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## HOW QUEER HOOK-UP / PEOPLE NEARBY APPLICATION (PNA) USERS NAVIGATE HYBRID DIGITAL AND LOCAL SPACE IN RURAL AND URBAN AREAS: RESULTS FROM A MULTI-REGION QUALITATIVE SCOPING STUDY IN THE UNITED KINGDOM (UK)

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### Issue

Scholars recognise that geographical cultures shape identity (Schweighofer, 2016), yet culturally specific applications - such as *Grindr's* focus on gay men - often fail to consider geography (Hardy & Lindtner, 2017). Before the millennium, finding other queer people often involved travelling to a queer venue in a city. Yet when *Tinder*, a PNA for people of all sexualities, launched in 2012 (Crook, 2014), *Grindr* already had over 1.5 million users (Van Grove, 2011). Queer people have thus been at the forefront of internet technologies (Mowlabocus, 2010), and are likely visible rurally via PNAs, some of which semi-publicly display users organised by geographical proximity on any smartphone screen. This creates a hybrid space, where digital and geographical realities combine (Miles, 2021). For rural queer people, visibility in relation to sexuality is carefully negotiated and cannot be taken for granted (Gray, 2009). Our research consequently asks what PNAs afford and complicate for users in rurality, compared to

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those in cities, and thus how geographical specificities (such as approaches to visibility) are facilitated or constrained by PNA architectures.

Accounting for queer identity in geographical context requires methodological caution. We build on valuable European studies of queer PNA use that utilise Sexual Citizenship theory (Driscoll-Evans, 2020; McKearney, 2021) while keeping in mind the belief of some scholars that it requires queer compromise (Langdrige & Parchev, 2018). We take our lead from arguments for empirical methods undergirded by queer theory, while focusing on the assets queer people bring to society, rather than the problems they experience (Rivera & Nadal, 2019). Understanding queer PNA use in rurality via these lenses offers an important example through which to comprehend the adaptability of novel internet technologies in enabling or constraining cultural diversity (Cserni, 2020), such as the expression of marginalised groups or the needs of rural populations more broadly.

## **Methodology**

A semi-structured approach using five open interview questions was chosen to establish whether location and/or technology use shaped social, sexual, and romantic network creation and/or quality. Participation was offered via an interview or qualitative online survey. Nine demographic questions (covering location, age, sexual and gender identity, race and ethnicity, outness and relationship status) were included. Ethical Approval was granted by the Psychology Department Ethics Panel at Northumbria University.

The researcher recruited by creating and contacting a database of local community groups, accepting subsequent invitations to attend rural Pride events, engaging friendships (Tillman-Healy, 2003), and snowball sampling. Data collection took place between May and September 2022. The emic researcher (a gay man) carried out a Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022) of the data, with a view to understanding the experiences of participants living in different contexts.

## **Results**

39 participants took part in total, including 26 online survey respondents, 8 online interviews, and 5 face-to-face interviews. 24 participants resided outside of major cities, 11 in cities other than London, and 4 in London. Participants included 22 men, 8 women, and 9 non-Binary or gender-diverse participants. The sample was majority male in urban areas, though more evenly distributed outside of major cities.

The research team harvested three themes from the dataset: firstly, the distinct nature of urban and rural connections described, secondly; the bonds and barriers to relationship formation in urban and rural space, and thirdly; alternate social opportunities beyond PNAs.

In terms of the nature of connections, participants in urban areas were afforded both friendships and expedient, anonymous, and sexual connections while rural spaces produced like-minded friendships.

Paying attention to bonds and barriers revealed that participants often seek and achieve friendships in cities and the countryside, even while some PNA designs can make this difficult. Some city participants mentioned shared housing as a barrier to connection, while landscape features could prevent rural connections. Some rural participants discussed context collapse as potentially empowering or reducing safety, with limited control available over which people and contexts are combined.

Participants described offline LGBTQ+ social opportunities as meeting their specific interests and identity needs (such as by catering to bisexual women) in cities, while supporting broader LGBTQ+ solidarities outside of major urban areas.

Across all three themes above, we conceptualised urban PNA use as producing *vertical* hybrid spaces, where increased population density produces digital and physical connections in tangible proximity, enabling spontaneous interaction. Rural PNA use produces *lateral* hybridities that map and connect more distant users.

## **Discussion**

This may be the largest extant UK study of queer PNA use covering multiple rural regions and cities. It demonstrates that culturally specific hook-up apps indeed lack geographical specificity for those living in the countryside, such as by showing sometimes unreachable profiles some distance away, possibly revealing an awareness of isolation rather than connection (Hardy & Lindtner, 2017). Their cultural specificity is also incomplete: for many participants (in the city and the countryside) queerness extends beyond visible sexuality to friendship, echoing empirical scholarship outside of Europe (Byron et. al., 2021). PNAs can be inadequately tailored tools for this expression, yet sometimes the only tools available.

Especially in terms of visibility, the pictorial logic of PNAs can be problematic for rural users or those partially open about their sexuality, adding empirical credence to extant scholarship (Smilges, 2019). Participants describe finding local, rural, and trusted social groups beyond PNAs, building on earlier studies of community (Wilkinson, 2012). Our

recruitment process demonstrates the time-consuming nature of finding and contacting rural social groups in comparison to the immediacy of queer people visibly organized by distance on smartphone screens. Future studies might consider whether the ease of turning to such apps (and their visually stimulating design) drives their use, despite their inadequacy in affording desirable user outcomes or respecting partial disclosure of sexuality, especially in rurality. Future exploration of the power relations evident in hybrid spaces (de Souza e Silva, 2023), especially between culturally specific groups of app users and app designers, may prove fruitful in better understanding queer, rural, or wider user claims and constraints when attempting to realise internet-mediated encounters.

Some participants who are aware of the mismatch between app affordances and their motives demonstrate skill in using apps beyond their perceived design (such as building or joining friendship groups) or founding alternatives to apps (such as starting book clubs), even where this requires considerable personal emotional and time burdens. By drawing attention to successful queer and rural user strategies, rather than overly focusing on negative outcomes, future research may be able to contribute to the development of internet technologies more expertly tailored to specific users' needs.

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