

“Discreet Masc”: Non-Heterosexual Male Identities in Urban and Rural New Hampshire

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ABSTRACT

Many subcultural identities exist within male culture. Identities may vary by geographical location, and further intersectional research is needed in the fields of gender and sexuality as they relate to location. By examining a sample of 600 social networking app profiles, the present study establishes that experiences of masculinity vary significantly for non-heterosexual men based on their urban or rural setting. Men in rural locations are more inclined to assume traditionally masculine identities, and as such, a claim to an inconspicuous and heteronormative position in the masculinity hierarchy. Even so, “discreet and masculine” men must find ways to connect to others within the non-heterosexual male community for friendship, sexual companionship, romantic relationships, and mentorship. Regional social expectations play a major role in shaping and perpetuating varying masculinities, and non-heterosexual men in rural New Hampshire utilize social networking apps to project their own versions of masculinity while searching for others with whom to connect.

Keywords: subcultural identities, non-heterosexual male, rural masculinity

INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Many subcultural identities exist within gay, bisexual, queer, trans, and other non-heterosexual male cultures. Identities can be based on physical attributes, health status, sexual proclivity, and any other number of categories in which a person can choose to describe themselves. They may also vary by geographical location, and further intersectional research is needed in the fields of gender and sexuality as they relate to location (Silva 2017).

Unfortunately, much of the existing literature on the topic uses foundational labels such as gay, bisexual, or “men who have sex with men”, which is not entirely inclusive of groups of men who may not fit into the current widely-accepted academic terms. The present study addresses the experiences of men in urban and rural New Hampshire who fit into any self-identified definition of masculinity but who do not identify strictly as heterosexual, and as such, the term “non-heterosexual male” (NHM) has been employed. Particularly, as there is a need to examine masculinities by place, this study examines how rurality impacts self-identification (2017).

Through use of subcultural identities, men in all places along the masculinity spectrum are able to normalize their own experiences of masculinity. Two of the most broadly known NHM identities are “Bear” and “Twink”, both of which have distinct physical connotations that dictate membership within those groups and also position members in varying levels within our cultural hegemonic masculinity hierarchy, a hierarchy which privileges the “straight” male above all (Prestage, et al. 2015). Subcultural identities can also indicate sexual positioning preference between NHMs, with the labels of “top”, “bottom”, and “versatile” being the most widely used terms to distinguish sexual proclivity. The use of subcultural labels within NHM communities provides a mechanism for community-building. Increased connection to others may improve health and quality of life by providing social support which can promote positive self-identity

and a sense of belonging (Fergus, Lewis, Darbes, & Butterfield 2005). Conversely, the use of subcultural labels can be exclusionary and reductionist. Reducing a personal identity to narrowly defined labels in the context of masculinity may perpetuate hegemonically masculine stereotypes and behaviors.

A comparison between urban and rural locations within New Hampshire shows some significant differences in NHM identities. These differences are indicative of contradictory value systems, a variance in the prevalence of high-risk behaviors, and a varying sense of safety in sexual exploration and personal growth. The present study shows that rural NHMs in New Hampshire are more inclined to embrace hegemonic masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity has been described as the “dominant notion of masculinity in a particular historical context” which “serves as the standard upon which the ‘real man’ is defined” (Kupers 2005). Contemporary hegemonic masculinity is dependent on the “domination of women and a hierarchy of intermale dominance”, and so rural NHMs who embrace this type of identity are also claiming an inconspicuous, more heteronormative place in the masculinity hierarchy (2005).

Emotional development for an NHM located in a sparsely populated rural setting can be challenging for a number of reasons. As mentioned, access to social support is vital for a personal sense of acceptance and wellbeing, and rural locations are less likely to have established “gay/queer-identified enclaves” (Brewer 2017). Brewer also describes the intersection of rural and NHM identity as being partially defined by a personal attempt to “ruralize the queer” (2017). This means that rural NHMs tend to emphasize a desire for a hegemonically masculine partner while outwardly denying any feminine traits within themselves (2017). Because rural NHMs show this tendency to value traditional masculinity, they may feel a greater need than urban NHMs to suppress their own personal identity to minimize any and all expressions of femininity.

By utilizing electronic social resources, rural NHMs have the ability to extend themselves into the NHM community but may be less likely to openly identify with subcultural groups for fear of being “outed” in their rural community and consequently regarded as insufficiently masculine. As such, rural NHMs are less likely than urban NHMs to get the emotional and social support they need to live authentic and emotionally fulfilling lives.

Because our heteronormative culture favors heterosexual identity, NHMs who lack positive social support may fear negative evaluation and rejection in social situations (Pachankis & Goldfried 2006). Many sexual minority individuals learn to hide their identities in order to avoid victimization, and research shows that concealment of sexual orientation is one of the most important strategies that NHMs use to maintain a sense of personal protection (2006). Most rural men, including heterosexual men, do not have access to any “socially viable alternatives” to expressions of traditional masculinity and so they construct more socially acceptable heteronormative identities which may be sources of social anxiety (Silva 2017). For NHMs who either experience this social anxiety or uphold a desire to produce a heteronormative appearance to simply connect to their cultural surroundings, an emphasis on discretion may be necessary. Even so, “discreet and masculine” NHMs must find ways to connect to others within the NHM community for friendship, sexual companionship, romantic relationships, and mentorship.

RESEARCH METHODS AND DATA

Modern day Western culture provides many technological options to connect with others for a variety of purposes. “Computer mediated communication” is now a very common and effective mode of interaction and has become an easy way for NHMs to find each other (Brewer 2017). For instance, Grindr is a popular social networking app for gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer men which uses location-based technology (grindr.com 2019). Grindr was launched in

2009 and has “millions of daily users who use...location-based technology in almost every country in every corner of the planet” (2019). As of July 2015, Grindr reported the United States as the country with the most users at over 2.5 million (Grindr Advertising 2015). The app allows users to create a personal profile which may contain as much or as little identifying information as they would like. In addition to having the ability to upload a personal photo, users can create their own display name, share their age, height, weight, body type, preferred sexual position, race/ethnicity, relationship status, tribe (or subcultural identity), and they can also describe what they are looking for in other users. Additionally, there is an “About Me” section in which users can add up to 250 characters of free text, and all fields are entirely optional.

Using Grindr’s location services “Explore” feature, I identified profiles from six distinct cities and towns within the state of New Hampshire. I chose three urban locations based on their high population numbers according to the New Hampshire Municipalities 2010 Census Populations map. I also selected three rural locations with low population numbers and distant proximity to higher population areas. Hillsborough, Merrimack, Sullivan, Grafton, and Coös Counties were represented, which is half of all counties in the state. By selecting each city or town individually, Grindr’s “Explore” feature presented the 100 closest profiles for review, preventing human bias in profile selection. Users have the option to opt-out from appearing in this type of search by turning off the “Show Me in Explore Searches” selection in their user settings. Also, Grindr will only show users who have been most recently active within that geographic location, and so some users found in the search may not originate from the area. I collected data from the 100 profiles made available by a search in each chosen location to make comparisons between urban and rural populations within New Hampshire. This strategy yielded a total of 300 urban profiles and 300 rural profiles for a total sample size of 600 profiles.

I reviewed demographics such as race/ethnicity, age, body type, preferred sexual position, “Tribe” identity, and relationship status. Data from the “Looking for” section of the profile was also collected to determine the user’s intent for their presence on Grindr, with the options being “chat”, “dates”, “friends”, “networking”, “relationship”, and “right now”. For analytical purposes, “chat” and “networking” have been combined and “dates” and “relationship” have been combined due to their very similar natures. Similarly, within the variable of relationship status, I combined “committed” with “partnered” and “engaged” with “married”. In addition to this data, I examined profile photos to determine the level of facial identification provided by the user as an indication of their willingness to be positively identified within their community, and this data is available along with “Tribe” affiliation.

DEMOGRAPHIC ANALYSES

Table 1 provides chi-square analysis comparisons of demographics between both urban and rural locations in New Hampshire. Prevalence of white self-identification in the urban sample was 55.7% with 12.3% non-white, and 32.0% with no response at all. 53.0% of the rural sample identified as white, 8.0% as non-white, and 39.0% with no response. Non-white is a recoded variable which encompasses the available options of Asian, Black, Latino, Middle Eastern, Mixed, Native American, South Asian, and Other which was recoded due to the low response rates from each non-white group. Chi-square analysis of racial identification showed there is no statistically significant difference between locations ($\chi^2 = 1.83, p = 0.176$). In the urban sample ($n = 234$), the mean age was 33.3 years and the median was 29.0, and 22.0% of the sample provided no response. In the rural sample ($n = 240$), the mean age was 35.0 years and the median was 30.0, and 20.0% provided no response. A comparison of the recoded age groups of 18-24, 25-34, 35-44, and 45+ showed no statistically significant difference ($\chi^2 = 2.98, p =$

0.394), however the largest gap between urban and rural locations appears to be in the 45+ group with rural users showing a higher prevalence of older users.

An analysis of self-identified body type showed that among those who provided this information, both the urban ($n = 223$) and rural samples ($n = 199$) most strongly identified as “average” (40.7% and 43.1% respectively). The rural sample had a slightly higher prevalence of the self-identification of “large” or “stocky” (22.1% vs. 17.0%) while the urban sample had a higher prevalence of the self-identification of “muscular” or “toned” (26.0% vs. 23.6%). Although these comparisons are not statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 1.78, p = 0.619$), the urban-rural differences support prior findings (Brewer 2017; Silva 2017) indicating that rural men may be more likely to construct socially acceptable heteronormative identities.

Preferred sexual position varied significantly between the urban and rural samples, with 39.7% of urban users ($n = 189$) identifying as “top” or “vers top” while only 32.5% of rural users ($n = 166$) chose this identity. Just over a third of urban users identified as “versatile” while only 27.7% of rural users chose this. However, rural users showed a greater prevalence of identification as “bottom” or “vers bottom” at 39.8% compared to urban users at 26.5%. The greater prevalence of “bottom” or “vers bottom” identities in rural New Hampshire and “top”, “vers top”, or “versatile” identities in urban New Hampshire is noteworthy as this is statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 7.11, p = 0.029$). Also, there was a greater prevalence of choosing not to respond at all within rural communities (44.7% vs. 37.0%), which may indicate a greater resistance to being siloed into any positional identity.

As stated by Dangerfield, et al., self-identification as a “top” indicates a preference for “insertive anal intercourse” (IAI) and self-identification as a “bottom” indicates a preference for “receptive anal intercourse” (RAI) (2017). Men who identify as “vers top” tend to have IAI

“most of the time” and men who identify as “vers bottom” tend to have RAI “most of the time” (2017). The self-identification of “versatile” would be indicative of having no greater preference in either IAI or RAI. These labels of preferred sexual positioning are influenced by many factors ranging from sexual experience to partner type, HIV status, power, and masculinity stereotypes (2017).

There is evidence that shows that while positional terms describe sexual behavior, they are also associated with gender roles (Johns, et al. 2012). A study conducted by Moskowitz & Hart showed that men who commonly preferred RAI, or who identified as a “bottom”, were less likely to be considered masculine as positively related to hairiness and muscularity compared to those who identified as a “top” (2011). They found that hegemonically masculine physical traits could predict “commonly enacted roles” of either “top” or “bottom” (2011). In other words, having more traditionally masculine physical features may predispose NHMs to identify as a “top” due to cultural norms, regardless of their true sexual positional preference. That being said, research has shown the importance of recognizing self-identified sexual positioning labels as dynamic and that they may not determine sexual position in every occurrence of intercourse (Ravenhill & de Visser 2018). The higher prevalence of the self-identities of “muscular”/“toned” and “top”/“vers top” in urban areas as well as a lower prevalence of “muscular”/“toned” with a higher prevalence of “bottom”/“vers bottom” in rural settings may support a connection between urbanization and the promotion of hegemonic masculinity. A more physically fit body image may be a result of greater access to health and wellness services in urban locations and may also be linked to increased exposure to hegemonically masculine imagery presented in retail settings.

A review of what users are “Looking for” showed roughly the same prevalence between rural (n = 189) and urban (n = 223) NHMs in all responses given. However, the prevalence of

giving no response at all was higher among rural NHMs (16.7%) compared to urban NHMs (10.3%). This demonstrates an initial hesitancy from rural NHMs to commit to any kind of relationship with other NHMs. This may be due to a lack of experience or concerns about physical or emotional safety. A chi-square comparison of what users are “Looking for” was not statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 1.21, p = 0.750$) and further qualitative research would facilitate a greater understanding of these differences by location.

TRIBE SUBCULTURAL IDENTITY ANALYSIS

In addition to the previously mentioned self-identification options within user profiles, Grindr offers the option to select a “Tribe” subcultural identity. In this context, we can understand “Tribe” to refer to members of a group that share interests, physical or emotional characteristics, or preferences (Merriam-Webster 2018). Grindr’s options within the “Tribe” field include “Bear”, “Clean-Cut”, “Daddy”, “Discreet”, “Geek”, “Jock”, “Leather”, “Otter”, “Poz”, “Rugged”, “Trans”, and “Twink”. These identities are inclusive of both physical and non-physical traits, and some of these are more exclusionary than others. For example, the “Bear” tribe is commonly identified by a “natural”, hegemonically masculine, hairy, and somewhat larger-than-average build (Prestage 2015). “Otter” is commonly accepted as similar to “Bear” with hegemonically masculine physical features but possessing a slimmer or more athletic build. “Daddy”, “Jock”, “Leather”, and “Rugged” each provide slightly different identity concepts but clearly insinuate a strong relationship to hegemonically masculine attributes ranging from paternalism to athleticism to toughness and authority. Conversely, a “Twink” is commonly described as typically younger, often with a slim and smooth build and so the identity carries more feminine connotations (2015). The identities of “Clean-Cut” and “Geek” conjure images of politeness, wholesomeness, and studiousness which are somewhat ambiguous in relation to

masculinity and suggest room within NHM subcultures for nontraditionally recognized masculine identities related to social relationships.

“Discreet”, “Poz”, and “Trans” each provide messages that are somewhat removed from traditional masculine identities. “Poz” indicates that the user is HIV positive, “Trans” indicates that the user identifies as transgender, and “Discreet” expresses the user’s desire for discretion above all other identities that they might relate to. The availability of “Poz” or “Trans” identities may provide empowerment to NHMs within these groups. However, due to power dynamics related to health and gender status, members of Poz or Trans groups may find discomfort in openly identifying as such, indicating an ownership of a “lesser-than” masculine identity (Pinto, et al. 2019). For analytical purposes, the tribes of Bear, Daddy, Jock, Leather, Otter, and Rugged have been combined to characterize hegemonically masculine self-identification. Clean-Cut, Geek, Poz, Trans, and Twink have been combined to characterize non-traditionally masculine self-identification, and Discreet has been reserved as a third group which characterizes users who wish to remain anonymous.

It’s important to note that identifying as Discreet does not necessarily equate to a lack of desire for group identification as choosing a Tribe is not compulsory for users. Fifty-seven percent of urban users did not select any Tribe identity and 59.7% of rural users did not select any Tribe identity. The existence of a Discreet Tribe indicates that modern NHM culture, perhaps through provocation from social apps like Grindr, embraces the values of discretion and anonymity. Conceivably this could be viewed as a reclamation of the concept of the “closeted male”, and perhaps it is simply a perpetuation of it.

Chi-square testing of Tribe data, as shown in Table 1, provides an analysis of users who selected one or more Tribe and produced statistically significant results ($\chi^2 = 10.46, p = 0.005$).

Rural users (n = 129) were more likely than urban users (n = 164) to identify with a hegemonically masculine tribe (Bear, Daddy, Jock, Leather, Otter, or Rugged) at 51.2% versus 41.5%. Furthermore, users who identified with a non-hegemonically masculine tribe (Clean-Cut, Geek, Poz, Trans, or Twink) were almost twice as likely to come from an urban location (36.6% urban vs. 19.4% rural). This is indicative of a significant underlying cultural difference between urban and rural masculinity. The prevalence of Discrete self-identification was higher for rural users at 29.5% versus 22.0% and the prevalence of no Tribe selection was roughly the same for rural and urban users at 59.7% and 57.0% respectively.

Analysis based solely on Tribe selection for all users in the sample shows that there is a distinct difference in NHM subcultural self-identity in urban and rural settings. Urban NHMs are not only more likely to identify with any subcultural group, those groups tend to be less hegemonically masculine. Rural NHMs not only lack exposure to the greater resources found in urban locations which could help them to connect to subcultural groups and other “like-minded” people, they may also feel compelled to restrict their behaviors to conform to more traditionally masculine ideals. The difference in availability of location-specific social support contributes to the variability of socio-cultural expectations related to masculinity that differ between urban and rural settings (Brewer 2018). Except for the category of age, the prevalence of not providing any response was higher for rural users in all categories as shown in Table 2. Because they were less likely to provide information indicating a specific Tribe, preferred sexual position, body type, race/ethnicity, and what they are looking for, rural users exhibit how their location inhibits their willingness to self-identify with NHM communities. The higher prevalence of older users in the rural locations combined with an overall unwillingness to divulge other identifying information is also indicative of a concern of ageism within rural NHM communities. The greater willingness

to share NHM-related self-identity and body image in urban users is indicative of a safer and more liberating environment.

QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

The free text “About Me” section of the Grindr profiles was also reviewed for additional indicators of NHM self-identification. The rural sample contained 23 profiles which featured hegemonically masculine and/or heteronormative text such as “masculine country guy”, “manly, no fems”, and “I love straight-acting guys”. One rural user even described his fondness for riding strong horses, fishing in cold streams, and drinking beer as a demonstration of hegemonic masculinity. All comments within the 23 profiles either displayed a predilection for traditionally masculine behaviors and appearance in a partner or an insistence that they themselves conform to hegemonic masculinity. Also, 19 of the 23 users (82.6%) had either no profile picture or one that did not allow for full facial recognition, and the most prominent Tribes within the group were “Discreet” and “Jock”. Silva’s survey of rural self-identified straight men who have sex with other men also provides many direct quotes in which men equate masculinity with normative heterosexuality and “manly” behaviors such as “hunting, farming, cuttin’ firewood, and playing sports” which help to validate that these results in New Hampshire are not unique (2017).

A review of the urban sample showed similar results. There were 25 profiles which contained hegemonically masculine and/or heteronormative text, with seven of them actually identifying as straight. Some of those users also expressed an interest in exploring their own sexuality. Seventeen of the 25 urban users in this group (68.0%) had either no profile picture or just a partial face, which is a much lower percentage than the rural group and so there was a higher prevalence of comfort with identification. The most prominent Tribes were “Discreet” and “Jock”, as in the rural group. It’s possible that NHM social networking apps such as Grindr

provide a safe place for men who feel pressured by heteronormative society to reach out to others like themselves and to comfortably discover more about their own identity.

The analysis of the additional hegemonically masculine text and the corresponding need for discretion in exploration points to another interesting subsample worthy of further discussion. Grindr users who identify as “Discreet” do not necessarily express themselves in ways that allow for a clear understanding of their self-identity. Without descriptive text in the “About Me” section or identification with another hegemonically or non-hegemonically masculine Tribe, some “Discreet” users cannot be easily classified. By comparing some of the other data collected, it may be possible to gain a better understanding of the needs and perspective of this subsample. By examining the members of the rural “Discreet” Tribe (n = 38), 81 responses were noted in relation to what they were looking for in other users. The most common response was “Right now” which could also be described as an immediate sexual encounter (30.9%). “Right now” was also the most common response in the urban “Discreet” Tribe (n = 36) at 35.6%, which was much higher than the prevalence in the entire urban sample (22.0%).

While many Grindr users appear to use the app to make sexual connections, users who self-identify as “Discreet” are more likely than the average user to be looking for quick and casual sexual connections. The combination of anonymity and casual sex could be considered high risk behavior as sexual partners may not be informed of health status and other potential threats to health and safety. Intervention may be equally necessary in both urban and rural locations to ensure that sexual health education is made available to all NHMs. Watson, Fish, Allen, and Eaton describe minority stress theory, in which stigmatized groups such as sexual minorities experience unique stressors which contribute to poor health outcomes (2018). They also discuss the impact of sexual orientation disclosure. In their study, “closeted bisexual men

were 55% less likely than gay, out, and open men to report HIV testing every six months or more often” (2018). They were also less likely to know about HIV prevention and post-exposure options (2018). Many men within the “Discreet” Tribe could benefit from increased, positive community support to ensure that they are exploring their sexuality as safely as possible.

CONCLUSION

More research is necessary to examine a possible link between NHMs who self-identify as “Discreet” and their urban or rural location. However, this study does show that rural Grindr users not only disclose less identifying information than their urban counterparts, but when they do provide it, it is more likely to reflect hegemonic masculinity through the use of hypermasculine subcultural labels. Rural NHMs also tend to be physically larger but less muscular, older, and are more likely to identify as “bottom” or “vers bottom”. Regional social expectations play a major role in shaping and perpetuating varying masculinities, and NHMs in rural New Hampshire utilize social networking apps to project their own versions of masculinity while searching for others with whom to connect. It should be noted that while apps like Grindr connect people, often those who are in the greatest need of social support, they also provide and promote definitions of masculinity (Tribes) that may be culturally limiting.

Some limitations to the present study include the self-descriptive nature of electronic social media profile content. As users have the ability to complete each field in any way they wish without scrutiny, their descriptions of themselves may be quite subjective, especially within a demographic which values discretion. A study of electronic profile data paired with in-person, objective interviews could provide an interesting study of the authenticity of social media self-identification. Additionally, as Grindr profiles were selected in a single moment of time, and because the location-proximity technology collected the nearest profiles in that moment, some

users in the study may not originate in the area in which they were captured. Another important limitation to note would be the need for a further understanding of the causal relationship between location and identity. Does the rural environment produce non-heterosexual men who value hegemonically masculine self-identification, or do hegemonically masculine men relocate to rural locations? Qualitative research would be helpful in addressing these questions as well.

Further research into how location intersects with masculinity is necessary, and studies of states comparable to New Hampshire would be helpful in determining whether my findings were unique or if they are representative of the experiences of all rural non-heterosexual men. With a greater understanding of the experiences of NHMs, the development of location-specific social support will be possible which will enhance the lives of all men, regardless of where they live. Additionally, it may be the case the NHMs who use Grindr or other social networking apps are not entirely representative of the NHM population in New Hampshire or in the United States. However, the preceding analysis of 600 Grindr profiles does suggest that the experience of masculinity and its presentation via social media manifests differently in urban and rural settings. Although all men must contend with hegemonic masculinity, urban men may find it easier to construct identities that diverge from dominant cultural expectations by embracing a broader spectrum of subcultural identities. In contrast, the fact that rural men are more likely to adhere to traditionally masculine identities is indicative of the constraints that impinge on their expression of masculinity in this geographic context.

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Table 1

Chi-Square Analyses of User Profile Content by Location

Descriptive Statistics	Rural	Urban	Location χ^2
Race/Ethnicity (n = 387)			
White	86.9%	81.9%	1.83
Non-White	13.1%	18.1%	
Age			
18-24	25.2%	26.6%	2.98
25-34	34.5%	39.5%	
35-44	14.7%	14.6%	
45+	25.6%	19.3%	
Body Type (n = 422)			
Average	40.7%	43.1%	1.78
Large/Stocky	22.1%	17.0%	
Muscular/Toned	23.6%	26.0%	
Slim	13.6%	13.9%	
Preferred Sexual Position (n = 355)			
Bottom/Vers Bottom	39.8%	26.5%	7.11*
Top/Vers Top	32.5%	39.7%	
Versatile	27.7%	33.9%	
Tribe Identity (n = 292)			
Masculine	51.2%	41.5%	10.46**
Non-Masculine	19.4%	36.6%	
Discreet	29.5%	22.0%	
Relationship Status (n = 373)			
Committed/Partnered	4.4%	2.6%	2.82
Dating	1.1%	1.6%	
Married/Engaged	8.8%	5.8%	
Open Relationship	10.4%	8.9%	
Single	75.3%	81.2%	
Looking for			
Chat/Networking	21.0%	23.5%	1.21
Dates/Relationships	19.1%	18.8%	
Friends	29.1%	29.2%	
Right Now	30.9%	28.5%	

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$

Table 2

Prevalence of Anonymity (No Response)

