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‘WHAT ARE YOU LOOKING FOR?’: SEXUAL IMAGINARIES AND AFFORDANCES ON GRINDR AND SCRUFF

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Introduction

For queer men, sexual imaginaries have come to accommodate hybrid physical and digital location-based cultures (Miles, 2017). In short, what is possible in terms of intimate connections with other queer men has opened up in exciting, sometimes scary, and radical ways. However, this expanded imaginary of what is possible can also lead to an existential questioning of what an individual person wants—simply and nothing more than sex, a fleeting summer fling, a new group of friends, to fall in love? More? Less? A combination of all of these things at different moments in time? In the face of such uncertainty, we argue that queer men develop a range of practices as they negotiate their shifting relationships to sex and romance as mediated through virtual intimacies (McGlotten, 2013).

In this study, we explore how queer men learn about, interpret, and reproduce sexual and romantic norms on two intimate platforms, Grindr and Scruff. Our approach builds on Sharif Mowlabocus’s (2016, pg. 60) notion of cybercarnality concerning the “erotic economy of gay male corporeality” and Pym et al. (2021, pg. 399) study of queer community “imagined as an affective sense of shared ethics” on intimate platforms.

To that end, we explore three intertwined research questions:

- 1) What sexual imaginaries and affordances circulate on Grindr and Scruff?
- 2) How do queer users make sense of their own practices relative to these narratives and norms?

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3) What role does platform design play in how users construct and reproduce sexual and romantic narratives and norms?

Methods

We leverage digital ethnographic and qualitative approaches to explore how queer men make sense of how intimate platforms and their attendant sexual social media subcultures mediate their sexual and romantic practices. Specifically, we employ 1) participant observation on location-based dating and hookup apps Grindr and Scruff, 2) interviews and app walkthroughs (Light et al, 2018) with users, 3) critical discourse analysis of social media conversations and mainstream journalistic coverage of queer men's mediated sexual and romantic practices, and 4) design probes that elicit alternative design directions.

'What are you looking for?'

This study emerged from lingering questions in both of our doctoral research projects at the intersection of communication and media studies, human-computer interaction, and design studies. In the context of Author 1's research on sexual content moderation and queer digital sexual cultures, interviews and fieldwork highlighted an enduring ambivalence towards the behavioral routes available to queer users on intimate platforms like Grindr and Scruff. Author 2's research examines how norms embedded in platforms can influence health outcomes for queer people, elucidating participants' experiences with Grindr and Scruff's design features.

The common question "what are you looking for?" that users exchange reveals the shifting practices that queer men bring to these platforms, where someone's profile description or choice of tags does not necessarily align with the intimate possibilities that they are interested in at that moment in time. This resonates with Miles (2019) exploration of the different types of use in male-male locative dating app contexts (the embracer, the timewaster, and the minimalist). Furthermore, our study builds on Byron et al. (2021) by examining how queer men destabilize divisions between dating apps and social media platforms, wherein their social and sexual communication practices construct digital intimate publics that support a range of sexual narratives and norms (or imaginaries).

In this conference presentation, we discuss two emergent themes from our study:

1. The interpretive work that queer men do to make sense of how they fit into sexual and romantic norms as represented through profile descriptions and subculture signification (ie: kink interests, body-type categorization, sexual content creation)
2. The construction and circulation of sexual imaginaries on social media platforms (ie: Twitter and Reddit) and intimate platforms (ie: Grindr and Scruff) among queer men

Designing for Multivalent Intimate Interests

We follow up on Birnholtz et al. (2014), who found that Grindr users use specific language in their profiles to manage reactions and stigma from others, to investigate users' reasonings and strategies. In alignment with Hutson et al. (2018) who "argue that focusing on platform design can reveal opportunities to reshape troubling patterns of intimate contact without overriding users' decisional autonomy", we further explore the socio-cultural impacts of design-based features (pg. 1).

In particular, we examine how current Grindr and Scruff users interact with 1) search, sort, and filter features in relation to discrimination (Hutson et al's, 2018), 2) reporting and blocking moderation features (Mowlabocus, 2020), and 3) relaxed sexual imagery on Grindr and Scruff that allows users to share content that had been previously prohibited. Through qualitative interviews and design probes, we also employ speculative design methods to explore how queer men's experiences might change if these features worked in different ways, thus co-creating alternative ways of connecting with others on these platforms.

Intimate platforms, as Lik Sam Chan (2021, pg. 2) describes, "are portals that transport people from their mundane physical environment to an exciting virtual world full of relational possibilities". From our digital ethnographic and speculative design data, we develop the concept of *multivalent intimate interests* to capture the ambivalent socio-cultural context and situated nature of queer men's sexual and romantic practices. This is situated within a theoretical framework that integrates queer communication approaches with HCI and critical design studies, shaped by our Black and Asian American personal subjectivities as well as decolonial queer of color critique and methodologies as they concern intimate platforms (McGlotten, 2013; Mowlabocus, 2016, Chan, 2021).

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