

Flirting and Friendship at the Periphery of Hook-up App Research

ABSTRACT

The everyday intimacies of friendship and flirting are not typically explored in hook-up app research, nor is there much reflection on the intimacies of researching these media. This paper considers flirting and friendship as practices and methods that broaden the scope of current hook-up app research. We ask what these intimacies can produce to expand research approaches (and thus knowledge) of hook-up apps. As users and researchers of these apps, we consider negotiations of flirting and friendship between researchers and research participants by exploring what it means to *research with intimacy*. Attention is given to the connections, conversations, and intimate encounters within hook-up research that are mostly absent from existing presentations of research findings. We suggest that greater attention to peripheral and intimate communication between researchers and participants can offer valuable methods for queering otherwise stabilised ways of knowing, using, and researching these platforms. Adding to the queer ethnographic tradition, we demonstrate how a processual and affective approach to hook-up app use encourages researchers to make visible our connections to the media we research, and how these connections relate to the intimacies that hook-up apps foster.

Keywords: hook-up apps, queer research, methodologies, intimacy, friendship, flirting, Scruff

Introduction

SINCE THE ARRIVAL of Grindr in 2009, we have seen important research and academic discussion about hook-up apps, often penned by authors like us who use these apps beyond our research practice.¹ There are many ways to consider the intimacy of these platforms and what they bring to our everyday lives. Our phones are intimate devices, and the embodied practices of hook-up app use – touching, scrolling, swiping, and reading bodies, faces, and profile text – are intimate (David & Cambre 2016; Roth 2014). Even without direct communication with other users, intimacy contours our engagement with these media.

This paper foregrounds friendship and flirting as two examples of intimacies less commonly addressed in hook-up app studies. Beyond simply broadening the discussion of app use experiences, we focus on how friendship and flirting inform and challenge the practice of hook-up app research. Guided by Berlant's work (1998), we understand intimacy as not simply an interpersonal phenomenon, but also a mode of affectivity that produces relations and publics according to different normative systems. It is from this vantage point that we consider the intersections of research, friendship, and flirting. This enables us to consider a range of sociabilities – sexual, friend-based, and ambiguous – as taking part in the production of publics, and this critical approach to intimacy opens a range of ethical and methodological issues for further inquiry. This paper does not propose concrete methodological or ethical approaches to researching with intimacy, but examines research practices and peripheries to open space through which to expand our considerations of these things – for hook-up app studies and broader digital intimacies research.

Connecting Berlant's theory with our empirical research approaches to digital media, we draw upon Race's work on *thinking with pleasure* (2017). This centres the affective dimensions of our research practice and informs the questions that guide this paper: What does it mean to *research with intimacy* when we research hook-up apps? What do our own experiences of flirting and friendship in hook-up app mediated encounters tell us about how intimacy is arranged in these socio-

technical spaces? And how might that inform and expand our research methods?

With some exceptions (e.g. Race 2015a), most discussions of peripheral research encounters in dating sites relate to earlier web-based platforms for gay/queer men (e.g. Cassidy 2013; Correll 1995), or to digital sites in which sexual intimacy is incidental (e.g. Sundén 2012). We argue that these peripheral communication practices help us to understand our affective connections to the apps we research.

This paper offers a *queering* of hook-up research that has four main folds. Firstly, it deviates from hook-up app research that centres apps' instrumental role in organising sex and dating. Secondly, we approach intimacy as manifold and multi-directional, rather than something confined to heteronormative logics of sex, love, and romance (Berlant 1998; Rubin 1984). Thirdly, it follows existing queer ethnographical traditions of exploring the intimacy of research (Ashford 2009; Dahl 2011; Newton 1993; Sundén 2012; Taylor 2011). Lastly, we explore what greater attention to peripheral research knowledge – that is, *thinking with* everyday intimacies such as flirting and friendship – offers to hook-up app studies.

In our research and general use of hook-up apps, we experience friendship and flirtation as modes of engagement that are central to the intimacies of these spaces, and they have been important for our research. Addressing such messy entanglements is difficult but important, since friendship and flirting are key cultural aspects of hook-up app use among queer men. According to feminist thinking such entanglements are also situated within a personal politics of orientation. While we work to (re)introduce perspectives that tend to slide out of view, our specific focus of course also carries its own normative politics. Consequently, someone with either more conservative or more radical views than us may arrive at different conclusions.

The point of this paper is not to argue for the value of “insider research” as this ground has been covered by queer (auto)ethnographies that inform our discussion (Ashford 2009; Kendall 2009; Newton 1993; Taylor 2011). Queer ethnographies have dealt with socio-sexual modes

of relating and creating kinship and other intimacies among LGBTQ+ people, including friendship and flirting practices. Challenges have been made against both the invisibility and the exoticisation of sexuality in ethnography, outlining the problems of a hetero-masculine gaze and privilege. Newton, for example, makes clear that approaching and researching sexuality with distance or detachment is not typically afforded to women and gay people (1993, 8). Exploring a lesbian scene through her own emotional and erotic attachments, Newton foregrounds her situated knowledge and how her erotic attunement drives and shapes her research. Elsewhere, Ashford (2009) considers how digital media has changed queer sex and queer ethnography. With internet-based sociality becoming commonplace through the 1990s, and with queer people taking advantage of networked, pseudonymous communication, Ashford considers how the act and commission of queer sex has changed, and implies that queer ethnographical methods should too. Kendall (2009) writes retrospectively about her digital ethnographic research in which she had (previously undiscussed) crushes on her research participants. In her “return” to the scene of research, Kendall foregrounds how sexual desire is a methodological issue, though deeply taboo in research. More recently, in an ethnography of playing World of Warcraft, Sundén (2012) writes of developing a crush on a skilled female player and more freely explores how questions of knowledge and power are bound with her desire for both play and player. By understanding desire as intimately related to technology, she shows how these dynamics are inseparable from the game’s hierarchies and requirements. Our paper contributes to (and is informed by) this body of work.

In this paper, we are interested in *queering research* practice and methods and we see potential in expanding research discussions beyond commonly-applied heteronormative frames and expectations in this field – i.e. asking what users *get* from hook-up apps, and focusing on the relational outcomes. While we acknowledge that relationships, monogamy, marriages and one-off sexual encounters can follow hook-up app connections, we are more interested in socio-cultural practices that are less explored, yet commonly contour app use. This includes practices of

flirting that need not lead to “something more”, or friendship practices and encounters that are found through, or strengthened by, hook-up app negotiations. In suggesting strategies for *queering* research intimacies, we address the research field (of hook-up app studies) while also thinking through *and with* the intimate encounters of our own research practices.

Concretely, we are concerned with what counts as knowledge in digital intimacies research. As feminist scholarship has indicated, fieldwork is never neutral, and our research performativities “(re)create research accounts, spaces, researchers and participants” (Browne 2003, 134). Taking a Butlerian approach, Kath Browne highlights how power relations “in the field” differ (but still exist) when researching with one’s friends and communities. While not a new concern, this maps onto long-running feminist agendas for situated research, and to reintroduce affect and emotion as important aspects of knowing and doing (Haraway 1988; Ahmed 2004).

This paper will later consider two distinct projects that engage with queer men’s hook-up app² intimacies: one from a doctoral study in Denmark, and the other from a pilot survey of friends in Australia. To prepare for an experimental study of hook-up apps using “friendship as method” (Tillmann-Healy 2003), Paul Byron surveyed his friends who use the app Scruff. For Tillman-Healy, friendship as method “involves researching with the practices, at the pace, in the natural contexts, and with an ethic of friendship” (2003, 730). This exercise was designed to consider how hook-up app uses are informed by and entangle with friendship. Twenty-eight friends responded to a pilot survey but also elaborated on their experiences of apps (and the survey itself) through peripheral chat beyond survey responses. These peripheral communications are discussed. Kristian Møller undertook digital fieldwork and qualitative interviews in London as part of his PhD project on gay men’s mediated intimacies of hook-up app use (Møller 2017). The case of “Francois” is drawn from this research, including interviews and Facebook Messenger interactions. In the material, Kristian Møller and Francois discuss their interactions which results in a collaborative interrogation of the role of flirting in hook-up app research encounters.

Hook-up app intimacy

Hook-up app research that engages with theories of intimacy commonly cite sociologists such as Giddens, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, and Bauman (e.g. Chan 2017; Hobbs et al. 2017). Giddens' conceptualisation of intimacy (1992) produces distinctions between romantic, sexual and platonic relationships that fall counter to queer intimacies (Weeks et al. 2001). In such a framework it is hard to decouple flirting, sex, and dating practices from the development of couple-based unions. This framework also precedes queer theory perspectives and has limited engagement with feminist understandings of intimacy (Illouz 2007; Jamieson 1999). To put it boldly, this theoretical approach marginalises a range of intimacies that play out through hook-up apps, including friendship and flirtation. Without disrupting this perspective it is hard to truly understand friendship and flirting the way queer theory can – as modes of intimacy in and of themselves that are not simply precursors to, or side effects of, normative intimacies (further normalised by stagnant social theory).

Furthermore, it has been argued that these theorisations of intimacy cannot easily describe the complexities of digital intimacies (Dobson et al. 2018). As Stempfhuber and Liegl argue:

It seems as though the sociology of intimacy is lagging behind technological advances which have long instantiated new regimes of mobility and have instigated a process of renegotiation of what it means to “be with” someone else or be co-present (2016, 52).

This lagging can be said to occur in hook-up app research that is slow to consider how app-based conversation can generate friendships or be centrally oriented to flirtation – intimate situations that are common and unsurprising to most app users.

Much empirical research has highlighted how hook-up app users recontextualise their geographic locations as “gay space” (Batiste 2013; Blackwell et al. 2014). Hook-up apps also ensure that there is not one single gay space or community, as one's grid of potential contacts shifts

not only between different countries and cities, but from one neighbourhood to the next (Blackwell et al. 2014, 10). Users can also recontextualise their childhood neighbourhoods as more queer than they once imagined and felt (Albury & Byron 2016). This re-mapping of familiar space, and the layering of physical and virtual spaces (Blackwell et al. 2014), can increase one's sense of community or belonging and expand opportunities for a broad range of intimacies. While much research has discussed user experiences of space, negotiations of privacy, and self-presentation in hook-up apps, there is less discussion of these apps as *infrastructures of intimacy* (Paasonen 2018). As Race notes, recent entanglements of physical spaces, hook-up apps, and sexual practices afford “new forms of intimate exchange” (2015b, 504).

Hook-up app technologies operate in a range of global contexts, but our research centres on dominant geopolitical experiences of queer life in the global North. Notably, many research examples exist beyond our experiences, offering a range of intercultural perspectives. For example, a study of the diasporic context of Chinese men living in Australia found that cultural codes and systems of communication and desirability within Grindr are supported and extended by peer networks in the group chat app LINE (Cassidy & Wang 2018). Elsewhere, a study from the Philippines found that Grindr was used by young gay men to engage in peer conversation, make friends, and “learn how to be gay” (Castañeda 2015) – a context very different to US-based literature that dominates hook-up app studies. Recently, more attention has been given to cosmopolitanism and hook-up app cultures, with examples including “connected migrant” experiences of queer dating apps in Belgium (Dhoest 2018), and Grindr contact between local Filipino men and aid workers following Typhoon Haiyan (Ong 2017). These are just a few examples of hook-up app uses that integrate local and diasporic cultures, offer spaces to encounter difference, and support a range of intimate connections.

Further, it should be noted that these apps are arenas for the reproduction of inequalities and hegemonic hierarchies as they operate through, and potentially extend, existing cultures of xenophobia, homonationalism, and colonial violence (Carlson 2020). The apps' filtering and search

options can position our sexual “preferences” as depoliticised consumer rights and thus freed from critical inquiries into their possible bigoted origins (Jørgensen 2016; Andreassen 2020; Møller & Ledin in press). The seemingly low degree of moderation in apps like Grindr conceivably contribute to such toxic environments. Further, moderation work falls on the shoulders of those most affected by hate speech, given that system flagging is based on users’ blocking and reporting (Mowlabocus 2020). We recognise that the queering of research we propose in this paper is limited by our cultural distance from a range of hook-up app practices, like those mentioned, but we encourage readers to consider their own cultural and geopolitical settings and how these inform and contextualise app intimacies and how research accounts for these (or not).

Intimacies made peripheral

Hook-up app uses are not limited to sexual or romantic goals, they are also approached out of curiosity, boredom, or for entertainment, and as sites for chat, trading sexual images, and a range of other less researched encounters (Albury et al. 2019). These interests, purposes, and affective investments speak to a range of relational practices, among which friendship and flirting are just two. Research shows that flirting is common on these platforms (Jørgensen 2016; Miles 2020). Existing friendships, flirtations, and other intimacies established in other spaces also seep into hook-up app communications.³ These are porous spaces, less bounded than we sometimes want them to be, though users seem to be increasingly comfortable with bringing their app profiles into contact with their social networks, as per sharing Instagram links on their profiles (Byron et al. 2021).

We consider flirting and friendship intimacies because they are peripheral in a double sense: their presence in research encounters is often undisclosed, and they are underrepresented in current research accounts of hook-up app cultures. Therefore, they provide excellent starting points for challenging and expanding the scope of hook-up app studies. Along with sex and relationships, friendship and flirting are important queer male intimacies in which a range of sexual sociabilities

connect and overlap. Many gay/queer men have and seek sexual friendships (Nardi 1999) and to delineate “social” from “sexual” ensures limited accounts of intimacy. Flirting without an intention to find a partner or even meet the other person, does not align well with heteronormative sociality or the normative privileging of physical interactions. Such flirting can offer a form of playful exploration of intimate potential. Similarly, the theme of friendship does not sit easily in hook-up app research that commonly focuses on sex and dating intentions and outcomes.

Berlant’s (1998) attention to queer intimacies is useful for expanding a viewpoint of intimacies. Their rethinking of intimacy opens a space for considering multiple and intersecting practices of connection and offers an important critique of how public and private spheres are produced through hierarchies of intimacy. Rethinking intimacy (as Berlant proposes), helps us see value in not simply exploring the intimate dimensions of research participants’ app use “over there”, but in also exploring the intimacy of researching these media. As Berlant argues: “intimacy refers to more than that which takes place within the purview of institutions, the state, and an ideal of publicness. What if we saw it emerge from much more mobile processes of attachment?” (1998, 284) – for example, the “casual” research encounter. As “institutionalised researchers” we are complicit in reproducing narrow understandings of intimacy. This paper represents our attempt to take what we know through unprofessional engagements with hook-up apps in order to disrupt clear-cut distinctions between sexual, friendship and community-based connections that reproduce heteronormative hierarchies of intimacy.

Thinking with intimacy

Berlant’s analytical strategy guides our attention to intimacies typically understood to be peripheral, of little value, and unremarkable. This allows for centring flirting and friendship as modes of social production. In doing so, Race’s interrogation of pleasure in research (2017) is useful. Rather than approaching the intimacy or pleasure of research as something to avoid, hide, or excuse, Race suggests that we explore what *thinking with pleasure* means and allows for, stating that:

to “think with” is to acknowledge the capacity of each party to the encounter to affect and be affected by the other in unknown, surprising, potentially generative and/or unsettling ways; all the while aiming to achieve and affirm a shared interest in actively attending to the unknown directions such exchanges might take us. (2017, 2)

Here, Race urges us to explore research encounters as generative, emerging, and potentially troubling. Race draws from science and technology studies to foreground the unruly and generative aspects of affect, forecasting our need to include these in our research process. Race’s approach pushes back against researchers’ tendencies to think or write about pleasure as “detached observers” who are not implicated in such pleasures. Arguably, detached observation is a “power move” that systematically reinforces a normative hierarchy – one in which the researcher extracts material from participants before returning from the field with a bounty of knowledge that seems void of feeling. While more intimate research approaches come with additional risks, and are not inherently more ethical or authentic, they do offer more space for self-reflection, unlike the heteronormative hierarchies of intimacy that so often work to “straighten” (Ahmed 2006, 563) research. Such straightening removes peripheral intimate relations, sometimes even citing ethical concerns as a reason to do so. However, whether ignored or not, flirting and friendship continue to be factors in research, and so by thinking with them we are able to make them available to (ethical) inquiry. While attending to emotions and embodied experience does not inherently queer research in the political sense, it does open space for other kinds of thinking.

Affect sticks to different objects (Ahmed 2004) and informs how we consider, discuss, and ask questions of objects known to be pleasurable. This includes smartphones and hook-up apps. Further to the pleasure of objects, we note the relational pleasures of identity and identity play in research encounters, including common characterisations of The Researcher, The University, The Informant, and The Community. When studying queer hook-up apps, the overlapping work of pleasures and pleasure objects intensifies. One reason for this is that the queer eth-

nographer cannot perform as a privileged unmarked body, much less so in spaces they inhabit beyond the work of research. As Esther Newton argued, for women and queer researchers, “matters of sexuality and gender can never be unproblematic” (1993, 8), and this acknowledgement leads her to ask what peer intimacies produce in her fieldwork. Following Newton’s example, the following sections demonstrate our *thinking with* flirting and friendship to highlight the generative aspects of these intimacies in terms of what they offer to researchers and our ways of knowing. Each reflects the particular research by Kristian Møller and Paul Byron respectively, and so stylistically these sections differ as they offer separate examples of researching with intimacy, each written by one of us. Further, they refer to two very different studies, using different methods. Where they meet is in the attention we each bring to the periphery of our research encounters, and the intimacies they hold.

Flirting – Kristian Møller

In hook-up app communication, flirtation is not only a method for negotiating hooking up, but also a site of affective production and experience that warrants closer attention in itself. Such phenomenology of desire has been investigated through the concept of cruising, including “digital cruising” (Mowlabocus 2010). As cruising takes place in public spaces, among individuals for whom privacy and discretion are often important, it requires finely tuned interpersonal communicative skills of “reading the room”, as one research participant notes. Such turning and attunement – or flirting as it were – enables sexual encounters, but is also erotic in and of itself, precisely because of the imagined sexual futures that such turning and attunement enables.

By engaging with hook-up app users in my fieldwork, as well as in my private life, it has become clear to me that flirting, while sometimes a means to gauging and building sexual interest, also performs as a way of feeling pleasure in and of itself. Tavory (2009) describes this flirting tension in interactional terms. To him, flirting serves to avoid “actualisation” through the communicative management of interactional ambiguity, leaving it a “suspended” interaction open to the imagination of a

(sexual) futurity. He argues that this interactional logic either operates in contexts where such suspension is useful and a goal in itself, or is used as a risk-averse method for testing the viability of the envisioned intimate future (2009, 61). Either way, flirting's affective power comes from its proximity to, and imagining of, a preferred future, and is facilitated through agreed-upon withholding. In other words, under-communicating is its key interactional strategy. It oscillates between presenting a potential erotic encounter, and unstable moments of imaginary closeness that efface the difference between "having" and "not-having". This mirrors the high degree of ambiguity that mediated text-based interaction typically offers. When it comes to the hook-up app infrastructures, these are unlike more closed chat systems like SMS, iMessage and WhatsApp, in that every app user is able to message any other user within range. This leads to a larger number of messages from strangers, which then requires other forms of management strategies. This might explain why flirting as a communicative mode is so well suited to hook-up app mediated intimacy cultures: its ambiguity suspends the relation between definitive engagements and possible future relations. This is not to say that hook-up app flirting is an uncontested practice. For example, Miles (2020) notes that interviewee recruitment through Grindr, while affording a certain quick establishment of rapport and closeness, may also reproduce intimate "roadblocks" such as ethnocentrism. On an interpersonal level, because flirting by design is ambiguous, it is a site of contestation. My research participant Francois reflects on this in the following way:

People are scared of flirting, because they see flirting as – which is true, but not always – the very first step to a series of events that take you to sex. But it doesn't have to be. I think it's a way of communicating, of being nice to people. You flirt and you smile and you unzip your thing. (Francois)

In this framing, Francois offers that flirting is subject to socio-sexual anxieties about commitment and promises. At the same time though, it may help smooth out the emotional risks involved in figuring out strangers, by allowing enough vagueness for plausible deniability or

retreat (e.g. “I was just teasing, I didn’t mean anything by that”). Flirting may emerge as a textual erotic encounter in and of itself, and it may open up space for other more physical sexual encounters, all done in a “nice” way. The ability to balance such niceness with erotic pursuit is particularly useful in an environment like that of queer hook-up apps that are intense sites of sexual propositions and rejections.

As a researcher, stepping into such a contested emotional space is far from straightforward. Queer hook-up apps do not simply operate as “containers” for erotic practice, but must be understood as sexual infrastructure (Race 2015b) that centres emergence and potentiality. In a queer sex culture, hook-up apps serve as sites for erotic visual consumption and communication. It is the “realness”, the ability to envision a somatic encounter with the depicted, that gives the imagery its particular erotic charge. In a follow-up interview, Francois reflects on his first encounter with my Scruff profile, which I used to recruit participants:

Okay well that’s an interesting image. Is it true? Is he a real guy who’s actually doing a PhD and research? Oh, well, if he’s the real thing that’s interesting. And if he’s not, maybe it’s a fantasy for him to be the professor having pupils coming to him. That could be interesting too. Let’s see how it goes.

The distance that I try to create by presenting myself as a researcher invigorates Francois’ pursuit as he folds it into an erotic narrative of academic role play. His attitude of “let’s see how it goes” reflects not only an imagining of several interactional futures, but like flirting, a general willingness to stay with the unresolved. Hook-up apps can be spaces of context collapse (Marwick & boyd 2011), and of people’s intentions changing over time and not necessarily matching the narrative that the profile text allows the user to construct. While frustration is one possible outcome, the above quote gestures towards the erotic productivity of such uncertainty. Thus, *researching with flirting* reveals how being comfortable with or even enjoying intense uncertainty is a relational orientation that is attuned to the structure and communicative culture

of Scruff and Grindr. Even when the researcher tries to be “good”, flirting and erotic potentiality still marks the encounter. Being attuned to, and even allowing yourself to think with, the erotic impulses that field engagements foster in you and others, allows you as a researcher to register more precisely a digital space’s affective climate.

The erotic tension that Francois feels in the interaction with me also points to how insider and outsider positions are at work – not in the sense of simplistic researcher positioning, but as categories with a social and erotic life beyond academia. Notably, this is not because I engage in particularly erotic ways, but because I do not. The distance produced by me enacting the unaffected researcher position is then consumed as a privileged outsider, read as the “wise” professor figuration to whom one must submit. The distancing opens a space for imagining and consuming the fantasy of the forbidden and powerful subject. In light of this, it is not surprising that my respectability work – saying things like “I’m sorry, but I don’t think anything will come of it” (see Figure 1) – has little effect in stopping the flirtation and its ambiguous intentions. Instead, normative boundaries and their possible transgressions drive the flirting interaction. As such, insider and outsider positions *do* operate as categories organising social interaction, not because they are adhered to, but because they embody a fantasy of subordination and decency that can be playfully consumed, reversed, and disturbed.

Because flirting serves as part of the communicative ethos in hook-up apps, disengaging from it constitutes a break. I felt this keenly in my interview recruitment. Recruiting through a hook-up app, I was often met with flirtatious comments. My profile featured a rather flattering headshot of me with my glasses on, which I felt could be read both as that of an academic and of a “normal” user. In the fieldwork I experienced that both my profile picture and my chatting became folded into erotic play. I could recognise this “slippage” from my own practice, but still felt somewhat uneasy about it when I was using the app in “research mode” (another slippery term). Feeling the pleasure that can come with being erotically pursued, I was also concerned that our encounters would somehow “seduce” people to participate and expose themselves

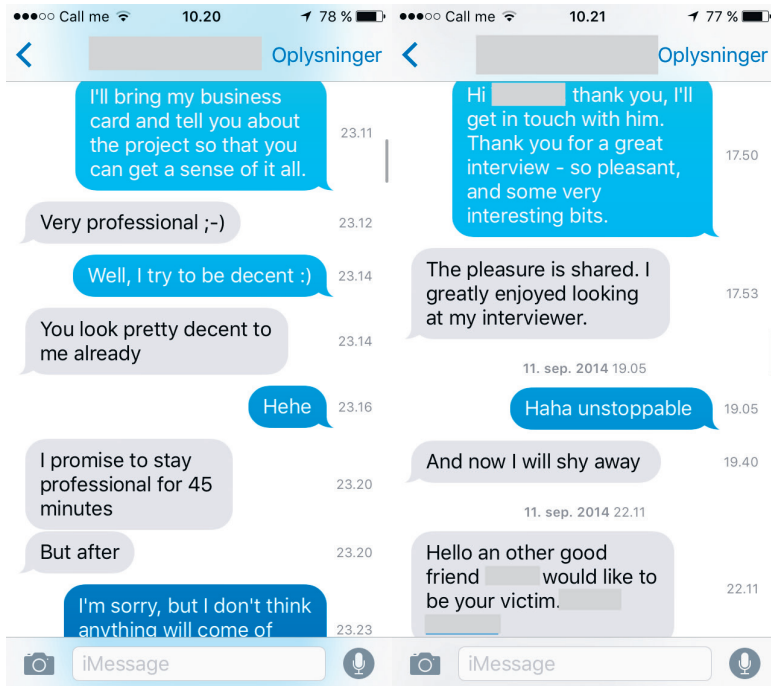


Figure 1: Screenshots of interactions between researcher and participant before and after interview.

in ways that they and I might later regret. While this worry could be taken as an acknowledgement of the heightened responsibility of the researcher for participants and the cultures investigated, I would over time come to think of this worry of seduction as overstating the power of my rather rudimentary engagements. This freed up space for me to enjoy the ambiguity of these encounters, and to register them as events that were not incidental or always only problematic, but important traits of the communicative culture of these apps. Not being shameful about such enjoyment does of course not absolve the need for ethical evaluation of the encounter, but it frees up affective and analytical capacity that can be put to use empathetically. One example of this can be seen in the chats with Francois before and after our first interview (Figure 1). In this encounter, flirting and sexualised talk continued to show up. Dur-

ing the interview, however, Francois substituted this interactional style with what, in a reversal of the “good queer academic” (Ashford 2009), can be called the “good participant”. Thus, he readily follows my analytical invitations without adding any sexual-emotional complications. As the figure illustrates, once the interview is over, flirting is taken up again in the digital channel used to arrange the interview. This was a recurring phenomenon. Flirting and professional interactional styles were not so much mixed as temporally separated and distributed across different interactional formats and research moments. In this way, chat platforms inadvertently served to contain and separate erotic energy, leaving space for us to momentarily perform the “good” researcher and participant roles respectively.

Friendship – Paul Byron

Decades ago, Weston argued that we need more research on queer friendships “given the high value historically placed on friendship” among gays and lesbians (1991, 13). Discussing queer intimate life, Weeks et al. similarly argued that “The most commonly told relationship story among non-heterosexuals is one of friendship” (2001, 51). They relate this to a discourse of “queer kinship” where families are *made* through friendship, as exemplified in Weston’s work. Meanwhile, Roseneil and Budgeon argue that researchers need to consider queer friendships beyond a model of kinship to better understand our “*networks and flows of intimacy and care*” (2004, 153, original italics) – where queer friendship is considered in its own right. These discussions highlight an ongoing academic and political agenda to take friendship seriously, as a site of care, support, solidarity, and survival (Byron 2021).

Despite their reputation as sex apps, hook-up apps afford making friends as well as communicating with existing friends (Byron et al. 2021). Furthermore, our app-based encounters are often workshopped with friends, demonstrating that friendship is a guiding force in many queer lives (Byron et al. 2021; Nardi 1999; Weeks et al. 2001). As Race notes of hook-up app use: “sharing of captured images has emerged as a pleasurable activity and form of bonding among friends and acquaint-

tances in its own right, in activities informed by genres of gossip, boasting, archiving, memorabilia, humour, illustration, evidence, exposure and betrayal” (2015b, 504).

This section discusses my process of *researching with friends*, extending upon Tillman-Healy’s “friendship as method” (2003). For Tillman-Healy, this is a method of researching with a “friendship ethic”. While she engaged with her formerly unknown participants as friends, I am interested in researching with existing friends, drawing upon established modes of intimacy, honesty, and investment in each other’s lives. This project is more in line with Taylor’s configuration of the “intimate insider” (2011), however I do not focus on a local community, but dyadic friendships.

In 2018, I piloted a survey about Scruff use by sending it to queer male friends via text message, Facebook Messenger, or Instagram direct message, depending upon our existing communication channels. In what follows, I consider examples of digital chat with friends that was peripheral to survey data collection. In most cases, discussion of the survey and the research topic entangled with existing and ongoing friend-based chat:

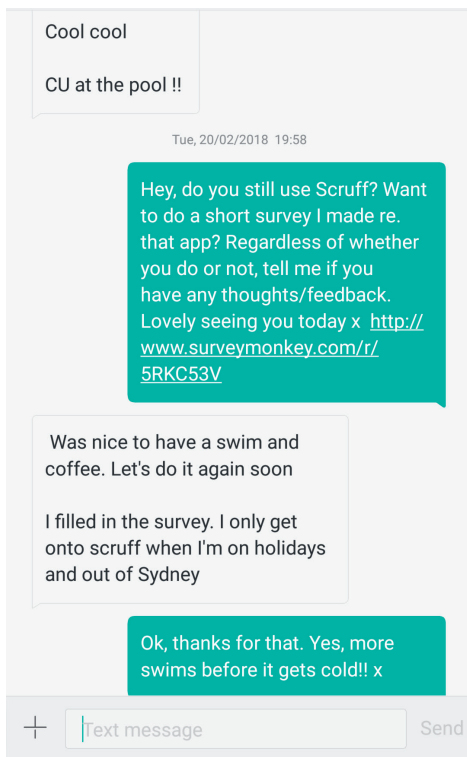


Figure 2: *Enfolded research and friendship chat.*

One friend (Figure 2) advised me that he had completed the survey and in doing so mentioned further details of his app use. This “reporting back” sits comfortably within our ongoing communication practices. Communication about the survey is nestled among our plans for meeting at the swimming pool, and future plans to do it again. This intimate “research encounter” plays out casually, without a sense of confession or weighty disclosure, in what Roach (drawing upon Foucault) describes as the anti-confessional discourse of queer male friendship (2012).

After the first batch of survey links had been sent, one friend quickly signaled a problem with a survey question. While I was repairing this, survey responses from other friends were lost, so I regrettably had to ask if they could complete the survey once again. One friend responded with: “For you? Of course.” My apologetic request and its underlying discomfort reflected a fear that friends would feel obliged to repeat the survey. Was I exploiting them, or did their willingness reflect the satisfaction of helping a friend? I would later realise that many such friends are already involved in my research practice through our ongoing conversations about hook-up apps, sex, and relationships, and that such discussions do not operate on a separate register to my “academic thinking”. The willingness of my friends to participate was apparent, however, not all friends took part in the survey.

In a lengthy response that included other life details, my friend (Figure 3) admitted to not using apps, while “wondering” if

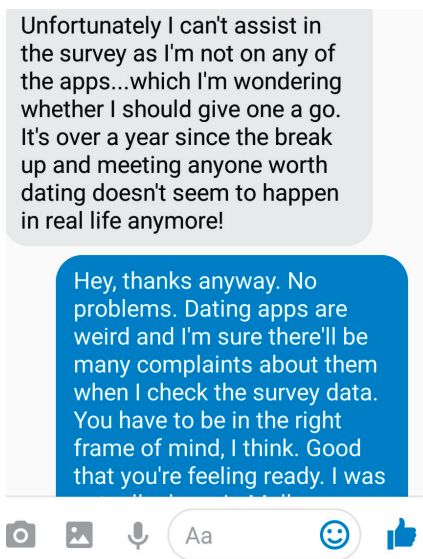
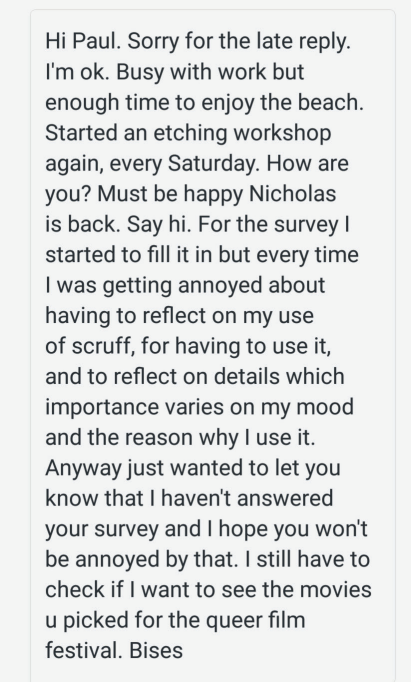


Figure 3: Non-use “wonderings”.

he should “give one a go”. This “wondering” references our intimacy – firstly that this is something we can easily discuss, and secondly, my knowledge of his past relationship. It may also speak to his perception that I have some level of expertise on this matter, as a hook-up apps researcher. As often happened, a friend’s response led to further discussions of app use that exceeded the scope of the study, yet cannot be considered “irrelevant data” on account of what it reveals about the affective aspects of apps and our contemplations of their use. These instances demonstrate how friend-based research can produce a deeper level of insight into participants’ feelings about apps and their potential use – offering affective dimensions that are less easily found outside friendship intimacies. Not only does friendship-based research reference the affective aspects of friendship between researcher and participant, it can also generate more data on the affective and emotional aspects of app use. This is also true of another friend explaining why he did not complete the survey (Figure 4). In his text message, this friend gave me an update on his life, asked about my life, referenced our future plans, and told me he did not complete the survey because he was annoyed by having to reflect on his use of Scruff. As his friend, this made sense, and I was not “annoyed” (and did not believe that he expected I would be).

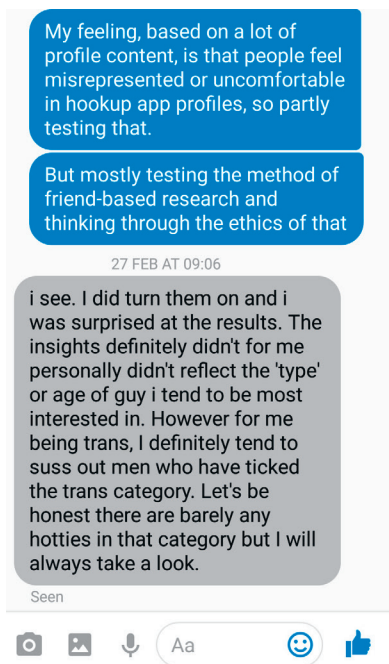
A screenshot of a text message from a friend, enclosed in a light gray border. The text is as follows:

Hi Paul. Sorry for the late reply. I'm ok. Busy with work but enough time to enjoy the beach. Started an etching workshop again, every Saturday. How are you? Must be happy Nicholas is back. Say hi. For the survey I started to fill it in but every time I was getting annoyed about having to reflect on my use of scruff, for having to use it, and to reflect on details which importance varies on my mood and the reason why I use it. Anyway just wanted to let you know that I haven't answered your survey and I hope you won't be annoyed by that. I still have to check if I want to see the movies u picked for the queer film festival. Bises

Figure 4: “Getting annoyed about having to reflect”.

This is another case in which non-participation in research generated peripheral (yet significant) data about why participants may choose not to engage in, or even be annoyed by, our research. My friend's message offers "data" about app use feelings and discomforts that would unlikely be shared with a researcher who is not also a friend. This honest feedback speaks to both the affective aspects of apps and friendships. Seemingly, friend-based research offers greater ability to hear and respond to discomforts that arise through the questions we ask – questions that we may not have considered to be annoying, unless someone (like a friend) was able to tell us they were. This reflects the honesty of friendship that Roach discusses in relation to Foucault's theorisation of parrhesia (2012, 24–9), which involves truth-telling and bi-directional communication – where the friend "simultaneously guides himself and another" (2012, 24). As researchers, we may forget that our questions may be difficult to answer and friendships offer space for this communication.

Elsewhere, one friend had questions about the pilot study after he completed the survey (Figure 5). This friend is less familiar with my research, yet we have discussed hook-up apps before and also met on one (as was the case for several participants). He asked what I expected to find and what I thought about issues raised in the survey. As a friend, I was happy to engage, though my responses were careful and awkward. My hesitation reflected a discomfort in speculating about research findings and expressing hunches without drawing upon evidence. Below we discuss *Insights* (Scruff user metrics that are available to users), and this discussion offers "data" of a different shape to my friend's survey responses:



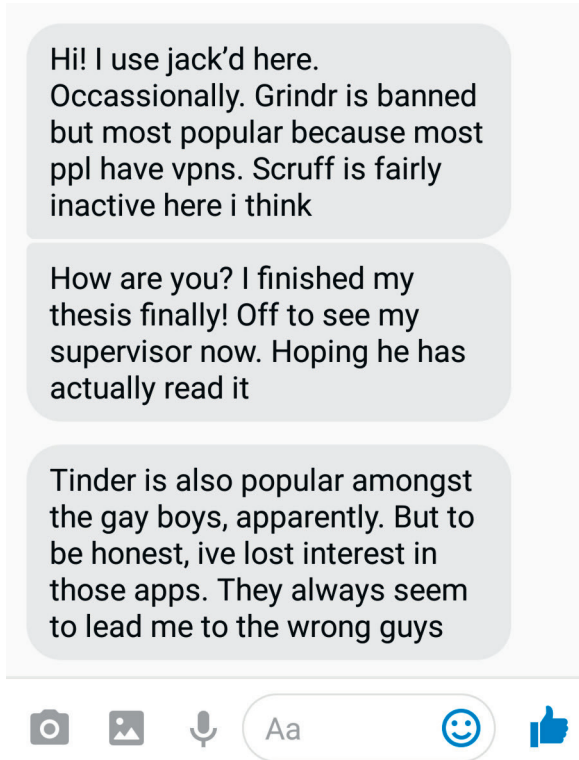
*Figure 5:
Post survey
follow-up.*

In this case, my sharing of the survey, and my friend's completion of it, generated broader conversation and further insight than the survey could elicit. This shows how intricate details of hook-up app use are more likely to unfurl in two-way casual discussion between friends. While interviews with unknown participants can generate complex accounts of app use, it is rare that unknown participants ask me what I think or expect to find – a move that references our friendship and expands the discussion.

Through conversation, friends using hook-up apps process their habits and feelings about these media, allowing us to traverse a range of often contradictory feelings. We may comfortably describe our searching and filtering practices, while also questioning these, as per the above example. Such discussion generates insight into thinking through feelings and practices that are less likely to feature in survey responses where one replies to static questions – speaking alone, into an empty text box.

Overall, the survey responses gathered lacked the detail and intimacy that the space of friendship affords – the detail that emerged through peripheral communication *about* the survey.

In a final example, a friend offers a transnational context to his non-use of Scruff:



*Figure 6:
Transnational
context.*

This friend’s response to my survey request moves from his hook-up app practices, to accounting for a broader app ecology, to other life matters and personal feelings about certain apps like Tinder. As per other examples, this level of detail was not requested but is a “normal response” in the context of friend-based chat. In discussing the local practices, barriers, and workarounds of app use among queer men where he lives,

my friend adds a transnational elaboration that contextualises different ecologies of app use, and his knowledge about workarounds for finding connections that lack legal protection or broader social acceptance in the country where he lives. While this context was not sought by the survey, my friend knew that this would be of interest to me. Here, and elsewhere, my friends offer their own expertise, with an awareness of what interests me. Our intimacies reference a familiarity with each other's everyday practices (including my research).

I offer these examples not simply to reference how friendships mediate hook-up app use (and non-use) but also to foreground the possibilities of *researching with friendship*. I am not suggesting that this method suits all circumstances, and the above examples are notably specific to hook-up app research, referencing the friendships that commonly support app use (Byron 2021, 144-169; Byron et al. 2021). While these peripheral data may be specific to my friendships, this particularity is useful where it is understood that distant observation or detached surveys will likely produce less intimate data on the mediated intimacies we research. Presented in this discussion are data that are peripheral but informative and that speak to the value of friendship as method. These data would unlikely emerge outside a method of friendship and the care, honesty, and intimate chat that contour our queer lives.

Concluding discussion

Berlant states that “To intimate is to communicate with the sparest of signs and gestures, and at its root intimacy has the quality of eloquence and brevity” (1998, 281). This evokes the shorthand of hook-up app use, where communication may be sparse yet affective. It also evokes the brevity of friendship and flirtation, though these have different contexts: one refers to familiarity, the other to unknown potential. She argues that intimacy is productive and involves not only the production of ourselves but also the other selves we engage with and the relations we produce together. This is evident in the research practices we have discussed, where intimacies are not simply reported on, but also constructed through research practice.

In this paper we have foregrounded intimacies that are peripheral to much hook-up app research. As both users and researchers of hook-up apps, we bring our existing knowledge of cultural norms into the ways we inhabit, but also research, these communities. These are proximate spaces where we brush up against the bodies and desires of others, and they offer potential for a range of erotic and intimate encounters. Friendship and flirting are important aspects of our intimacies, and we draw from our research endeavours to demonstrate how we can *research with* these intimacies. It is not our aim to build a method that others may replicate, but to open space for further discussions of what intimate modes of engagement offer to digital media scholarship. Further, while we do not propose a model for ethical research of digital intimacies, we do draw upon queer ethnographies that centre questions of ethics. It is in this light that our attention to peripheral knowledge should be understood. Much peripheral communication within our research encounters is not recognised as data, yet offers a rich source of meaning. This can raise questions about the ethics of ignoring these insights, and downplaying these gifts (and the intimacies they speak to). A queering of data, that brings the periphery to the centre, enables us to engage with a wider range of intimacies than are normally engaged with in hook-up app research. This queering strategy is informed by decades of queer scholarship, particularly its attention to non-heteronormative intimacies and to the intimacy of research practice itself. In dialogue with this work, our disciplines, and each other, we offer an argument for *researching with intimacy*.

While this project engages with queer life and culture, we use a queer analytics that is applicable to many other social groups and practices. In drawing attention to research peripheries, we are indeed challenging the centre – i.e. common (heteronormative) approaches to intimacy and the way it is understood and studied. Hook-up app researchers commonly ask outcome-based questions (e.g. “why do you use these media, what functions do they serve?”) – ensuring a particular dataset on user motivations and/or goals and whether or not these are met – rather than reflect on the processual and affective dimensions of media use. In formal research scenarios, participants are less likely to deviate from the

script of what they “get” from media platforms, regardless of the intimacies that contour app engagements. Researching with intimacy can extend our attention to these aspects of media use.

A scholarship of affect, intimacy, and queer ethnographic experience has taught us not to fear the entanglement of public and private, that our intimacies are not “private matters”, and that we should question research methods that value academic distance and detachment, as though oriented toward neutral observation of others. As Newton (1993) argued, without records of intimacy “in the field”, we are made to assume it does not exist or that it should not be spoken of – but it does and it should. Further to this, researchers should be educated about, respectful of, and attuned to, the cultures of networked platforms we study and inhabit. We can also further consider how our intimate networks and practices strongly inform our understandings of digital media platforms and cultures, including what typically goes unnoticed due to the sexual, racial, geopolitical, and other cultural aspects of our social positioning. One could further consider the extent to which friendships and flirting are mobilised in order to gain access and earn trust, and whether researchers and participants alike are equally comfortable in queering researcher–participant relations.

Research with flirting in spaces where sexualised interaction is not only accepted but expected opens the possibility of making visible, and critically engaging with, how it feels to take part in such cultures of intimacy. Like transgressive forms of play, it may soften and possibly disturb the cut of hierarchical relationality, while by no means erasing it. Likewise, researching with friends draws upon established affective orientations that can generate important discussion about how research questions are felt and responded to, or are rejected entirely. Attention to these and other peripheral intimacies can afford more engagement with affective aspects of hook-up app use. However, mapping and queering research relations is not exempt from an analysis of power relations but further necessitates this. As Sundén ruminates: “Then again, to choose an unusually open way of writing about parts of the research process can be understood as an exercise of power” (2012, 174).

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NOTES

1. While the term “hook-up app” foregrounds certain actions and potentials ahead of others, we use this term because it is recognisable in our research field.
2. While we refer to “queer men’s hook-up apps” (e.g. Grindr; Scruff), we understand that their use exceeds this category and users include bisexual men, trans women, non-binary people, and more. We use this frame for simplicity, to connect to existing literature.
3. Given the geolocative aspects, users are likely to see their neighbours, work colleagues, and people commonly attending similar venues and events on apps – a point often overlooked in research that orients app use for new connections.