltburn	Nick & Charlie (Heartstopper)
Phoenix	Yes	Kurt Hummel (Glee)	Heartstopper (Season 2)	Nick and Charlie (Heartstopper)

C. Digital Survey Form

Desire for Desire:
A Socio-Linguistic Perspective of Gay Men's Perpetuation of Hookup Culture
Participant Survey

Demographic Information:

Please indicate your age: _____

What is the highest level or degree of education you have completed?
- Some high school
- High school diploma
- Trade School
- Some college/university
- Bachelor's Degree
- Master's Degree
- Ph. D. or higher
- Prefer not to say

Please choose which best describes your sexuality:
- Gay
- Bisexual
- Pansexual
- Queer or other: _____

Which race or ethnicity best describes you?:
- American Indigenous or Alaska Native
- Asian or Pacific Islander
- Black or African American
- Hispanic/Latino
- White/Caucasian
- Other ethnicity: _____

What is your religious background/upbringing?:
- Atheism
- Agnosticism
- Buddhism
- Catholicism
- Christianity
- Hinduism
- Islam

- Judaism
- Protestantism
- Spirituality
- I was not raised religious
- Other/Self-Describe: _____

What is your current religion if any?:
- Atheism
- Agnosticism
- Buddhism
- Catholicism
- Christianity
- Hinduism
- Islam
- Judaism
- Protestantism
- Spirituality
- I am not religious
- Other/Self-Describe: _____

Media Representation Questions

Growing up, did you see Queer/Gay representation in the media?
- Yes
- No

Who do you first think of when you think of Gay representation in the media?

- _____

What's the most recent show/movie you watched that starred a Queer romance?

- _____

Who is your favorite Queer couple from movies or TV?

- _____

D. Informed Consent Script

Information Sheet
The Desire to be Desired HUM#

Principal Investigator: Austin Rueffer
Faculty Advisor: Hollis Griffin, Associate Professor, University of Michigan Department of Communications and Media

PI:

Before we jump in there is just a bit of information I want to give you about the study so you can decide whether or not you'd like to continue to participate. Feel free to ask any questions at any time if you're unsure of something and would like more clarification.

This study is looking to understand more about how Queer men use language to describe their experiences in the framework of hookup culture and especially on the platform, Grindr. Your participation is meant to give more insight into how individual members of this community articulate this phenomenon. The interview itself is semi-structured, mostly it will just be a conversation or a way for you to tell me about your experiences as a Queer man and is expected to last 45 minutes to 1 hour.

I have around 10 discussion questions here, but like I said if you think of something related or just an interesting point you'd like to make feel free to. This is your space to express yourself. I understand that discussing hookup culture and even your own experiences could cause some discomfort, so if at any time you would like to not answer a question or stop the conversation entirely that is entirely acceptable. Your participation is entirely voluntary and will aid in further academic conversations about how Queer individuals navigate Queer spaces and give more insight into personal experiences on apps designed for Queer relationship-building.

This interview is entirely confidential, you will be given a pseudonym and all of the stored interview information will be under that pseudonym. The recording and transcripts will only be kept as long as necessary for analysis and then will be destroyed. Nobody will be able to hear this audio except for myself and research members of my team.

If you have any questions after the interview I will give you my contact information and you are free to let me know. By continuing with this study, do you indicate you understand and voluntarily agree to continue with the research interview?

Thank you for your time and help with this research.

E. Interview Questions

Personal Experience with Queer Dating

1.) Could you please tell me about your experience with coming to terms with your own Queer identity, the process of coming out, etc.
    a.) Where did you learn how to perform relationship roles?
    b.) Where did you see Queer representation online or in the media?

2.) What can you remember about your first interaction with the gay dating scene?
    a.) When were you introduced to dating apps?

3.) In a previous discussion it was brought to my attention that the traditional heterosexual relationship model seems to influence how Queer men approach dating spaces, what do you think about that?
    a.) Do you think that people continue to base their relationships around this model?
    b.) How do you think this affects top/bottom dynamics within the community? Do you associate certain traits with one or the other?

Grindr Questions

4.) We're going to move into some questions specifically about Grindr as a platform and your experience with the app, if that's okay. Can you walk me through your first experience and impressions in the app?
    a.) How do you feel about it at this time?
    b.) How have your different identities affected your experiences on the app (depending on ethnicity, religious background, education level, class, etc.)?

5.) I've noticed in my research that a typical encounter on Grindr or Tinder (whether that be a date or hookup) tends to include four main stages that individuals go through. I've labeled them "The Interest," "The Chase," "The Act," and "The Effects" stages for the purposes of this study.
    a.) Can you tell me more about your experiences in "The Interest" stage, which I understand to include the profile-making, swiping and viewing other profiles
        i.) What were your own motivations for coming onto these types of apps?
        ii.) What types of profiles did you see as most present?
    b.) Can you elaborate now on your experience with "The Chase" stage, which I understand consists more of the messages that are sent in the spirit of trying to meet up and connect with people?
        i.) What would a typical conversation look like?
    c.) Can you tell me now about what "The Act" of meeting up looks like in your experience?
        i.) Could you walk me through a typical encounter?
    d.) Finally, how do you feel after getting home or leaving an encounter? Can you elaborate on what you feel after one of these experiences?

6.) One thing I've noticed is that unlike the heterosexual model, gay men specifically have labels for different body types. Can you tell me a bit about your experience with these "Tribes" I believe as they're called on Grindr (Twink, Jock, Bear, Otter, etc.)?
    a.) Do you feel as though certain tribes are more desirable than others? Why?
    b.) Have you ever felt pressure to fit into those categories?
    c.) If you had to guess, why do you think that the Queer community has developed these categories? Do you think we're better off with them or without them?

7.) Finally I'm curious as to the dynamics of "friends" on Grindr, which is something I've seen every now and again. This same thing shows up in a lot of gay male online spaces. How do you pursue different types of relationships in online spaces (friends, dates, hookups, friends with benefits, etc.)?
    a.) How do you typically determine what people are on the app for? Are there certain indicators for what someone is looking for and how you figure that out?

8.) As we reach the end of the interview, is there anything we touched on only briefly that you'd like to discuss in more detail, or perhaps something I haven't brought up at all that you think would be important to discuss regarding this topic?

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