



Selected Papers of AoIR 2016:  
The 17<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference of the  
Association of Internet Researchers  
Berlin, Germany / 5-8 October 2016

## WHAT'S BEHIND THE MASK?: UNDERSTANDING STEALTH PRACTICES OF GRINDR USERS

W. E. Chapin  
University of Washington

Ian Wesley-Smith  
University of Washington

### Introduction

Geo-social dating apps like Grindr target gay communities to facilitate finding people who may otherwise remain hidden. Although Grindr is known as a gay hook-up app focused on men seeking sex with other men, it also contributes to the visibility and acceptance of gay culture, and even facilitates friendship for many who once thought they were alone in the world (Ritter, 2012). Grindr users create profiles describing themselves and the partners they are seeking. The primary interaction mechanism for Grindr users is the “cascade”, a page that displays profile pictures, sorted by distance. This means that a user's profile picture is extremely important, as it is often the only aspect of a user that will be visible. Although ideally this picture is of the user's face, some users choose pictures unrelated to them, pictures not including their face, or no picture at all.

However, using an unidentifiable profile picture is at odds with the overall goal of Grindr: how are other users supposed to identify whether they are interested in a person if they don't know what that person looks like? Furthermore, there is anecdotal evidence that the prevalence of unidentifiable pictures vary by region: Grindr users in the Southern United States seem to choose unidentifiable pictures at a much higher rate than those on the West Coast. Observation of this regional bias led us to the following questions:

- Why do Grindr users post a profile picture in which they are unidentifiable (e.g. torso shot) or not present (e.g. car, beach) in the picture?
- What key themes emerge as explanations of why Grindr users choose unidentifiable profile pictures?
- In what ways do these explanations vary with regions?
- What are the Grindr community perceptions of unidentifiable profile pictures?

Suggested Citation (APA): Chapin, W. E., & Wesley-Smith, I. N. (2016, October 5-8). *What's Behind the Mask?: Understanding Stealth Practices of Grindr Users*. Paper presented at AoIR 2016: The 17<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference of the Association of Internet Researchers. Berlin, Germany: AoIR. Retrieved from <http://spir.aoir.org>.

In order to answer these questions, we designed an online survey instrument and recruited Grindr users to respond anonymously.

## **Method**

The survey includes closed and open-ended questions and is structured into four sets of questions: demographics, Grindr usage and choice of profile pictures, measures of outness in various social relations, and perceived discrimination experienced in their everyday lives. Surveys were distributed via posts to online community forums, mailing lists, and snowball recruitment techniques.

We performed inductive analyses of response data using open coding techniques (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). We labelled participants' responses to the open-ended questions and organized codes into preliminary categories. We then refined the categories and labels and coded the data, resulting in 13 top-level categories, including codes relating to body image, disclosure, profile descriptions, motivations, user control, anonymity, and privacy.

We continued our analyses through the conceptual frameworks of queer theory (Nash & Browne, 2012) and stealth (Edelman, 2009, 2014). The concept of stealth offers a queer conceptual framework that destabilizes the binary notions of the closet and a person's relationship to the closet as fixed in either "in" or "out" positions. The lived experiences of many LGBTQ people confirm the notion that moving in and out of "the closet" depends on the context. This practice of sometimes hiding and other times revealing LGBTQ identity is a common practice and a way of practicing stealth. Edelman (2014) discusses stealth practices in relation to trans subjectivities and defines stealth as "a dynamic practice of contextual disclosures and non-disclosures" noting that "economies of stealth and disclosure are deployed to maintain physical and emotional safety, get or keep a job, and avoid alienation."

We explore this concept of stealth in relationship to users of Grindr and their choices of profile pictures. For example, most users who download and set up a profile on Grindr are in some sense identifying as a man seeking sex or dating relationships with other men. If users of Grindr are in some sense self-identifying as gay by using the app, we wondered why users would choose to hide their identity in their profile pictures. We employ queerness as a conceptual framework and as the lens through which we interpret and analyze the boundaries between identifiability and unidentifiability among Grindr users. Woo (2006) describes the concept of "identifiability" on apps such as Grindr. For Woo, unidentifiable users do not want their online identity to be easily traced back to their offline identity.

## **Key Findings**

We discovered that location was a factor in why some Grindr users displayed unidentifiable profile pictures, although their locational concerns were more tied to whether or not they were in their hometowns, not the destination they were traveling to. Respondents also communicated that they change their profile from identifiable to unidentifiable as a means of controlling interactions with other users. We also found a significant difference in perceptions of unidentifiable users between users who are

identifiable and users who are unidentifiable. Ultimately, posting unidentifiable profile pictures on Grindr is a complicated practice with multiple explanations.

## Conclusion

Attempts at understanding LGBTQ subjects and their practices related to sexual behavior continues to be a challenging endeavor. As queer researchers before us have encountered difficulty in recruiting subjects and navigated complicated ethical terrains in doing field work, we too have come up against significant limitations in making sense of Grindr users' choices to use unidentifiable profile pictures.

We discovered the complexity of social cues and social signaling that are variously interpreted by Grindr users. The differences between self-reporting and community perceptions of unidentifiability showed us that explaining behavior on social networks involves complicated social interactions and power relations where users were blocking or avoiding unidentifiable users and refusing to consider them as potential partners. Our respondents clearly engaged in stealth practices of contextually disclosing or hiding information about themselves, but not always in ways we expected. Sometimes they did so to protect their career, others because they didn't want to be outed, and some because they were new to Grindr. Users varied their actions by location, motivation, and desire. So, what's behind the mask? Well, it's complicated.

## References

- Corbin, J., & Strauss, A. L. (2008). *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory*. SAGE Publications.
- Edelman, E. (2009). The power of stealth: (In)visible sites of female-to-male transsexual resistance. In Lewin, E., & Leap, W. L. (Eds.). (2009). *Out in Public: Reinventing Lesbian / Gay Anthropology in a Globalizing World*. Wiley.
- Edelman, E. (2014). Neither in nor out: Taking the "t" out of the closet. In Zimman, L., Davis, J., & Raclaw, J. (Eds.). *Queer Excursions: Rethorizing Binaries in Language, Gender, and Sexuality*. Oxford University Press.
- Nash, C. J., & Browne, P. K. (2012). *Queer Methods and Methodologies: Intersecting Queer Theories and Social Science Research*. Ashgate Publishing Limited.
- Ritter, M. (2012, June 4). *Pride in Grindr: A Sex-Positive, Global Cyber Space for Gay Men*. Retrieved March 8, 2016, from <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/psychoanalysis-30/201206/pride-in-grindr-sex-positive-global-cyber-space-gay-men>
- Woo, J. (2006). The right not to be identified: privacy and anonymity in the interactive media environment. *New Media & Society*, 8(6), 949–967.