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‘IT’S A CANDY STORE. YOU CAN SEE THE CANDIES, BUT THE DOOR IS CLOSED.’ (NEURO)QUEERING THE HOOK-UP APP INDUSTRY IN NON-METROPOLITAN FINLAND.

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Issue

Industry is a paradox. It is a natural/rural cycle of autonomous workers interspersing social interactions and labour tasks without precise attention to clock-time. Yet it is also the classed time-discipline of synchronised labour: Employee time is employers’ money, time at work is measured, work and leisure are demarcated, and capitalist bosses judge workers’ recreation as wasteful (Thompson, 1967). The industrious human achieves autonomy while the industrialised subject is disempowered.

Industrial time and space produce marginalities and resistance: Colonial imposition of arbitrary borders and linear time undermined geosocial order in parts of the Global South (Arfaoui, 2021), and queer lives were historically excluded from normative trajectories of marriage and child-rearing. Queer time rejects linearity, potentiates alternate experiences (Halberstam, 2005), and runs backwards or off-course (Kondakov, 2023). Rural queer scholars question urban speed and rural slowness

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(Crawford, 2017), while crip time resists demands for disabled bodymind conformity to clock time (Katzman et al., 2020). Intersecting subject positions, including sexuality (Moore, 2012), contest linear-industrial progress, as does the history of Steel City: Attercliffe was transiently the crucible of steel and a queer social enclave (Brownson, 2022). Both declined, validating the precarity of linear progress.

Today, phones or smartwatches mediate temporal ruptures in daily lives (Mowlabocus, 2016), and hook-up app industries monetise intimacies (Aunspach, 2020), defining interactional norms (Licoppe, 2020), profile fields (Warner et al., 2020) and pictures (Smilges, 2019), while empowerment is rooted in (in)visibility (Brighenti, 2007). Global design undermines local contexts (Hardy & Lindtner, 2017), while app time is too fast or slow, dependent on user motives of immediacy or futurity (Bonner-Thompson, 2023). Time is passed (or wasted) as distraction. Queer app messaging frustrates other goals, and some users leave these technologies (Brubaker et al., 2016). Given permanent online connectivity, work and leisure are more porous than in a factory, yet corporate industries mediate marginal socialities. App designers utilise user data, albeit more covertly than workplace clock cards. Industrious rural queers wrestle control of spatiotemporal intimacies from totalising platforms while concurrently moving through daily lives.

Participants & Methodology

Prior linked doctoral studies considered perceptions of queer hook-up apps and community group use in urban and countryside Britain using mixed methods. This study maps rural sexuality and hook-up app (dis)comfort, and visualises whether hook-up contacts penetrate social networks. A Turing partnership with a Finnish researcher offered a Northern European research site politically similar to the UK, while benefitting from Finland's vaster, more sparsely populated geography. Northumbria University granted Ethical Approval in October 2023.

Semi-structured interviews constructed Relief Maps expressing feelings of (dis)comfort (Rodó-de-Zárate, 2014) and Sociograms mapping queer relations (Complex Data Collective, 2016). Recruitment emails were sent to local LGBTQ+ organisations and research contacts. Data was collected in January 2024.

Seven participants responded: two online and five face-to-face. Five resided in Arctic Finland, one in West Finland, and one in Southwest Finland. Two identified as gay men, one as a bisexual woman, one as gender-fluid, one as queer, one as a lesbian woman, and one as pansexual-asexual non-binary. Three participants identified as neurodivergent (ADHD/Autism), and one disclosed Cerebral Palsy. Two Arctic participants identified as indigenous (Sami/Karelian).

The insider-outsider researcher (a regional British gay man with ADHD) carried out inductive Reflexive Thematic Analysis, mediated by his positionality via auto-ethnographic journal (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Analysis of visual data is forthcoming.

Results

Three themes were determined: (in)visibility due to (fears of) marginalisation; categories and borders of app design inadequately reflecting indigenous/gendered, (neuro)queer, rural, linguistic, infrastructural and economic realities; and resisting spatiotemporal app logics.

Two participants described one locality as closed-minded, one stating this prevents queer people from becoming visible on apps or in place, voicing their queerness after moving elsewhere. Others experienced a 'live and let live' mentality yet feared discrimination (that did not materialise). Another felt discomfort with sexuality and hook-up app use when visiting the family due to exclusion there. One indigenous participant experienced uncomfortable fetishisation of their clothing; finding smaller places enabled them to be a person rather than a tourist attraction. Another no longer shares his number after being blackmailed by a hook-up app contact. Local culture and past memory consequently shape current possibilities.

Reductive categorisations were manifold. On *Grindr*, one participant felt forced into descriptions of 'tribes' and sexual positions, limiting interactional potential. Several wished for others with similar hobbies, gender identities (indigenous genders differ from app options) or accessible matches. Yet distance radiuses of apps reach Norway (with no common language or cross-border train) while excluding others in Sami land. Two participants mentioned rapid cheap flights to London and Brussels as more affordable than Finnish trains, yet could not see matches there. Some valued the design of *Her* for community-building and transgender inclusion, yet felt compelled to use *Tinder* (despite normative frustrations) given its dominance. Many wished for a queer friendship, rather than dating, app. App design thus borders and limits social potential.

Participants queered hook-up app demands of hyper-connectivity and visibility. Nearly all expressed a preference to meet face-to-face shortly after initiating discussions (sometimes due to app limitations and risks), despite the need for expensive day or night-long rail or road journeys, often in treacherous conditions. Several enjoyed meeting distant contact only a few times a year because multiple intersecting marginalities produced intimacies. Others logged on at work, feeling power from avoiding and queering heteronormative spaces, or accidentally leaving their phone unlocked and getting 'blocked' (by a user who felt ignored). Others spoke of the cyclical nature of rural loneliness, browsing at night, and deleting and re-downloading (for

example when university terms bring new queer people). This blurs life's boundaries and undermines permanent connectivity via cyclical (dis)connections, and wrestles control from app logics.

Discussion

History has shown the rise of industry as precariously subject to queer temporal forces lacking predictable directions, ultimately declining. Nonetheless, queer hook-up apps claim control of users' leisure and work time, while mediating possibilities for expression among the (mis)mapped matches they produce. They contribute to fetishisation of queer (and indigenous) bodies as visible yet unreachable products for capitalist consumption (as the participant's quote in the title of this paper suggests).

Apps inadequately account for the cultural, linguistic, neurodiverse, gender diverse, disabled, indigenous, remembered, and local contexts of queer lives beyond major cities: just as clock-time undermined working labourers while empowering colonial interests. Via empirical research at embodied and geographical margins, we demonstrate the ingenuity of users in queering apps' social norms. This ingenuity resists digital foreclosure of queer futures.

Our findings reveal the importance of digital queer world-making that counterbalances immediacy with slowness, profile visibility with intimate community, geolocation with awareness of cultural and local context, and technological distraction with intimate connection. Achieving this requires theoretical knowledge and user experience from postcolonial, feminist, disabled, and queer people. We hope this may challenge digital industries of capitalist oppression.

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