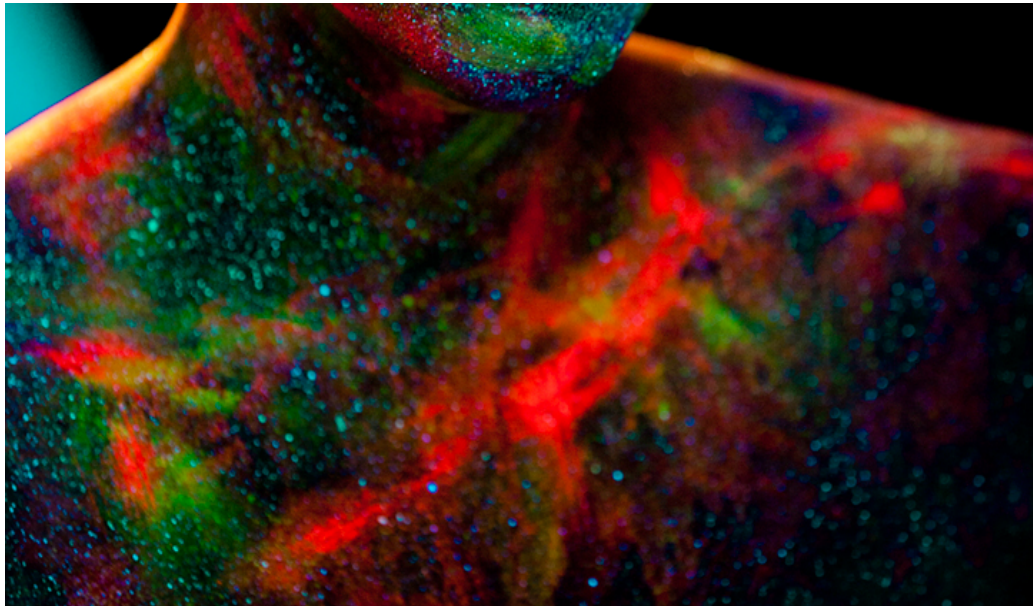


# Sex(uality) in the city: Understanding the impact of locative media technology on queer urban geographies



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Thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the Degree  
of Doctor of Philosophy

August 2017

# Statement of Originality

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I, Sam Miles, confirm that the research included within this thesis is my own work or that where it has been carried out in collaboration with, or supported by others, that this is duly acknowledged below and my contribution indicated.

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# Abstract

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Whilst the introduction of the internet has made it possible to experience life across great distances, the smartphone allows internet on the move. This project offers a new understanding of how locative media technology specifically impacts queer social and sexual encounters and queer spaces. Popular GPS-enabled smartphone apps including Tinder and Grindr play a valuable role in multiplying social and sexual networks for men seeking other men, but also provoke questions about their impact on space, embodiment and connectivity.

This thesis applies the concept of hybridisation to male-male locative apps to develop a new approach to research bridging technology and sexuality. A qualitative approach utilising semi-structured interviews with 36 male-male app users living and working in London, UK, reveals how locative media impact on 1) technological hybridisation, 2) social and sexual encounter, and 3) queer public and private spaces. I shift debates regarding online self-presentation into more *embodied* scenarios that explore daily practice for the hyperconnected user in a digitally enhanced but demonstrably physical context. Developments in technology mean that we are more ‘plugged-in’ than ever before, but this project contends that the ostensible benefits of locative media in expediting physical encounter are complicated by more ambiguous outcomes. The novel efficacy of geospatial partner scoping is often inhibited by extensive labour for the user, tendencies to addictive app use, and clashes in digital-physical hybridisation. Users express uncertainty regarding online social codes and difficulties in aligning motives with others for physical encounter. Locative apps also domesticate encounter into the private space of home, compounding the wider economic deconcentration of queer public venues. These ambivalences show that whilst sociotechnical hybridisation is ostensibly enriching, the journey to embodied encounter in the contemporary city is far from seamless. This thesis contributes a more nuanced theoretical and empirical understanding of the risks and rewards of digital-physical hybridisation as it is experienced in real-life contexts for queer men.

# Acknowledgments

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This project started life as an Economic Social and Research Council (ESRC) award (grant number 1363921). The award has proven invaluable in allowing me to pursue doctoral research with fantastic mentors at Queen Mary, University of London. I have benefitted hugely from the support of Dr Regan Koch. The experience of supervision was as new to him as it was for me, and I hope he has found it as rewarding a process as I have. Fellow supervisor Dr Yasmin Ibrahim has overseen my time at Queen Mary with a vital view to the ‘bigger picture’ in my research that has proven invaluable. Thank you both for showing me that there are many ways to ‘do’ academia, including my way.

I am grateful to Alexandra, who shared her thoughts on my drafts, Gynna, my fieldtrip companion, and Sue, who offered an invaluable ear and space to think. Professor David Pinder and Dr Tim Brown provided academic support at key moments, as did the larger School of Geography, whose collegiate atmosphere is the envy of departments across the country. The conversations we had over the course of my research taught me as much as any book.

The time and energies of the thirty-six participants I spoke to have been invaluable in building a rich picture of technology, sexuality and urban life. Thank you for volunteering your time, and I hope the results do you justice.

Thanks are due to my parents, who were not only unperturbed by their son pursuing a PhD in queer dating apps but even cut out relevant articles from their *Guardian* each month to save for me. They have been there for me at every stage of my academic journey: who knows what the next 30 years will bring? The two Toms in my life have been with me through the course of this project: my twin supporting my journey from the other side of the world, and my partner at home every evening with kind words. He has avoided having to read the thesis so far, but it’s only fair he sees the finished product.

Finally, this research is dedicated to Chris Greenwood, who we lost so young and who is so missed by all who loved him. He was always so interested in learning more – about this, and about everything.

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# Acronyms and Abbreviations

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**ACT UP** – AIDS Coalition To Unleash Power

**ALMR** – Association of Licensed Multiple Retailers

**ANT** – Actor-Network Theory

**BDSM** – Bondage, Dominance or Discipline, Submission or Sadomasochism

**BAME** – Black, Asian, Minority Ethnic

**GPS** – Global Positioning System

**HIV/AIDS** – Human Immunodeficiency Virus/Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome

**IRC** – Internet Relay Chat

**LGBTQ** – Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer<sup>1</sup>

**MSM** - Men who have Sex with Men

**PEP** – Post-Exposure Prophylaxis

**PHE** – Public Health England

**PnP** – Party ‘n’ Play

**PrEP** – Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis

**QMUL** – Queen Mary, University of London

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<sup>1</sup> Sometimes referred to as LGBTQI (Intersex).



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# Chapter 1

## Introduction

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Cyberspace and ‘real’ space are both experienced through the body. People conduct their personal, familial, and emotional lives in a myriad of ways in a variety of different spaces. Bodies and spaces – cyber and ‘real’ – are entangled.

Robyn Longhurst (2013: 667)

Walking down a poorly lit street to my home one evening several years ago, I was targeted for harassment by two strangers standing on the curbside. The men, scanning me from head to toe as I passed, shouted homophobic insults ranging from the prosaic: “You’re a faggot, a bumboy, a gay boy”, to the colourful: “You like it up the arse, don’t you? ’Course you do, you’re gay!” They continued their critique from the pavement as I hurried, mortified, to the next street and towards my own front door.

After the initial shock of the incident had passed, I parsed the event for meaning. I had walked alone, without a partner or correspondent display of same-sex affection, or with gay contemporaries to identify me in any visibly queer grouping. I had not spoken and was not even very distinct in the evening light. There was, therefore, something about the very presentation or performance of my body that enabled these strangers to correctly code me as homosexual. If I had ‘covered’ my sexuality, minimising expression of my minority identity markers (Yoshino 1996),<sup>2</sup> would I have escaped their unwelcome scrutiny? How did my body inhabit and communicate my sexual identity? And how had my sexuality been mediated by the physical environment through which it passed?

The incident generated further observations. The strangers’ calls rendered literal the naming, or codifying, of homosexuality as an attributable category of gender identity

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<sup>2</sup> Covering builds on Erving Goffman’s ‘passing’ (1963) but pertains to the obtrusiveness of an identity rather than its visibility.

produced through and within society. The pair's invective included common derogatory terms, but also sexualised language that oddly echoed the style of direct approaches used by consumers of popular male-male dating and 'hook-up'<sup>3</sup> apps. Further, the home I had escaped to constituted a private space in which I could be 'myself' after navigating the fraught contested public space of 'my' city. Despite years of activism and advocacy, and despite my own scholarship of sexualities and space, I still found myself coding as queer the private, domestic space of the home: a place imbued with freedom and possibilities that ran counter to what I had experienced as the overbearing heteronormativity of public space.<sup>4</sup> And that wasn't all: having navigated a distinctly analogue exchange, rather than turning to digital technology to find the support to which so many queer minorities testify (Wakeford 2002; Alexander & Losh 2010) – 'tweeting' my humiliation to an online social network for support, perhaps – I told only my housemate about the altercation. Despite burgeoning explorations of the special relationship between sexualities and digital space, and concomitant growth in online social networks, my experience was unequivocally embodied.

### **The research project**

I use this real-life anecdote to introduce the thesis in order to contextualise the multiple subjectivities at play in contemporary queer life, from identity and community to embodiment and risk. This research project brings together the strands of thinking generated by my experience that night to contribute to research in sexuality and space studies, queer theory, and locative digital media – a term I use to describe GPS-enabled mobile phone networking apps. This interdisciplinary project explores how 'MSM' – men who have sex with men, including those who do not identify as gay or bisexual – **negotiate technological hybridisation, social-sexual encounters and public and private spaces in London using male-male locative digital media.**

Digital technologies are now deeply involved in human life. In the past, virtual worlds were considered distinct from 'real' spaces, but as technology has progressed,

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<sup>3</sup> Hooking up can be defined as a 'brief, uncommitted, sexual encounter' (Reay 2014: 16).

<sup>4</sup> Heteronormativity describes the 'ingrained belief in heterosexuality as the gold standard of human sexuality' (Simpson 2015a: 3).

hybridisation has developed as a more sustained relationship between the two entities. Indeed, the relationship between virtual and material worlds has become so intertwined that many scholars no longer consider them as separate (Rheingold 2002; Kitchin and Dodge 2011; Farman 2012). One way to interrogate this digital-physical relationship in an applied context is through the burgeoning popularity of dating and hook-up apps. The UK dating app market alone is predicted to be worth £225 million by 2019 (Mintel 2015). These platforms are disproportionately adopted by LGBTQ individuals: in a North American context, 70% of same-sex couples now meet their partner online rather than in person (Ansari and Klinenberg 2015). Male-male locative offerings including Grindr, Scruff and Hornet, as well as products popularly adopted for same-sex searching such as Tinder, have proven popular for both socialisation and sexual encounter (Mowlabocus 2010a; Woo 2013; Ahlm 2017). Their major attraction is their mapping function, which locates a user's physical coordinates in order to sort potential matches by proximity, with the aim of expediting localised encounters. Evidencing a process of technological 'convergence' (Blackman 1998), these apps signal an evolution from static iterations of the internet to something portable, networked and immediate, but they also require users to constantly negotiate shared codes of conduct in the absence of established models for online communication or community. Understandings of the *material* conditions of 'digitally-inflected spatial formations' (Kinsley 2014: 2) are still limited, but they have never been more important. This project offers a new understanding of how locative apps mediate online connectivity with *embodied* encounter, as a specific 'locative turn' within more established understandings of digital and physical hybridisation.

This thesis contributes to critical debates exploring how sexual minorities conceptualise and negotiate private and public space, arguing that technological hybridisation renders distinctions between the two increasingly difficult. With a finger swipe, the ubiquitous smartphone can now overlay public space with private pursuits, and open up the private spaces of home to strangers through video communication or online relationships with potential partners. Sheller and Urry (2003: 108) testify to the transformations of public and private in contemporary society; I contend that *locative* technology now dominates the 'flows and networks that enable mobility between and across publics and privates'. As Hubbard et al. (2016: 568) rightly argue:

While the significance of new technologies and the profusion of sexual content online can easily be overstated, there has clearly been something important happening here, with some of the traditional boundaries between private and public, intimate and shared, suburban and urban being inverted.

Hybridisation evidences the power of technological mediation in shaping our relations with the environment, but beyond recognising hybridisation as a valuable element of contemporary digital technology, this thesis argues that the ‘locative turn’ evidenced by the growth of popular GPS-enabled dating and hook-up apps engenders a specific form of technological mediation within more established processes of hybridisation: a form that highlights both spatial and temporal concerns.

Recognising a significant historical synchronicity between specifically male queer sexuality and urban terrain, I utilise in-depth qualitative interviews to unpack the perspectives, emotions and behaviours of male-male app users negotiating encounters with other men in London.<sup>5</sup> Despite several decades of scholarly and cultural attention, ideas of what constitutes queer life and queer space are still contested, and a recent proliferation in locative digital technologies introduces a further variable to contemporary queer scholarship. As locative media allow almost anywhere to constitute a queer space via their ‘plugged-in’ hybrid qualities, the primacy of existing urban venues such as gay bars may fade. The welcome impact of this technological overlay cannot be understated in suburban or rural environments historically lacking concrete queer spaces, but its consequences are more ambiguously experienced in urban contexts. If technology users stop occupying these spaces (as restrictive or ‘homonormative’<sup>6</sup> as such spaces may be) in favour of online or private physical spaces, queer publics may decline. Some critics argue that apps are already complicit in the splintering of queer culture (Visser 2013; Ghaziani 2014; Collins and Drinkwater 2016), but this project suggests that there may be room for a reconceptualisation of what constitutes public space for app users, not via a liberated virtual space as imagined by earlier cyberculture proponents (see for example Turkle

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<sup>5</sup> The word ‘presentation’ is key here, because my empirical endeavor is based on presented accounts rather than real-time thought processes, emotions or behaviours *in medias res*.

<sup>6</sup> Homonormativity, a term developed by Lisa Duggan (2003) defines a depoliticised gay culture that valorises domesticity and consumption, in the process sustaining heterosexual dominance in society.

1995), but in the ‘real-life’ domestic space of home, where a remediation of private and public contexts may develop. Thus hybridisation is conceptualised within this project as a process that synthesises not just digital and physical realms but also public and private spaces, recognising in the process the increasingly blurred boundaries between these previously oppositional planes.

This thesis also contributes to scholarship in geographies of sexualities. Recognising a history of masculinism in geography (Binnie 1997), many more scholars are following in the footsteps of Gillian Rose (1993) and David Bell and Gill Valentine (1995) to enlarge debates around queerness and sexuality. These include Mark Turner (2003) and Phil Hubbard et al.’s (2004; 2011; 2016) work on sex in urban space, Nash and Gorman-Murray’s timely contributions to mobilities and technologies (2014; 2015; 2016a; 2016b), and Gavin Brown’s critical developments in geographies of sexualities (2001; 2006; 2008; with Browne 2016), amongst others. Away from public health investigations into MSM locative apps (Rice et al. 2012; Landovitz et al. 2013; Rendina et al. 2013; Bourne et al. 2013; 2014), scholarship often scrutinises self-representation and identity amongst male locative media users (Mowlabocus 2005; 2010b; McGlotten 2012; Woo 2013). My approach however is more embodied, focusing on spatial practices and the urban environments in which these technologically mediated interactions occur (after Nash and Gorman-Murray 2014; Race 2015; Lewis 2016) to build a better understanding of *concretely located* practices and *lived* encounters, the latter theme inviting a humanistic subjectivity<sup>7</sup> that recognises the autonomy (real or imagined) of users within larger sociotechnical assemblages (following Latour 2006). Arguing that the materiality of embodiment is mediated by its hybrid environment, I analyse how human-human negotiations are in turn being altered – or liberated, or compromised – by the relatively new but rapidly proliferating digital locative media platforms utilised within those spaces. Understanding this hybridised digital-physical praxis is key to contextualising future technological developments and the risks and rewards (and indeed, realities) that they will offer for users beyond the demographic explored in this thesis.

There is an urgency to this research. There is a growing movement to study new digital technologies as valid objects of cultural geography, understanding the impact

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<sup>7</sup> As discussed on page 26.

of these rather everyday tools on spaces and practices (Rose 2016a; 2016b; see also Kinsley 2014 on ‘vulgar’ geographies).<sup>8</sup> Mobile and pervasive technologies have become widely incorporated into daily routines, resulting in an internet more closely laid onto ‘real’ life than ever before. We have arrived at an era of digital promiscuity, where we attend to multiple online and offline activities in tandem (Payne 2015), compounded by a convergence between different forms of media, telecommunications and computing into shared networks (Gates 2000). At the same time, media and cultural moral panics frequently foment around phenomena such as internet addiction, sexual promiscuity, and ‘chemsex’.<sup>9</sup> Scrutiny of chemsex in particular provokes some difficult questions regarding the relations between locative app use and disinhibiting drug use, as well as reflecting a relationship between locative media and technological addiction that deserves further exploration. Even within MSM populations, palpable anxieties circulate about relationships, community, mental and sexual health and isolation. Steven Doran (2014: 17) articulates the slow progress of associated research, pointing out that: ‘even though sexuality constitutes one of the dominant organising logics of contemporary culture, little work examines the relationship between sexuality and technology’. This project addresses precisely that lacuna, building a more detailed picture of the nature of this hybrid scenario and the significance of its locative turn.

Given the rapid pace of technological change, it comes as no surprise that critical evaluations must continually play catch-up, but this thesis ensures its long-term relevance by addressing the larger issue of technological mediation in everyday life. Locative media and queer male technology users represent one route into larger considerations of pervasive technological connection for humans. As mobile technologies continue to proliferate, societies will become more densely networked than ever before, and this ‘hyperconnection’ generates implications for human-human relations as well as interactions between humans and their devices.

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<sup>8</sup> In this respect cultural geography is a relative latecomer in considering the impact of new media technologies on embodiment compared to media and communications studies; see, for example, Hine (2000); Miller and Slater (2000); Manovich (2001).

<sup>9</sup> ‘Chemsex’ describes sex under the influence of psychoactive substances (Bourne et al. 2015), often in group settings.

Yet by introducing this research project not, as one might expect, with an illustration of the interplay between digital space and sexuality but instead recounting an entirely analogue experience, I want to highlight the continued relevance of the body in how we chart space. I want to caution against the tendency for digital research to become totalising in the way it accounts for conditions of contemporary life and overlooks the experience of the body in space. Hybridisation signals an ever-diminishing separation between digital and physical planes, but the body is still required to *access* these layered experiences. Prosaic involvements dominate our daily lives, and this project maintains this phenomenological epistemology as a way of ‘emphasis[ing] the lived experience of inhabiting a body’ (Ahmed 2006: 2). This project examines not only locative sociotechnical hybridisation itself but the spaces of reflection produced for users involved in that process. For that reason, participant interviews focus on the ways in which digital technology use mediates *embodied* as well as online experiences, and junctures of the two.

Moreover, I contend that there is academic value in shining a ‘queer lens’ alert to ‘queer nuances’ (Sedgwick 1990, cited in Edwards 2009: 59) on the underexplored but valuable spaces of everyday practice.<sup>10</sup> By decentering conventional approaches to technology, my epistemology seeks to reinvigorate queer theorisations of technology to allay criticism regarding the impractical (and sometimes seemingly impenetrable) nature of queer studies, opening up new conceptual space to consider how technology impacts on space, socialisation and sexual behaviour.

### **Research questions**

This project addresses the following central question: **how are locative media technologies impacting on queer social life and queer spaces?** The investigation is realised through an empirical study focused on male-male dating app users in London. The central research question can be broken down into three sub-questions:

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<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless of growing interest in sociological discourse (see for example Silverstone 1994; 2005; Zerubavel 2006). For an historical overview see Kalekin-Fishman (2011).



- 1) To what extent do locative media hybridise digital and physical space, and how is this process experienced and practiced by users on a daily basis?
- 2) How do users of popular locative apps such as Grindr and Tinder facilitate encounters through and with the city in spatial and self-reflective terms?
- 3) How are these encounters bound up with contemporary debates surrounding public and private spaces, and perceived risks and rewards?

The first sub-question considers hybridisation as the layering of digital and physical scenarios for the locative app user, a pertinent debate given the growing ‘digital turn’ in human geography (Ash et al. 2016; Leszczynski 2017). Over the years spatially removed virtual reality has progressed to something more coterminous with lived experience. As a result, technology users are subject to new forms of hybridised embodiment mediated by what one participant in this study dubs ‘electrons on the screen’. My deliberately broad remit of this hybridisation utilises Gordon and de Souza e Silva’s (2011) theorisation of technological hybridisation, but I apply it to MSM locative dating apps specifically to show its particular significance in these negotiations. I also interrogate the theorists’ claim that such a hybridisation is always generative by demonstrating instances where physical and digital meetings ‘clash’ for users, as well as exploring the risks of ‘continuous connectivity’ (Wilson 2014), a sensation rather ambivalently experienced by users. The effects of new sociotechnical ‘assemblages’ (Latour 2005) – understood within this project as the relations between different human and non-human entities that in combination make up networks or systems – are evidenced by participants who capitalise on their ‘hyperconnection’ to access a greater number of partners online, whilst also professing anxieties about the unsustainable nature of their technological involvement.

The second sub-question explores how locality becomes reinserted into online spaces through the geolocational sophistication of contemporary MSM apps, something hitherto under-examined. It considers how app users conceive of city spaces and how they navigate for social or sexual opportunities in ways that may echo or depart from traditional histories of *flânerie* or cruising in the metropolis (Turner 2003; Delany 1999). This project recognises the relational qualities of space, understanding it as

something subjectively imagined (i.e. distances from the user), rather than more orthodox Euclidian or objective mapping (for instance, coordinates on a static map), because this dominates how participants visualised proximity and distance. This project also finds that the portability of mobile devices entails scoping opportunities for matches across a variety of socio-economic scales and geographical contexts. For the hyperconnected user, the advent of ubiquitous technology should make distinctions between online and offline temporalities irrelevant and expedite gratifying social and sexual encounters, but my project attends to the human slippages that inflect hybridisation. London, like any city, hosts spaces of isolation; literal proximity does not automatically constitute intimacy (Laing 2015). Further, technological efficiency is hampered by the lack of a shared set of social codes for online practice amongst users that would improve both online sociality and offline partner-matching.

The third sub-question speaks to a conceptual shift that seems to be progressing from queer publics to domestic spaces of home, ostensibly at the hands of popular locative apps that expedite and privatise the social or sexual encounter. The ongoing diffusion of queer individuals from distinct 'gay villages' to more scattered residential zones (Gorman-Murray and Nash 2014) may be partly attributable to locative media (as argued by Collins and Drinkwater 2016; Gorman-Murray and Nash 2016), but I question the extent to which these apps must take responsibility for queer deconcentration amidst larger economically-driven urban change. The domestication of formerly public encounters invites new forms of queer intimacy in the home, but brings considerations of security too. Critics have scrutinised state surveillance (Doran 2014; Zuboff 2015) and commercial commodification (Lanier 2013; Norman 2015), but I am interested in the risks and rewards generated not just by the products but also the encounters they mediate, which vary from meeting new residential neighbours or brief encounters with temporary visitors to the city to procuring chemsex meetings. The latter is an often misunderstood but undeniably complex practice that now commingles with locative media and domesticity. A final pertinent consideration of the apps as agents for risk and reward is the dependence they invite from the hyperconnected user, which can result in compulsive or addicted app use.

The overarching aim for this thesis is an investigation of how locative media impact on queer life and queer space, and it is a timely one. Whilst some accounts celebrate the quantifiable gains made for sexual minorities in the last half-century (Weeks 2007; see Sullivan 1995 for a more homonormative conservatism), others call for a reassessment of collective progress in a contemporary queer environment marked by isolation and disconnection. Non-heterosexual men experience disproportionate sexual unhappiness (Bourne et al. 2013) and poorer mental health (Meyer 2003; PHE 2014); these health disparities are so pronounced that they are now defined as ‘syndemics’ (Stall et al. 2003; Frye et al. 2014). A recent *Huffington Post* article (Hobbes 2017) lamenting endemic loneliness amongst supposedly successful gay males in the global North ‘went viral’ online, read and shared by networks of readers for whom the recognition that ‘it is still dangerously alienating to go through life as a man attracted to other men’ clearly struck a chord. This reflects larger concerns that mobile technology negatively impacts on social life and embodied socialisation (Bauman 2000; 2003; Turkle 2011). Despite all that has been ‘won’ for queer men – marriage, growing social acceptance, vastly improved sexual protections in the form of PEP and PrEP prophylaxes against HIV transmission – pundits and participants alike express concerns not just about promiscuity and safety so often highlighted before, but also about isolation, community fragmentation and rampant individualism in an era of supposed technological connectivity. To some extent, these sociotechnical impacts are felt by a variety of technology users, but the unprecedented popularity of male-male locative media platforms brings its own specific risks and rewards. This study gets to the heart of some of these affordances and anxieties. Twenty years on from Jon Binnie’s call for queer research that encapsulates *lived* experience (1997), it is more important than ever for queer theoretical approaches to consider the practical narratives of everyday life.

### **Participants and research setting**

This research is informed by in-depth qualitative research with 36 MSM from a range of ages and backgrounds living and working in London, UK, who use locative dating products.<sup>11</sup> Participants became involved in the project in three ways: those

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<sup>11</sup> It is important to note the socio-economic inequalities that mediate access to technologically privileged spaces. Consideration of these factors are outside the realm of this project, but they merit

responding to recruitment posters in public spaces around London including health centres and libraries; those who contacted an institutionally approved recruitment profile on Grindr and Tinder; and finally ‘snowball’ volunteers who heard about the study from previous participants. Semi-structured, open-ended interviews with participants investigating both thoughts and behaviours provide a complex and detailed picture of contemporary techno-mediated queer male life.<sup>12</sup> Whilst I am alert to arguments against the deployment of interview as the default methodological choice, I would argue that they continue to offer a useful qualitative method at the *everyday* scale. I am dedicated to materially grounded research, and interviews offer a particularly rich access to the complex balance between empowerment and risk for locative app users. After all, “the Internet is not utopia” (Gross 2007, x) and in subscribing to locative products, the user is bound into certain systems of commodification. Exploring user perceptions of this informational exchange is key to better understanding consumer participation in technological processes of risk and reward.

Interviews took place in a range of public venues across the city from cafes to libraries, with participants invited to choose the venue to maximise their comfort in what were often highly sensitive conversations. Moreover, by making concrete the geographical parameters of such a study by locating it in London, a city with a long history of variously celebrated and contested queer spaces, I aim to emphasise the importance of space and place as geoinformative and sociocultural precepts in mobile media practices (as per Thielmann 2010). Cities are full of public spaces; locations from pavements to parks contain myriad social conventions and practices that make up social interaction every day. In these kinds of interactions, the ‘experience of the whole is determined by the relative intactness of the constitutive parts’ (Gordon and de Souza e Silva 2011: 90), and ‘intactness’ cannot be taken for granted where locative technology is involved. Nor can it be taken for granted where queerness is involved. People are folding together the public and private in new configurations through technology and their embodied use of it. The city provides a relevant base from which to sample a deliberately diverse range of users in terms of socio-economic

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research of their own (see, for example Zickuhr and Smith 2012; Ragnedda and Muschert 2013; Friemel 2014).

<sup>12</sup> This project does not explore queer female locative media, but scholarship elsewhere attests to its growth (see for example Murray and Ankerson 2016; Tang 2017).

background, ethnicity, age and sexuality, who nevertheless share the status of app user. By sampling from such a wide range of participants, the project highlights variegated sociotechnical experiences in sufficient depth to produce a range of narratives tracking locative media use.

This project is also relevant to knowledge outside of the confines of its empirical focus. By gathering the experiences of queer males living and working in contemporary London I aim to provide a richer picture of how technological mediation affects this persistently misunderstood demographic. Beyond this application, my data also contributes to study of sexual health and behaviour, queer ‘communities’<sup>13</sup> and how minority groups utilise the internet for peer support, information gathering or sociality. These research insights on locative media practice have the potential to benefit academics, policymakers, and members of the public alike.

### **Thesis outline**

The remainder of this thesis is organised around seven chapters. **Chapter 2** outlines the key theoretical positions that inform the conceptual framework of my study. I examine relevant critical approaches to sexuality and space in offline and online contexts, as well as the centrality of the metropolis, and London specifically, to queer male culture. This positioning also allows me to suggest where my own project can contribute productive new insights into queer male encounter, as well as an understanding of how technological hybridisation is practically experienced. I outline popular locative platforms for male-male dating and sex and highlight their rapid colonisation of queer male culture. Recognising a young but growing scholarship around locative media, I argue that the historical symbiosis between male queerness and technology requires consideration of locative media not just in terms of online presentation but in patterns of lived behaviour, including as a reinvention of cruising, as a mediation of public and private space and as a potential site for community. By intervening with scholarship from locative media technology, human geography and

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<sup>13</sup> Recognising the subjectivities and slippages in ideas of ‘community’ (Wakeford 2002; Campbell 2004; Mowlabocus 2010a).

space and place studies I show how my own interdisciplinary research fits into the larger academic context.

**Chapter 3** details my methodological framework. I explain why I utilise an applied queer approach to this project as a way to evaluate sociotechnical assemblages from a fresh perspective. Queer theory, a set of ideas that seek to de-naturalise hegemonic power structures, informs my research in considering how different sexual identities are practiced across different spaces of the city. I show that despite a broadening of queer epistemology to absorb nearly anything non-heterosexual, there remains value in a queer or ‘sideways’ perspective to interpreting the data. This chapter also outlines how I conducted the research, employing grounded theory to prioritise the issues that organically arose in data collection to inform consequent data analysis. I detail my use of in-depth qualitative interviews and show how I came to this decision, noting the rich quality of data it can collect and providing a detailed personal narrative for each participant. Finally, I consider the practical, conceptual and ethical challenges of the project, evaluating how the co-construction of an intimate interview space can enhance the fieldwork experience, and reflecting on my positionality as a researcher. The chapter concludes with an outline of the participant group to ‘set the scene’ for the analysis that follows.

The empirical results of this project are divided into four chapters. **Chapter 4**, ‘Locative media and the hyperconnected user’, explores online practice. It defines hyperconnectivity in the context of this research as MSM locative media users who, via their involvement in the platforms in question, constitute bodies entangled in pervasive technology. This hyperconnection mediates a range of technological practices, prompting consideration of the positioning of male-male apps and their users, the ‘gamification’ of apps (by which I mean their tendency to offer a game-like experience), their imbrication with social media, and age-related distinctions in the ways users conceive of and operate locative technology. I find that locative app use is surprisingly evenly distributed across the age range. In fact, some older users specifically embrace the geospatial novelty of locative media, whilst others contextualise contemporary platforms amongst their experience of previous desktop-based encounters. The chapter concludes that ‘user’ best defines the individual interacting with locative media because it recognises their autonomy of use, *contra*

critical approaches that highlight commodifying forces acting on the human within a technological assemblage.

**Chapter 5**, ‘Navigating time and space in the hybridised city’, progresses from online practice to more directly embodied concerns. It evaluates the impact of digital-physical hybridisation on social and sexual encounters for MSM. I explore how participants conceptualise distance and proximity, and how locative mapping facilitates locational scoping and ‘dropped pin’ behaviours in spatial and conceptual terms. Having argued that locative technology mediates human movement through hybridisation, I highlight the complex consequences for virtual and embodied sexual encounters, including app use at work and in public thoroughfares. My findings evaluating virtual sex and physical encounter inform technology and sexuality studies by showing that far from practicing uncomplicated transitions between the two planes, locative app users must navigate tensions between new possibilities and more ambiguous or contentious experiences. Online sex tends to function secondarily to embodied encounter for participants, but the social codes underpinning both contexts lag behind the technology that brokers the encounter.

**Chapter 6**, ‘Urban encounter, public space and queer sociality’, evaluates the shifting relations between public queer space and locative media. Despite a history of queer migration to urban centres and the development of entertainment districts and ‘gay villages’ (Castells 1983), dedicated queer public spaces are declining as techno-mediated queer life thrives. I argue that locative media brokers new forms of sociality and routes to embodied encounter, but they contribute to larger social and economic changes in the urban environment to compound the deconcentration of queer life in cities, and consequently the traditional routes to public encounter including cruising and self-organised community or sociality. The chapter concludes more optimistically, considering the forms of community that might be brokered via locative media. However, I caution that this sociality cannot sufficiently cohere without the development of social codes that can more effectively mediate online behaviour.

**Chapter 7**, ‘Domesticating the public encounter: reconfigurations of queer life’, theorises a domestication of queer public encounter to the private space of the home.

It explores how the digital introduction offered by locative media sidesteps the need for physical introduction in public space, shifting the encounter straight to a private space that is unusually engineered to welcome in the symbolic ‘stranger’. This process brings with it consideration of risk and security, as well as more positive potential not only for fulfilling sexual encounter, but also social connection via ‘netflix and chill’-style bonding activities. The domestication of queer spaces also interacts with chemsex, a catch-all term for socialised practices involving group consumption of drugs combined with sex. Participant experiences of chemsex, technological labour and app addiction show how locative media are significantly influencing not just human-centred communication but more subcultural lived experiences too.

In concluding, **Chapter 8** illustrates how my research contributes empirically, theoretically and methodologically to understandings of technological hybridisation in queer urban life. I summarise the central research outcomes of the project and evaluate the dichotomous contribution of locative media to users, finding that depending on context, platforms can constitute a help or hindrance, and sometimes both at the same time. I reflect on what often seems like the ‘out-of-reach’ potentiality of locative media for its users, arguing that locative platforms offer a genuine utility in partner scoping in the contemporary city but often fall short of delivering the imagined encounter so desired by the hyperconnected user. I note the implications for mental and physical wellbeing, balancing the affordances of these agents for queer encounter with the unexpected complications generated by their locative hybridity. I highlight the contribution of the thesis to empirical, conceptual and methodological debates, including future development of locative platforms as more pluralistic lifestyle tools, and the practical benefits of co-constructing an intimate qualitative research environment. Finally, I sketch out several directions for future research, focusing on policy and applied public engagement, particularly for younger technology users.

### **A note on ‘MSM’ and ‘queer’ labels**

This project utilises both ‘queer’ and ‘MSM’ (men who have sex with men) as definitional labels, identifying a diverse group including those self-defining as homosexual as well as straight-identifying men (Mercer et al. 2013). Male-male sex



does not automatically equal gay identity (Bartos et al. 1993); whilst 4.3% of individuals in a recent large-scale survey identified as homosexual or bisexual, double that number (9%) reported a same-sex experience as an adult (Twenge et al. 2016). The use of ‘MSM’ and ‘queer’ labelling in this project echoes Gavin Brown’s (2006: 133) recognition of queer identities as ‘overlapping, relational and place-specific’, and reflects the approach of Collins and Drinkwater (2016: 4) who note that: ‘MSM indicates a population beyond men who currently identify themselves as gay or bisexual and includes those who are ostensibly in heterosexual relationships but engage at least intermittently in homosexual activity’. The acronym originates in public health discourse (Glick et al. 1994), and has been latterly contested as reductionist (Young and Meyer 2005; Khan and Khan 2006) but remains widespread and useful in evaluating sexual behaviour beyond self-defined identity categories. ‘Queer’ labeling takes its lead from how several participants self-identified, but also reflects contemporary discourses that have enlarged the term (not unproblematically) from its initial radical interpretation to something coterminous with MSM or gay identities (Giffney 2004; Halley and Parker 2007). I use it in the spirit of Nathaniel Lewis’ (2014: 232) definition: ‘although queer has also been framed as a political position that rejects categorising sexual identity, it is used here to refer to identification with any sexual subjectivities different from or outside of heterosexual norms’. Politically, this project does adopt a queer stance in challenging normativity that overlaps with, but is not automatically substitutable, for participant self-defined identities.

# Chapter 2

## Situating queer sexuality, cities and technology

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This chapter outlines theoretical and empirical scholarship informing the conceptual framework of the project. By reviewing research in sexuality and space studies, digital technology and locative media I am able to situate this study within a number of contemporary debates. I show where scholarship has failed to sufficiently address sociotechnical processes or could be further extended, locating critical lacunae to which this project aims to contribute new concepts and knowledge. This is particularly apparent in discussions of the future impact of ubiquitous digital-physical hybridisation in embodied scenarios and in relation to social and sexual practices.

Locative media products force us to rethink how we parse both spatial and temporal boundaries, and more sustained investigation of the real-life impact of these shifts is required to update humanistic understandings of technology. ‘Humanistic’ is understood in this context as a study of the whole person, with attention to personal agency and the understanding that a person's subjective understanding of the world is no less valid than objective reality (Maslow 1968). My framing of this project as humanistic is a response to post-humanist approaches to technology which tend to overlook the *embodied* human practices enabled by those technologies. In this sense I align myself to the theoretical position of Gillian Rose (2016; 2016b), who argues for continued recognition of the reflexive and creative agency of *human* actants within dominant scholarship exploring the nonhuman agency of digital codes (2016a: 766). I share her concern that a wholesale focus on the agential capacities of technology risks neglecting human networks within which these technologies are embedded. Whilst I do not adopt a specifically humanistic framework, it provides a useful scaffold to situate technology in terms of its human orientation and use.

What follows is constituted of three parts. Part one addresses literature on queer spaces, beginning with the physical public space of cities and London in particular, before considering queer online spaces and the shift from cyberspace to hybridised

digital-physical scenarios. Part two focuses on locative media, outlining key research contributions to MSM dating apps, their role and their use. I engage with and critique the most relevant research in the still-germinating field of locative media studies, demonstrating how these platforms offer a way into answering larger questions about cruising, queer social life and space. Finally, I consider community and how locative media might resituate ideas of sociality and belonging in a hybridised but human-centred framework.

## I. Queer Spaces

### **Sexuality and the city**

To understand why digital technology has so impacted on ideas of queer space, it is important to first understand how these spaces have been differently figured in academic debates. ‘Space’ can be interpreted as a complex site of political, cultural and social negotiations and re-negotiations between groups and individuals. Throughout this project ‘space’ is understood multiply, as not only a cartographic representation but something perceived, conceived and lived, following Lefebvre’s (2004: 285) trialectics of spatial practice, representations of space and spaces of representation.

In the years since Michel Foucault’s *The History of Sexuality* (1978) theorised the relationship between power and sexuality, research has explored sexuality in terms of its *situated* and often problematic cultural, social, political and, key to this project, spatial contexts. Because space is socially constructed (see for example Foucault 1984; Lefebvre 1991; Iveson 2007) and relationally practiced (Thrift 2006) it provides fertile ground for queer interrogation. As a result, the relationship between sexualities and space, including spatial determinants in the construction of sexual identities, has generated considerable interest in queer human geographies (Bell and Valentine 1995; Puar 2002; Aldrich 2004; Bell and Binnie 2004; Browne, Lim and Brown 2009; Hubbard 2011; Nash and Gorman-Murray 2014). Significantly, Jack Halberstam’s (2005) theory of queer space argues that queerness operates at the edges of social life. Building on Judith Butler’s (2000) idea of ‘liminal subjects’ who are excluded from society to maintain the coherence of recognisable heterosexuality,

Halberstam contends that queer individuals occupy conceptually liminal or peripheral positions in society in relation to heterosexual subjects, who occupy and therefore serve to constitute the normative 'centre'. This position is reflected by Sharif Mowlabocus (2010a: 4), who identifies heterosexuality as the perceived fixed central point 'around which all other sexualities orbit'. Given these relations, it is clear that queer public space takes on meaning far beyond its physical characteristics.

Public spaces have historically been intertwined with queer encounter, including not just platonic structures of sociality and community but also cruising, sex work and protest. Scholarship originally focused on identifiably queer spaces in urban centres dubbed 'gay villages': places where sexual minorities could stake a claim to their identities in the safety of likeminded people (Castells 1983; Johnson 2001). This led to scrutiny of the shifting power relations between increasingly assimilative gay communities and gentrification (Lauria and Knopp 1985; Knopp 1997; G. Brown 2001; Schulman 2013). More recently, migration and physical and social mobility have been claimed as drivers for the formation and fortunes of queer urban enclaves, or lack thereof (Knopp 2004; Nash and Gorman-Murray 2014; Collins and Drinkwater 2016). The idea of a queer 'escape' to the metropolis has become a trope of queer mobilities research (Chauncey 1994; Weston 1995; Aldrich 2004), and is now so ingrained in popular culture that more recent critical approaches have sought to elucidate a more complex picture than a unidirectional homeland-hinterland rite of passage (see for example G. Brown 2008; Podmore 2016; Blidon 2016). Notwithstanding the cachet of the city as a sexually stimulating environment (Bech 1997), the field of sexuality and space studies has also broadened to consider sexualities of rural (Phillips et al. 2000) and suburban locales (Brekhus 2003; see also Tongson, 2011), and intersectional sexuality and space including wealth, race and the global south (Puar 2002; Oswin 2008; Tucker 2016). Other foci include geographies of public sexual health (Chaney and Dew 2003; Weiss and Samenow 2010), *heterosexuality* and space (Browne 2007a; Sweeney 2014) and queer homes (Blunt and Dowling 2006; Pilkey 2014). It is possible to see, then, that sexuality and space significantly interrelate: both the way in which space can be sexually *coded* and the effect of space *on* sexuality (Valentine 2009: 679). The contemporary city provides a context in which this relationship is visibilised.

Queer spaces are, by their very nature, regulated by dominant social forces (Hubbard 2004; Conlon 2004; Oswin 2008). The result is that queer subjects must navigate both their right to privacy but also their right to public space (Brown 2001: 50). This restriction demonstrates the need for an examination of the heteronormative structures that invisibilise queerness in public. For example, Samuel Delany's *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* (1999) documents the social cleansing of New York's regeneration initiatives on Times Square's queer spaces, dissecting the decline of the cross-class, cross-race 'community of contact' afforded to MSM in pornographic cinemas. Matthew Carmona (2014: 2) argues that diverse critical opinions are now in consensus that exclusionary space and segregated space are the result of normative hegemonic forces that work to decentre minorities (and therefore their practices) in urban public space. Meanwhile, initially limited explorations of the uneven experiences of lesbian, bisexual and trans individuals in cities have steadily grown (see for example Rothenberg 1995; Podmore 2006; Gorman-Murray 2007; Browne 2007b; Browne and Lim 2009; 2010; Brown-Saracino 2011). These wide-ranging perspectives are all articulated in Michael Warner's (1999) argument that publicly expressed queer sex and sexuality is, in hegemonic terms, the 'wrong kind of sex'. The result is queer(er) sexual pursuits diverging from the assimilationist behaviours of gay males who seek integration into normativity through political incorporations such as marriage. As Beatriz Colomina powerfully argued in 1992: 'the politics of space are always sexual, even if space is central to the mechanism of the erasure of sexuality' (2). The narrowness of acceptable social performance pressures queer minorities to capitulate to normativity, ensuring the ongoing marginalisation of queerness.

Nevertheless, renewed scholarly scrutiny of queer urban spaces in recent years has helped to protest against what Colomina defines as the 'erasure' of its dissident sexualities. Perhaps the most visible resistance to heteronormativity is the queer Pride parade, which has spread worldwide since the original protests at New York's Stonewall Inn bar in 1969. The parade queers its host city for a day, provocatively disrupting the normality of heterosexual urban space and exposing the exclusionary nature of the city's social structure. Beyond visibilising queerness, Pride challenges the 'production of everyday spaces as heterosexual' (Valentine 2003: 151), even as it faces scrutiny from queer scholars for its creeping neoliberalisation and

commodification (Bell and Binnie 2000; 2004; Hughes 2006; Norman 2015; but see Johnston and Waitt (2015) and di Feliciano (2016) in defence of Pride). Queer space-making practices have long navigated contested terrain even while those spaces have been marked as peripheral, both literally and figuratively. Colonisation of these peripheral spaces stems from a historical placelessness in the built environment for queer citizens. As a result, less governable spaces including parks, prisons and toilets become coded as queer (Ingram 1997; Cavanagh 2010; Gandy 2012; Hubbard et al. 2016). These have been read as spaces of activism and protest, commerce and sex. Conventional histories of place fail to register these transgressions but what occurs in these gaps can ‘disrupt neat models of narrative history’ (Halberstam 2005: 187). As Christopher Reed (1996: 64) argues: ‘no space is totally queer or unqueerable, but some spaces are queerer than others’. Twenty years on from Reed’s observation, this project asks whether the queerness of city space is still predicated on physical markers, or if technology might offer ‘queerer’ spaces too.

Cities are spaces of power imbalances but also political contestations, and queerness forms a part of these contestations (Bell and Binnie 2004; Nash 2006; G. Brown 2009). Urban space presents a site for queer play, with José Esteban Muñoz (2009) arguing that it offers potential for new forms of radical utopianism. But whilst the spatial density of the city has historically allowed for new networks, relations and community formation, these processes are difficult to reconfigure away from the social dominance of heteronormativity (Golding 1993).<sup>14</sup> Berlant and Warner (1998) highlight the space-making practices of queer men and women in cities in the United States (US) in relation to punitive council re-zoning legislation. By banning adult businesses from their established locales, the spaces of resistance that had been created by non-normative practices for socialisation, community and protection as well as for public sex were scattered to unregulated and unsafe spaces elsewhere across the city. Berlant and Warner point out that the way in which queer subjects build ad-hoc communities shows a reciprocal engagement with spaces of the city. Despite the establishment of these queer spaces, their marginal subject status means that any ongoing claim to such a space is overruled. The contested space is

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<sup>14</sup> As defined on page 11 as the ‘ingrained belief in heterosexuality as the gold standard of human sexuality’ (Simpson 2015a: 3).

subjugated by ruling powers despite its cultural signification for queer subjects who have learned to use the space as a way ‘to find each other; to map a commonly accessible world; to construct the architecture of queer space in a homophobic environment’ (1998: 551). As Nancy Duncan (1996: 129) points out: ‘[the] privatization of ostensibly public spaces has very uneven consequences for the population as a whole because groups with greater resources can more easily privatize spaces’. Resisting the normalisation of hegemony, Berlant and Warner (1998: 548) strive to alert the scholar to the possibilities of an (urban) society in which new forms of identity, publics, culture and sex can germinate when ‘the heterosexual couple is no longer the referent or the privileged example of sexual culture’. This thesis considers exactly this kind of re-leveling of sexual culture, in this scenario via technology. The difference is that the change here may be realised more through lived practice of sexual minorities instead of, or in addition to, attempting to change the normative majority.

Finally, it should be noted that some theorists argue that cities are sexualised not in oppositional or exclusionary ways (namely heterosexual versus homosexual) but multiply. These scholars approach the issue by moving beyond the dominant binary narratives in the critical field. Phil Hubbard (2011) contests the presumption that ‘straight’ spaces exist and are waiting to be transgressed in queer ways, arguing instead that multiple sexualities, practiced or otherwise, produce urban life in combination. Scott Herring (2010) takes an alternative queer approach, critiquing what he dubs the ‘metronormativity’ that assumes queer life is predicated only on its urbanism. Others suggest that thinking of gay enclaves via mobilities rather than in binary terms allow scholars to better understand the *interrelated* nature of gay urban spaces (Nash and Gorman-Murray 2014; see also Cresswell 2010). Certainly, whilst cities have been and continue to be spaces of sexual possibility, they are also sites where ‘sexuality is most intensely scrutinised’ (Hubbard 2011: xiv). Either way, cities are themselves such multiply occupied spaces that theorisations of centre and margin may be productively reconsidered in terms of contestation or, in more optimistic contexts, cohabitation.

## **London: an interregnum between physical and digital queer life**

Every city is imbued with its own queer history, spanning the political organising of New York's Stonewall riots (1969) and the urban praxis of ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power, founded in 1987), to more focused explorations of queer space (Brown 2001; Cavanagh 2010; Gandy 2012). London, with its long-established culture of queer dissidence (Turner 2003; in fiction, see for example Hollinghurst 1988; 2004) provides a salient case study for the study of urban sexualities. In addition to spatial characteristics, temporality is relevant here. The 20<sup>th</sup> century witnessed significant queer progress including the Wolfendon Report (1957), which decriminalised homosexual acts in private, and early campaign work by Terrance Higgins Trust (1982) and OutRage (1990). These milestones of queer liberation, joined by the more ambiguously received evolution of queer spaces into lucrative commercial gay districts (Bell and Binnie 2004; Collins and Drinkwater 2016), makes London a relevant European counterpart to more frequently studied North American urban cultures.

For both its residents and its national and international visitors, London has developed a reputation as something of a 'gay capital' (Andersson 2009: 55). This is a city that hosts diverse forms of queer life, from dating to cruising, activism to assimilation, and these feed into a larger 'throwntogetherness' (Massey 2005: 181) of cheek-by-jowl coexistence across social, ethnic and economic strata. Johan Andersson's spatio-temporal studies usefully disentangle cultural distinctions between the queer spaces of Shoreditch and Soho (2009), Vauxhall (2011) and Bloomsbury (2012). Andersson suggests that as the gay village of Soho has become commodified and culturally sterilised, more risqué and informal enclaves such as Vauxhall provide a less regulated and more permissive queer alternative (2011: 93). Yet across London, gay neighbourhoods are, if not *declining*, then at least deconcentrating. An ongoing spatial redistribution is diffusing queer residents, punters and venues, and taking with it distinct social and sexual practices. This reflects the fate of commercial queer venues across the UK, which are being repurposed at an unprecedented speed (Collins and Drinkwater 2016), and indeed across the global North (Lewis 2013; Ghaziani 2014; Mattson 2015).



From 2006 to 2016 the total number of American LGBTQ bars dropped from 1,605 to 1,022, signalling a 36% decrease in the past decade (Gatta in Parks-Ramage 2016); in London, nearly 50% of all nightclubs closed between 2007 and 2015 (ALMR 2015), with LGBTQ bars disproportionately affected, falling from 125 to 53 venues (Campkin and Marshall 2017). What is occurring is part of a broader economic shift, but it disproportionately affects historically marginalised populations, including queer populations. The fact that this deconcentration is so much more pronounced in queer rather than mainstream venues is surprising, given that London's population has increased by 12% in under a decade to 8.8 million (Mayor of London 2016), implying a concomitant growth in overall LGBTQ residents. It may also generate knock-on impacts for queer individuals, because queer venues have been shown to offer a wide range of support functions, including political organising, community and health advocacy (Bell and Binnie 2004; Doan and Higgins 2011; Campkin and Marshall 2017). Michael Brown et al. (2014) go as far as to position the gay bar as a space of male caring in an era of commercial decline. Given this scenario, 'taken-for-granted' assumptions of cities as 'systems of infrastructure' (Koch and Latham 2017: 1) deserve interrogation.

Established configurations of sexuality and space in public, including the socialisation offered by queer entertainment venues and the sexual encounters facilitated by male saunas, seem to have shifted in recent years to the domestic space of private homes, and technology is implicated in this shift. Meanwhile, private spaces for interaction between men is growing: London is Grindr's most popular city, with 700,000 active users (Grindr 2016). Amongst common consensus that locative media is complicit in queer spatial deconcentration, Phil Hubbard (2016: 578) appeals for further research into the decline of gay villages, a central provocation of this thesis project. The decline of public space as a site of queer encounter may be due to an extension of the 'post-gay' identity (Burston 1994) whereby geographical delineation by sexual identity is no longer felt to be necessary (G.Brown 2006; Nash 2013b; Ghaziani 2014), or at the hands of the neoliberal<sup>15</sup> gentrification of the 'gay village' and its

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<sup>15</sup> Neoliberalism is understood here as the 'policies and practices that promote austerity, competitiveness and capital accumulation' (Lewis 2016: 2).

resulting economic striation as a home to a diminishing proportion of queer residents (Nash and Gorman-Murray 2014).<sup>16</sup>

London can be interpreted as a tale of two cities, looking back to physical queer encounters of the past and forward to privatised spaces of the future. Nevertheless, Nathaniel Lewis (2016: 2) persuasively argues that researchers wrongly position gay men's consumption preferences as causative links in the changing urban landscapes of queer enclaves, pointing out that these assumptions about homonormativity do not take into account the same precarity these individuals face as any other residents of the neoliberal city balancing a 'career, financial insecurity and uncertain social standing'. Some theorists argue that queer spaces are mediated by consumerism and commodification anyway (Bell and Binnie 2000; Binnie and Skeggs 2004), although whether this is justification for their decline is more contentious. Campkin and Marshall (2017) point to neoliberal development and increased housing pressure, as well as changes to commercial zoning rules, as key to queer urban deconcentration, emphasising pernicious economic and social changes. But in the same way that the communitarian turn (a nostalgic view of an imagined national past of shared values) has been debunked (Amin 2012), we could think a little more critically about the supposed community and cultural offering of physical nightlife, and consider what might actually be gained by locative media spaces.

### **Temporality in online queer space: cyberspace to hybridisation**

As the previous section showed, sexuality is intertwined with physical space, but 'virtual' worlds can host queer spaces too. Research testifies to an ongoing symbiosis between queerness and digital technology (Wakeford 1998, Campbell 2005; Pullen and Cooper 2010). This symbiosis has been differently figured over time, from lonely hearts phone lines to locative media apps, but the development of the world wide web kick-started significant techno-queer debates focusing on the idea of cyberspace and cyberculture, positioning them as disembodied entities freed from the confines of geographical parameters and temporal fixity. Spatial concepts were represented by

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<sup>16</sup> We should not overlook post-materialist practices such as gay men's residential retreats (Potter 2016) as a way of manifesting a different mode of physical queer space. These retreats typify a well-being movement distancing itself from pervasive technological involvement.

metaphors such as ‘chat rooms’, and embodiment by human-computer hybrid ‘cyborgs’, which blurred boundaries between humans and machines (Haraway 1985), and later, ‘avatars’ or online characters (Anders 1998). Free from real-life hegemonic structures, digital technology advocates hoped to progress more democratic and power-equal structures, and in the process they opened up conceptual space for gender and sexual experimentation. Sherry Turkle (1995: 15) argued that online connection could, for the first time, play a part in these sexualities because ‘the self is multiple, fluid, and constituted in interaction with machine connections’. Essentially, the internet could provide not only a space but a figurative ‘home’ for sexual minorities.

Certainly, the internet is a flexible and porous mediator, and it has since its early days been interpreted as something of a protective environment for queer subjects.<sup>17</sup> In an online setting, ‘personality becomes fluid, ephemeral and empowering because people can choose how they are represented’ (Kitchin and Dodge 2001: 24). The internet, as an integrated yet separate world in which ‘the virtual operates as a promise of immanence’ (McGlotten 2012: 1), also offers the ability for minority subjects to find each other online, whether for information sharing, friendship opportunities or sexual encounters (Gross 2007, ix; see also Shen and Williams 2011). The potential for digital technology to disrupt the privileging of heterosexuality in ‘real’ life and make room for non-normative lives has been broadly supported by the idea of the internet as a site, or sites, for resistance against dominant heteronormative cultural codes (O’Riordan and Phillips 2007; Ashford 2009). Digital communication can re-create a sense of place, helping users feel at home in a globalised context (Caldas-Coulthard and Iedema 2008), and online space encourages queer users to interact with those who similarly identify, exemplified by the ‘It Gets Better’ video campaign, in which adults broadcast LGBTQ-positive messages to teens online (Phillips 2013)<sup>18</sup>. As Alexander and Losh (2010: 24) point out, for queer subjects ‘the internet has been an important, even vital venue for connecting with others and establishing a sense of identity and community’.

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<sup>17</sup> Although then, as now, access is limited by socio-demographic dimensions including income and education (see for example Friemel 2014). There are also geographic constraints to access, including for example government regulation of certain websites. Finally, physical points of access remain required for electricity, charging and internet signal.

<sup>18</sup> However, see Goltz (2013) for critique of the normativity of this production.

However, the queer claim that online space is by its very structure less hierarchical and more egalitarian than physical space deserves scrutiny. Counter to suggestion that in online space there is no normative ‘centre’ and therefore no periphery (Turner 2003), online spaces are still structured through heteronormativity, with the significant majority of online advertising, online media outlets and pornography heterosexually coded. When it comes to sociality, Larry Gross (2007: x) points out that ‘online communities, like their material world counterparts, can be ghettos as well as liberated zones’. Vikki Fraser (2009) similarly argues that same-sex dating and hook-up websites like Gaydar (re)produce the discourses present in offline queer spaces. Others note that hierarchies are no less evident within ‘queer communities’ – a term with its own conceptual baggage – than they are within the external systems acting upon them, and these power imbalances structure online as much as offline life (Schoene 2011; McGlotten 2012; de Ridder 2013). Cautioning against uncritical narratives of the relationship between queerness and technology, Jacob Gaboury (2013: n.pag) suggests that the role of the computer in the articulation of modern queer identity may have less to do with something inherently queer about computing, and more to do with the ‘broad indifference of these technologies toward such distinctions and the ease with which they facilitate contact and produce community’. Therefore the idea that the internet provides an unproblematic environment for queer individuals must be weighed up against the replication of punitive offline social structures in online spaces.

What remains is an online space often lacking the purported potential with which it was imbued in the infancy of the world wide web. Pioneering cyberspace theorist Nina Wakeford asked back in 1997 what might happen when ‘cyber’ meets ‘queer’, anticipating any number of fruitful new intersections. The novel construction of cyberculture, along with its democratic potential and the malleability of cyberspace, should logically have constituted an inviting platform for queer contributions. But for Wakeford (2002), the lived outcomes failed to match the ambitions of early predictions, due in part to an over-emphasis on critical debates focusing on users’ self-presentation online rather than issues of queer identity, along with an under-exploration of the relationship between online activity and everyday life. Evaluating cyberqueer discourses of the 1990s, Shaka McGlotten (2012: 2) similarly contends that ‘cyberspace promised infinite pleasures and freedoms, especially freedoms from

the constraints of gender and sex’, whereas its optimism is now, he argues, viewed with ‘both distain and nostalgia’. This trajectory mirrors the unfulfilled potential of wider cyberspace read against early enthusiasm for what these worlds could offer (McClellan 1994, Fernback and Thompson 1995). Online space presents a generative platform for queer networking, community-building and sexual encounter, but it may require physicality to effectively perform these functions.

Recognising the limitations of a virtual world predicated on a conceptual remove, scholarship has developed the idea of a *hybridised* digital space that, as technology has developed, interacts more productively with physical embodiment. Rather than escapism, cyberspace in this scenario becomes incorporated into our lived environment. Manuel Castells’ (1997) ‘space of flows’, connecting individuals across space,<sup>19</sup> and Rob Kitchin’s (1998) theorisation of online community showed that far from being rendered obsolete by the globalising force of the internet, geography in a digital context can usefully incorporate hybridity. Cultural geography has long incorporated spatial epistemologies, but Castells and Kitchin’s contributions paved the way for hybrid possibilities afforded by meshing the virtual and physical in new ways. Castells’ study of the Arab Spring (2012), for example, highlights the central role of the internet in facilitating networked political protests. These circulations generate questions for the way we might practice online life and what this might look like embedded in physical experience. In answering these questions, my project also recognises Sam Kinsley’s (2014) appeal for new approaches that move beyond the immateriality of ‘virtual geographies’ to understanding the *material* condition of digitally inflected spatio-temporal formations, and indeed the everyday, popular or ‘vulgar’ technological objects that have historically been underexamined in cultural geography (Kinsley 2016a). What Kitchin and Dodge (2011) term the ‘social contours’ of this technological hybridity is the element that I believe needs closer consideration in order to better understand how technology mediates queer life today.

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<sup>19</sup> In addition to global flows of capital.

## Theorising Hybridisation

Hybridisation provides a generative way to think about the multiple, simultaneous and interconnected dimensions of spaces and practices. I define hybridisation as the combination of two or more processes or entities, meshed to change the conditions experienced by the ‘assemblage’ (as per Latour 2006) involved in that environment. The processes or entities combined can be oppositional or distinct, not just complementary, and the assemblage can refer to humans, technologies, environments or a combination of the three. Recognising the value of Actor-Network Theory to help think about humans and technologies in tandem, I define assemblages as hybridised relations between agents (human technology users) and actants (here, mobile technologies and dating app software, both understood anthropomorphically) that can inhere a queer potential (see for example Knopp 2004; Race 2017) when it comes to theorising the entities that make up sociotechnical networks. This in turn provokes consideration of how entities modify other entities. For example, mobile devices make conversations no longer discrete entities but ‘living threads’ (Troxler 2011: 26). Latour (2006) productively resists the temptation to frame ‘community’ as something universal or coherent, instead showing how assemblages are configured and reconfigured over time. This project goes beyond testing the ‘nodes’ of the assemblage in question to consider the practical orientation of these assemblages, including how humans mediate hybridisation when it is *not* seamless.

This project explores hybridisation between physical and virtual spaces (Chapter 5) but also via public and private (Chapter 6), whilst recognising that the public and private are not absolute categories (see Sheller and Urry 2003). I contend that hybridisation of physical and digital spaces in particular leads to a more embodied, phenomenological experience of technology, and this involvement of humans with technology impacts on the social construction of space. New developments in technology have made hybridity a key feature of contemporary culture, with particular relevance for how identities and behaviour are produced online, offline, and in combination.<sup>20</sup> Peter-Paul Verbeek (2015) argues that humans and

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<sup>20</sup> Similarly, whereas the ‘gay world’ was once something that could be metaphorically entered into (Chauncey 1994), queerness is now more entangled with quotidian life.

technologies cannot be located in two separate realms but need to be understood in their interrelations, and Graham and Warf (2009: 2) suggest that the interfacing of everyday life and virtual worlds has rewired our material landscapes. This approach builds upon work on technological mediation by Don Ihde (1990), who influentially argued that technologies help to shape the relations between humans and world, as well as Roger Silverstone, who showed the central importance of different forms of technological media – first television (1994) and then personal computing (2005) – on everyday life and interpersonal communications. Christine Hine (2015) goes as far as to argue that the internet has become ‘embedded’ in non-virtual activities, ‘embodied’ via human actions, and made ‘everyday’, through its integration into modern life. Indeed, Howard Rheingold’s (2002: 85) prediction that communication technologies would soon invade the world, with ‘shards of sentient silicon’ lurking inside everything from dashboards to bus stops, is in a sense already occurring. But the outcome can be interpreted not as an invasion but as a generative hybridisation that might cohere new forms of relating. The locative turn bound up in this hybridisation might even help to figuratively ‘queer’ heteronormative spaces.

Gordon and de Souza e Silva’s *Net Locality* (2011) focuses on hybridity as the central concern of contemporary digital technology. They argue that contrary to earlier cyberspace debates, the internet can no longer be so easily demarcated from the world in which we live. Digital networks are not separate from ‘real life’ but overlay it, and it can no longer be argued that mobile phone use disconnects users from their immediate physical location, or their social interaction within that locale.<sup>21</sup> Their term ‘networked locality’ is a reasonable definition of what happens to people and societies where everyone is located and locatable, and what corporations, governments and also individuals do with this information. Like Dana boyd’s (2010) ‘networked publics’ – a theorisation of public life restructured by networked technologies, resulting in a new imagined community and new space – Gordon and de Souza e Silva’s theory is spatially rooted. They are vocal advocates for the continued emphasis on space as a dynamic and subjective entity, including in digital form. Notwithstanding their assumption that spatial deterritorialisation was universally a source of anxiety in late 20<sup>th</sup> century cyber debates (as this chapter has

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<sup>21</sup> This echoes Miller and Slater’s (2000) argument that the virtual is not dichotomised from the ‘real’ world.

shown, many enthused about the potential of new spaces that could be conceived), they present a persuasive argument for the ongoing relevance of spatial considerations. By arguing that ‘the dominant metaphor for the web [has] changed from virtuality to mobility’ (8), they show that connectivity benefits from both locational flexibility and rooted spatial processes as complementary processes rather than forces working in tension. Nevertheless, I contend that these forces actually can produce a tension, manifested in lived experience. Exploring the embodied experiences of participants hybridising locational flexibility and spatial rootedness will illuminate some of these tensions.

Central to the growth of digital-physical hybridisation is the use of mobile phones, which come ever closer to becoming the dominant platform for online connectivity. Handheld devices will soon overtake static devices as the primary medium used for internet access; in the US mobile internet access already exceeds desktop access (Murtagh 2014), and mobile devices are now the primary form of communication in the global North (Rheingold 2002; Troxler 2011; Rainie and Wellman 2012). Smartphones are the end result of a progressive blending or folding in of telecommunications, computing and broadcasting into single entities in a process of technological convergence (Gate 2000; in practice see for example Ibrahim 2010). Aided by internet capacity across geographical territory, the locational mobility of smartphones liberates the user from fixity. Contrary to anxieties raised by Kenneth Gergen (2003) and Sherry Turkle (2011) regarding the implications of virtual (un)reality on face-to-face communication, boyd’s ‘networked publics’ and de Souza e Silva’s ‘net locality’ prove that an app user does not ‘escape’ or stop attending to their physical proximate environment, even if, as Robert Payne claims, mobile devices presume divided attention as the preferred mode of engagement (2012). In fact, counter to suggestions that digital technology is leading to a loss of our ‘sense of place’, electronic media practices can actually make a sense of place plural, with the human agent existing both in physical space and a technologically-mediated ‘second’ space (Moores 2003: 15). Thus the app user adds to their embodied reality *virtual* connections with other people and places.<sup>22</sup> This distinction resonates with queer debates regarding the importance of embodiment in online space (Mowlabocus

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<sup>22</sup> This can hold in reverse, too: today’s smartphones contribute to an embodied experience from which they can influence a user’s affective realm.



2010a; 2010b; McGlotten 2012; 2015; Mowlabocus et al. 2016). If we recognise the ability of the internet as a *broker* for embodied connections, the threat of unintentionally disconnecting from local territory is neutralised. Space again finds potential as something that can be practiced, imagined and differently figured for each of its inhabitants.

The theory of ‘continuous connectivity’ developed by Matthew Wilson (2014: 535) argues that digital spatial media is structured by the assumption that users will be ‘always connected’. Jason Farman (2012) similarly centres mobile technology as the mediator of contemporary digital space. Doreen Massey’s argument that to map space is to constitute it (2005) can be understood in digital terms via Farman’s mobile interface theory, which argues that locative media generates a co-dependency between space and identity, producing space as a something embodied and social: ‘how we locate ourselves in space affects every aspect of the cultural objects we create and interact with’ (2012: 19). Farman theorises a ‘sensory-inscribed’ body as the lens for our interactions with mobile interfaces because embodiment is always a spatial practice. The co-constitutive relationship between different spaces and bodies is evidenced by the way technology users negotiate public-private binaries through their digital media, for example to distance themselves from others when commuting from between work and home. Farman contextualises space-making as an outcome of mobile technology through the practice of ‘sexting’, communicating sexual material via mobile phone to construct an embodied space even when correspondents are not physically proximate. In exploring sexting only fleetingly, Farman does not fully interrogate its implications on digital space, and locative dating apps are absent from his analysis altogether. We can nonetheless see how this format might synthesise particularly complex spaces based on Farman’s approach to digital interfaces.

Crucially, Farman argues that in an age of ubiquitous computing in which our human-computer interactions become almost unconscious, dichotomies between ‘real’ and ‘virtual’ are unhelpful in informing our embodied experience of hybridised space, especially now that the digital environment offers us such a liveable and embodied experience. Yet Farman’s call for the erasure of this virtual distinction leaves the implications of the blended space unaddressed. The hybridisation of

physical and virtual certainly unlocks potential for technological progress, but to elide all distinction between the planes risks losing what often makes this process interesting. My own project seeks to contextualise hybridisation through its *constitutive* processes and its spatial and temporal variables. My aim is specifically *to* expose the constructedness of space via its navigation by users. Farman also stops short of defining what it is precisely scholars or users should be celebrating about the multiplicity of hybrid space. Presumably he has in mind technological advance, but what this might look like goes untheorised – perhaps understandably, due to its opacity. Yet qualitative research with app users could provide exactly the kind of phenomenologically experienced hybridity that Farman’s argument omits, relying as it does on broader conceptualisation of locative media.

Certainly, incorporating hybridisation in sexuality and space studies further diversifies the scope of this field of research. With over 3 billion internet users worldwide (Hewson and Stewart 2016), the internet has for many become ‘part of everyday life and sexuality’ (Johansson 2007: 118), and hybridised experiences of sex and sexuality should be central to theorising digital futures. For example, the spatial context of sex work, physically located in urban red-light districts, has been challenged by, and forced to negotiate with, increasingly sophisticated online spaces in which individuals and companies can sell sex (Sanchez 2004; Sanders 2015; Hubbard et al. 2016). A sociotechnical account of how a user ‘leaves’ a locative dating app shows how online space impacts on lived practice (Brubaker et al. 2014). The overlap between pornography and home videos is progressively blurring as societies increasingly crowdsource online content. We see, then, that sexed bodies are constructed through social and cultural entanglements as well as through different spaces and places (Johnston and Longhurst 2009: 159). These spaces can be online, offline, or both simultaneously.

This section has shown how technological hybridisation challenges the assumption that digital space is predicated on transcending borders, boundaries and geography to an ‘Othered’ cyberspace. Instead, it overlays physical environments with virtual connectivity. This conceptual shift to hybridised space has been theorised by scholarship exploring continuously networked digital locality (Graham and Warf 2009; Gordon and de Souza e Silva 2011), the networked publics of online social

networks (boyd 2010), computing as a practice of embodied space in a digital age (Farman 2012) and even the ‘promiscuity’ of media in mediating intimate relations (Payne 2014). I draw from these literatures in geography, sociology and technology studies convincing arguments about the way that mobile technology and locative media are changing socialisation in urban space in the context of *general* populations. However, despite their disciplinary differences they share a broadly theoretical bent that invites new applied interventions which I hope to progress in this project, principally the ‘locative turn’ within digital-physical hybridisation. These theories of hybridisation and embodiment are not in themselves predicated on queer terms, but do offer intriguing new frameworks for evaluating queer practices and spaces. We now turn to locative media to examine its particular relevance in male-male encounter, its impact on cruising and its relationship with community.

## **II. Locative Media**

Until relatively recently the spatiality of media processes attracted little attention from geographers (Barnett 2009: 450; see also Doran 2014), but through mobile 3G, 4G and wifi, the internet is more closely laid onto ‘real’ life than ever before. This provokes questions about how new types of techno-mediated reality configure how people inhabit the spaces in which they live. After sketching out the contemporary context of online ‘dating’ – a catch-all term that includes social and sexual, and fleeting and longer-term, relations – I investigate popular locative apps including Grindr and Tinder, showing that associated critical research has tended to cluster around issues of online identity and self-presentation more than practical experiences of embodied use. The thesis aims to contribute a new voice to this emerging scholarship.

Since the launch of the world wide web in 1991, the internet has been able to somewhat overcome the obstacle of physical distance through virtual connection (see, for example, Wellman et al. 2001). Yet it now also brokers real-life connection, aided by mobile phones that liberate the internet user from physical fixity. Triangulating spatial coordinates, mobile signal and satellite position through GPS allows a mobile device to connect the user amongst a matrix of others similarly configured to specific online networks, including same-sex encounter. By marrying communication with

location, the technology facilitates vastly diverse platforms, including location-based games, geocaching,<sup>23</sup> surveillance technologies and experiential mapping (Hamilton 2009: 393). Locative media has also been harnessed for artistic projects (for example *Wanna Play?* by Dries Verhoeven, premiered in 2014), location-based information databases (RightMove 2015) and activity monitors (MapMyRide 2013). These are all platforms that utilise location services beyond simple mapping (Zickuhr 2013), even though, unlike earlier theories of virtual reality, locative media is rooted in concretely spatial terms. Web users are, after all (and despite the imaginative efforts of early cyberqueer utopias), embodied in physical space (Phillips and Cunningham 2007). Hybridisation operates here to synthesise relationships established online with physical meetings offline.

The internet has brokered relationships, sex and casual dating at an astonishing rate in recent years. In a contemporary moment in which an estimated 27% of new relationships in the UK now start online (Mintel 2015; see also Hogan et al. 2011), a locative function is the next logical step for bridging formerly placeless virtual space into a conceivable and local realm for users. Prestage et al. (2015) find that amongst MSM in Australia, meeting partners online, whether for casual or romantic relationships, has now replaced other methods of encounter *across all age groups*. Whilst *non-locative* dating websites have been the focus of some critical interest (Peter and Valkenburg 2007; Gunter 2008; Ashford 2009; Fraser 2009; Finkel et al. 2012; Rosenfeld and Thomas 2012), the relative youth of locative technology means critical approaches are less established, but the new configurations presented by these technological assemblages provide generative avenues for research.

### **Male-male locative dating apps**

Gay and bisexual men in particular have historically been early adopters of internet technology, comprising a large percentage of online dating and chat communities from the 1990s onwards ‘in disproportionate numbers compared to other social groups’ (Mowlabocus 2010a: 3; see also Campbell 2004; Skeggs et al. 2004; McGlotten 2013; Grov et al. 2013). Now-defunct Yahoo email list servers were

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<sup>23</sup> Geocaching harnesses GPS location for users to hide (and find) physical caches outdoors, building interactive relationships between online networks and physical locations.

hugely popular in the 1990s for LGBTQ individuals to communicate online with similarly identified users (Turner 2003). Many of these users were isolated from LGBTQ support networks and found themselves part of an online community for the first time. In contrast to static dating portals (Match.com 1995; Gaydar 1999; PlanetRomeo 2002), locative dating apps on mobile devices make a virtue of their portability and immediacy. The reason why queer locative apps make for such an interesting research tool is because they can productively answer some of the questions we have about how technology is embedded in everyday use, as well as generating ideas about how queer space might be practiced in new ways using the internet. Queer locative apps might even represent, in some modest way, a response to the cultural positioning of non-heterosexuals as somehow ‘out of place’ (Cresswell 1996).

Locative media now dominate online socialisation for male-male encounter. Taking my lead from Collins and Drinkwater (2016: 8), my own survey of the Apple App Store evidences the popularity of queer dating apps today, with 209 same-sex searching products available to download. Popular locative apps include Grindr (founded in 2009), Scruff (2010) and Hornet (2013) for MSM, as well as Tinder (2012), conceived as a heterosexual app with same-sex search functions now proving popular, and more niche offerings including Recon (fetish) and 3ndr (multiple partners). These platforms all stake a claim towards transforming dating and networking via real-time GPS tracking. Shrewdly bisecting mobile technology, proximity tracking, urban space and networking in a novel grid format, Grindr alone now counts over 10 million users across 196 countries worldwide. Two million users check into Grindr every day, spending an average of 54 minutes surfing the app (Parks-Ramage 2016). Half of MSM men surveyed in Scotland, UK reported using male-male locative apps every week (Frankis et al. 2013). By some measures, 71% or more of MSM meet sexual partners via locative apps (Chow et al. 2016), in a global context where same-sex relationships remain criminal offences in 74 countries including Iran, Iraq and Afghanistan, where homosexuality is punishable by death (ILGA 2016; Amnesty 2017). These platforms are shifting in public consciousness from niche interests, little talked about with friends or colleagues, to the mainstream: even if, in the case of Grindr in particular, popular opinion remains rather mixed (Trebay 2014; Beusman and Sunderland 2015; Greenberg 2016). What is clear is

that their growth continues apace, with critical exploration of how they influence queer social and sexual behaviours yet to catch up.

Locative media also overlay place with sociality (Hjorth 2013). Grindr, for example, develops the geolocational functionality of the early locative platform Foursquare (2009) but, instead of enhancing social networking between existing friends, Grindr uses GPS as a tool for *new* localised encounters. Grindr allows the user to locate other men subscribed to the product and currently online in the neighbourhood, aggregating a grid of results based on spatial proximity. The result is a visual smorgasbord of other users ordered by distance. Grindr creator Joel Simkhai's targeting to MSM, along with the striking visual production of a grid of male profiles, invariably led to users from its inception utilising the product as a dating and hook-up app, and only secondarily as a social app. Competitor Tinder, meanwhile, chooses not to reveal precise user proximity (a deliberate move, perhaps, given cultural assumptions surrounding female vulnerability in relation to locational specificity) but instead boasts a 'swipe' facility, allowing users to flick their thumb in a satisfyingly haptic gesture to the left of the homescreen to reject or to the right to accept the user as someone they would be willing to 'match' with. Each clickable profile thumbnail profile reveals vital statistics, a short biography, and a photograph, as well as options to interact: chat, send pictures, share locations or block the contact. What these apps share is an invitation to the user to log partner preferences as if products – their height and weight, ethnicity, body type, HIV status and their varying propensity for relationships, friendships or sex. These profiles are re-ordered as the user journeys between the variable urban densities of, say, a shopping centre, office or riverside.

The architecture of these apps supports differences in intended use. Even the visual layout of Tinder suggests a playful and dyadic experience, with just one match displayed at a time. Grindr on the other hand presents a grid of users who are currently online, listed in order of how close they are to the user (see Figure 2.1). This ranking promulgates a sense of immediacy conducive to *jouissance*: a blissful state that, it has been argued, is almost untranslatable (Rabaté 2003: 103), but which has been coded as a transgressive, particularly queer pleasure (Edelman 2004: 27; see also Bersani 1987). Whilst Tinder's neutral logo could operate for almost anything,

Grindr's mask logo connotes a more subversive or fetishistic product (see Figure 2.2), matching its reputation in popular culture as conducive to more casual 'hook-ups'. These apps clearly utilise technological sophistication to mediate sexual encounters in new ways, with an emphasis not just on proximity but also visuality and consumption. Kane Race (2015: 271) captures the distinctive qualities of these spaces when he argues that apps are 'participating in the construction of a specific sphere of sociability and amiable acquaintance among men in urban centres that prioritizes sex as a principle mechanism for connection and sociability'. The specificity of this environment makes it a generative site for study.

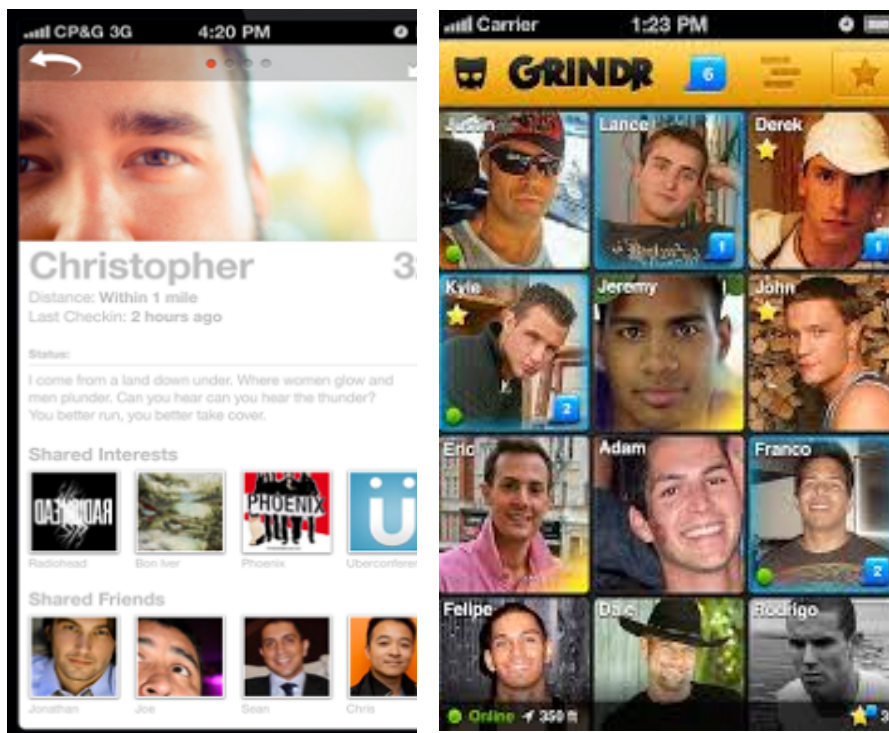


Figure 2.1. *Tinder (2016) and Grindr (2016) homescreens (publicity material/models).*



Figure 2.2. *Tinder (2016) and Grindr (2016) logos.*

Grindr's logic is its straightforwardness. If a user is not interested in chatting with you online, you can move onto another of the numerous thumbnails in search of success (Woo 2013: 13). Like 'selfies' and the visually-oriented Instagram, these apps feed into the 'pervasive creation of digital presence and content in our contemporary society' (Ibrahim 2015: 2). Further, if, as Laura Mulvey has argued (1975), to look is to desire, these apps are a logical digital iteration of exactly that desire, or even a kind of scopophilia: a sexual pleasure derived from viewing. There is a clear design emphasis on the visual and the graspable, with users' faces (and often bodies) lined up for consumption. In fact, evidence suggests users can become fatigued by the textual demands required for interaction on the app (Brubaker 2014: 2); as a result, picture exchange carries a yet-greater cachet for time-pressed users. The emphasis on visuality is deliberate: as founder Joel Simkhai argues: 'Grindr is a very, very visual experience... I'm not really a big believer in words' (interviewed by Trebay 2014). It is clear that the app designer here is structuring and influencing the social relations that occur in and through these apps: indeed, Simkhai is expressing how he intends users to experience the app *and each other*. But in a departure from Mulvey's theory, in which the *female* screen icon is the object of desire or the looked-at object, Grindr and its competitors offer a version in which everyone subscribed to the app is simultaneously the (male) spectator and the (male) object of the male gaze: what Yoel Roth (2015: 2120) argues is a 'reciprocal being-looked-at-ness'.

The way in which these platforms allow men to see and also be seen echoes the flâneur of the past who wandered not just to view others but to share a gaze (Sedgwick 1985; Ingram 1997). Unique to these apps therefore is a levelling of status because all users share sexual orientation by virtue of their presence on (or, if we are thinking in terms of virtual space, 'in') the platform. However, the levelling mutual gaze does not indemnify against hierarchy. The apps' fetishisation of visuality fosters a looks-based currency amongst users that seems distant from earlier aims of online space as somewhere where sexual minorities could find information and community. The developers who inform the architecture of each app actively try to construct certain forms of relationality. However, these forms are not imposed on users wholesale because different users vary in their appetite for complicity and resistance. Indeed, even at an individual level a user may behave in a certain way at one time,



for example consuming the platform in the format intended by its architects, and then changing their approach later, by resisting shared social codes promulgated by the app such as chatting to other users with no intention of actually meeting.

What makes these apps so fascinating is that the provocative visuality of their presentation, far from being satisfying on its own terms, is tied up in rhetoric of users on the move. Because the mobile phone is a communicative device, it already lends itself to the process of negotiating sexual desire among potential partners (Goluboff 2015). But by being hosted on mobile devices, and with the procedure for meeting other users for dates or sexual encounters so simplified, the apps further communicate a narrative of immediacy and efficiency based on locational proximity. Contrary to earlier cyberqueer visions of the domain as something disembodied and free from the constraints of the human body, locative apps foreground embodiment and physical encounter. The intense sociality promulgated by these apps resonates with the argument that locative media represent a ‘multiplication and complication of intimate relations, the promiscuous mingling of self with other, self with self, user with interface’ (Payne 2014: 3). Payne does not ask how spatially rooted this multimodal ‘promiscuity’ is, yet the striking popularity of queer locative apps suggests that locality has become a key concern in queer digital spaces, far removed from historically ‘othered’ cyberspace. As Grindr’s (2015) press page declares: “0 Feet Away” isn’t just a cute slogan we print on our T-shirts’. Braquet and Mehra (2007: 5) have argued that rather than use the internet as a space which satisfactorily contains friendships or relationships, users are increasingly viewing it as a ‘means to an end’ to generate physical meetings. That motivation is writ large in these platforms’ emphasis on embodied encounter. Far from a wholesale move to online life, locative networks pivot *more*, rather than less, on physically brokered connection. In so doing they also re-territorialise spaces normally coded as heterosexual, because using the app overlays queer space on normative terrain. The hybridising abilities of these apps thwart the dominant social reality of heteronormativity, enabling the user to queer dominant norms through conceptual repositioning.

As an emergent and developing technology, locative media has yet to garner extensive scholarship exploring embodiment, everyday practice, or sexuality and space. Jason Farman (2012: 57-67) explores the extent to which online *social* media

facilitate intimacy, and Adriana de Souza e Silva (2013: 118) performs a similar analysis in terms of social networking, but neither discusses internet dating or locative dating. Sharif Mowlabocus has argued that there is more generally a dearth of research pertaining to the academic intersection of queer culture and cyberspace (2010a), which I believe has shifted in a few short years as scholars have increasingly investigated queer online spaces. Studies pertaining to issues of queer identity and self-presentation in online space are now well established. This is unsurprising, given that ever since avatars were used to represent identity (Turkle 1995), image and self-presentation have circulated as traits conditioned online. Queer explorations often build on Judith's Butler's work on performativity (1990; 1993) to focus on issues of identity, especially online representation and self-presentation (Birnholtz et al. 2014; Blackwell et al. 2014; O'Neill 2014; Miller 2015; Phillips 2015). However, given that for users of these apps, 'geography is the primary determinant of visibility to others' (Blackwell et al. 2013: 5), explorations of *how* users navigate the hybridised space between digital networking programs and physical space remain under-explored.

Where dating app scholarship does explore spatial concerns, app users' relationships with their cities are often in a North American context (*pace* Tudor 2012; Race 2015; Mowlabocus 2016; Giraud 2016) and do not focus on everyday app use. Sharif Mowlabocus's (2010a: 195) examination of non-locative portal Gaydar slightly predated locative platforms, but does highlight the spatial conditions of this next generation of apps: 'while these services may look similar to conventional dating/sex websites, they maintain a far closer relationship with the spaces through which users move'.<sup>24</sup> This consideration of locative space-making is welcome. What remains under-analysed are the spaces made and practiced by queer internet users, and how these spaces overlay physical terrain. Further, whilst the sexual implications of technology are being considered – Grov et al. 2013, for example, show that MSM locative media users have more sexual partners – sociological interpretations lag behind public health scholarship. Given that these apps represent a whole new sociotechnical make-up that goes beyond merely online cruising, further consideration would be valuable. As Kane Race (2015: 255) points out: 'we are faced

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<sup>24</sup> Although these apps can also develop relationships with more geographically removed spaces: Hornet's 'passport' feature allows users to communicate with users in anywhere across the world by typing in a chosen location.

with a significant transformation in practices of sexual community and genres of sexual interaction that requires acknowledgement, understanding and analysis'. It is to understanding this cultural shift which my own project seeks to contribute. We turn now to consider how cruising practices have spatialised the city over time, and how locative apps might impact on these relations.

### **Cruising meets queer locative media**

Not only are queer dating apps a useful vehicle through which to interrogate ideas of spatial hybridity, they can also act as a framing device for thinking about urban space specifically. One way to answer the call by Gavin Brown (2008: 1217) to 'study sexualities as they are lived across the whole city' is by considering digitally-enabled cruising. Cruising refers to the practice of seeking a sexual partner in public. It is usually understood in physical terms, but it does not have to be: it can refer to an erotic but fleeting shared gaze between men (Turner 2003; Cavanagh 2010), and to online partner seeking. Cruising is a fitting example of Lefebvre's (1991: 87) socially constructed approach to space because it shows that spaces do not have 'mutually limiting boundaries' but instead can be layered. Thus a park for the 'mainstream' population can be queered by cruising to also provide a public sex environment for the cruiser 'in which to hide and find intimacy' (Ingram 2010: 264). Research has considered the impact of digital technology on cruising in terms of static online fora (Turner 2003; Dean 2009; Mowlabocus 2010a), but theorisations regarding technology's 'locative turn' are limited (*pace* Woo 2013; Race 2015). Kane Race (2015: 255) rightly argues that any account trying to understand the digitally-mediated sexual culture currently developing as merely the newest iteration of cruising 'misses something important about the specificity of the sociotechnical arrangements that shape its contours and conventional forms'. This project contends that constructed digital spaces provide the context in which to practice much of what cruising expedites: the non-procreative, liberatory sexual experimentation known as *jouissance*.<sup>25</sup> What is less clear is the form in which these constructed spaces are realised for queer app users: virtual, embodied, or hybridised.

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<sup>25</sup> In the spirit of Lacan and Edelman, but without necessarily literalising the more radical anti-futurity of Edelman's theorisation (*No Future*, 2004).

Cruising cohered as an urban practice in the late-19<sup>th</sup> century, although the city has long provided a backdrop for men who have sex with men.<sup>26</sup> Cruising was first documented in the metropolitan centers of San Francisco, Amsterdam and London, but has also been studied in cities as scattered as Austin, Texas (McGlotten 2013) and mining townships in South Africa (Elder 1995; see also Tucker 2016). Long theorised in terms of his uneasy relationship with criminality and liminality, the cruiser can nevertheless be queered as a counter-normative radical who practices sex in public *contra* the hegemonic pressure of a society forcibly ‘constructing national heterosexuality’ (Berlant and Warner 1998: 553) as the dominant and accepted format for sexual life. Imbued with a complex and unique personal geography, cruising has been mythologised as an almost celebratory practice that subverts the assimilationist expectations of the regulatory heteronormative culture. That throughout queer history cruising has been celebrated as something magical, or thrilling in its transgression or alterity (Dean 2009; Gandy 2012), is evidence of a tendency to nostalgia and romanticism characteristic of critical analyses of cruising. However, Berthold Schoene (2011: 214) rightly points out that historically, queer sex in public places *necessarily* existed to circumvent the criminalisation of homosexuality, as well as providing a space for queer sociality. Today, though, more assimilative forces shape queer male intimacies. Cruising is not transhistorical: ‘like everything else, it is circumscribed by any number of social determinant and cultural and social specificities’ (Turner 2003: 9). What, then, might cruising look like in the so-called ‘digital age’?<sup>27</sup>

Having been unequivocally embodied for so long, cruising is obviously reinterpreted through technology that restructures the practice, but not unrecognisably. Anonymity is central to the thrill of cruising (Delany 1999; Bersani 2002), so apps face a challenge in faithfully reprising cruising when their very architecture requires legitimate identity: most platforms require email or social media verification, reducing (albeit not eliminating) the presence of fake profiles. The task of mutual

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<sup>26</sup> But less so women. As Turner (2003) notes, scholarship on female cruising is limited. The flâneuse is however explored by Wilson (1992); Munt (1998), and Elkin (2016).

<sup>27</sup>The term ‘digital age’ is not unproblematic: many reject this foregrounding of the internet as the defining feature of 21<sup>st</sup> century society against other characteristics of society (benevolent or otherwise) including capitalism and hyper-industrialism (see for example Fuchs 2012). Nevertheless, the (subjectively defined) ‘success’ of either of these characteristics cannot be dissociated from the influence of digital technology.

identification, however, is solved using Grindr and its imitators because the visibility of potential partners is clear: you are quite literally both on the same (digital) page, although these online platforms can also replicate offline machinations of deception and dishonesty, muddying the water of a seemingly straightforward online space for encounter. Further, location is built into the very architecture of the app: when you spontaneously log in in an unfamiliar neighbourhood, the discovery of potential partners is mediated by their geographical proximity rather than an unplanned meeting in the street. In fact, visiting a town centre or new high street for the first time and loading the Grindr app makes for a curiously postmodern pastiche of cruising, parsing as it does the likeminded from the uninterested. But these apps also mark a departure from the spontaneity of traditional ‘analogue’ cruising. Dating apps allow the user to filter potential matches by age, body type (‘bear’,<sup>28</sup> ‘jock’, ‘geek’, ‘mature’) and distance. Thus whilst cruising in a digital age sidesteps potentially embarrassing false starts with non-queer subjects, it also engineers out the unpredictability and *diversity* of potential street-level encounters in an embodied context. This tendency towards categorisation echoes Sander de Ridder’s (2013: 5) queer analysis of social networking services, which notes that despite queer theory’s push for anti-normative and anti-identitarian projects, social networking sites constitute problematic ‘fixing tools *par excellence*’ that tend to reinforce gender categorisation.

Locative media are by no means the first interventions in analogue cruising practices; consider, for example, late 20<sup>th</sup>-century accounts of internet-relay chat (IRC) offering a new ‘virtual gay bar’ (Shaw 1997). Locative media do however replace desktop computing with mobility, and physical cruising with digital scoping. But cruising requires a geographical specificity, if only to have something to transgress, and in comparison to earlier static online social networks, locative apps do more closely echo the spatial considerations of real-life cruising practices in the Lefebvrian sense of the urban terrain as site of encounter (1991). This novel hybridity of locative media is exemplified by time-space compression across distant territories: someone waking up in New York can exchange photos with someone in a nightclub in Tel Aviv, in real-

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<sup>28</sup> Commonly referring to hairier, larger-bodied or more homomale men, but subjectively interpreted; as Yoel Roth (2015: 2122) argues, ‘defining these terms any more precisely than as sexual stereotypes is a task best left to the imaginations of individual users’.

time. Thus these apps allow users to make use of *the conceptual space created by their communication* as well as the space created by their embodied social or sexual encounters. The qualities of this hybridisation deserve exploration because whilst cruising inheres a larger queer resistance via its transgressive qualities (Patton 1997; Berlant and Warner 1998; Warner 2002; G. Brown 2007), it seems unclear whether locative media can do the same. We see through cruising that queer space has the potential to be disruptive, but locative apps cannot maintain the same political dimensions of cruising insofar as the latter can parallel political action aimed at ‘taking back’ public space (G. Brown 2007). Locative technology does on the other hand potentialise queer disruption by allowing users to remediate space in the interests of challenging or disrupting heteronormative codes.

The centrality of ‘looking’ in cruising resonates in contemporary digital terms with the male gaze so clearly in operation on the MSM dating apps previously outlined in this chapter. These apps also invite queerer sexual encounters than we might at first assume, because they do not readily resolve into dyadic encounter, instead networking multiple partners and diverse sexual practice via platforms like Recon, an app that matches fetish fans. Apps also provide an online portal for facilitating offline ‘chemsex’, combining of sex and performance-enhancing recreational drugs. But whilst cruising is valorised in queer scholarship (Delany 1999; Dean 2009; Muñoz 2009) it perpetuates its own inequalities, and these should not go unquestioned. As Johan Andersson (2012: 1083) argues:

While I am sympathetic to [cruising’s] utopian claims (which after all tend to be deployed strategically to convey a sex-positive message and to counteract homophobic representation of public sex) any implicit suggestion that cruising is a democratic sexual practice has to be critically engaged with.

Just because spaces are public does not make them egalitarian or level in terms of selection and inclusion, and this uneven access transfers to hybrid imaginings too. Tudor (2012), Woo (2013) and Artrip (2013) all testify to looks-based hierarchies that structure MSM dating apps. These are hierarchies that take in not just physical appearance but judgments about age, ethnicity and socioeconomic status. These platforms therefore seem to induce new forms of vulnerability through highly categorised (and categorisable) forms of voyeurism. Simkhai’s (2014) claims about the

liberatory potential of Grindr may therefore be tempered by speaking in depth with some of its real-life users.

### **Sacrificing privacy in locative media**

Normative codes governing behaviour do not necessarily constrain the potential of virtual or hybridised space, but contemporary locative apps are unlikely to be free from the effects of real-life social codes, and this impact spreads far beyond the online replication of real-life hierarchies. Commercial developers dominate gay men's digital culture (Mowlabocus et al. 2016: 5). For example, Pride and Mardi Gras parades, once the expression of political resistance, are now sponsored by Grindr and Manhunt (Norman 2015). Grindr and Tinder are examples of 'freemium' software (Pujol 2010), offering a no-cost download with optional paid-for enhanced features, with user data packaged and marketed to third parties by the app developer. In effect, the users are 'sold' as the product (Scholz 2013: 2). This commodification provokes questions regarding privacy and security, as well as the role of users as complicit data subjects. John Campbell (2004: 663) for example uses his study of pre-locative internet forums to criticise the 'Janus-faced' nature of male-male networking sites, which present themselves as inclusive communities for users who visit them for information and socialisation whilst simultaneously presenting themselves as surveilling entities to corporate clients. This builds on work tracking the development of gay media outlets online into corporate conglomerates (Gamson 2003: 258). Whilst there are reasons to celebrate the liberatory potential of the internet as envisioned by cyberqueer advocates, there is also potential cause for concern in terms of privacy and commodification.

The assumption that the internet is something open and neutral is further complicated by sociotechnical motives underpinning MSM locative media. Yoel Roth (2015: 425) argues: 'as gay targeted social media have matured technologically, they have also become more restrictive of the types of content their users are permitted to share'. Their tendency towards normativity sees them prohibit expressions of non-normativity, censoring not just nudity but also allusions to queerer lifestyle practices in user profiles such as drug use or group sex. This echoes a history of limited visibility for queer life outside of 'safe' assimilative or homonormative gay

identities (Duggan 2003; Brown 2008; Ng 2013). The logical counter-argument to Roth's critique of app commodification is that the content of queer apps must, after all, fulfill rather narrow and conservative criteria for clearance by hosts Apple Store and Google Play. Whilst Roth is unconvinced by this capitulation to corporate requirements, the argument remains a valid one, because these 'hosts' dictate the commercial success of any app developed for mainstream consumption. Roth's discomfort may stem from the rhetoric of inclusivity from apps predicated solely on increasing membership. But the fact remains that these sociotechnical processes are two-way, and users who feel they are finally represented in a normally restrictive sexual landscape (whether predicated upon age, body type, or ethnicity) may willingly participate in processes of commodification that grant them that visibility. They may even sacrifice their personal information to do so. Beyond Roth's critique, little work addresses the commercial interests at work in MSM locative media, despite extensive scholarship on commercial interests in older, static queer platforms (Campbell 2004; Mowlabocus 2010a; 2010b). It is clear that a privacy tradeoff is built into locative apps that make it a prerequisite for users to sacrifice their private data in order to access technologically-mediated sociality.

What is less clear is how users perceive their privacy and security in the larger commercial assemblage, given the regularity of high-profile privacy leaks. Heterosexual journalist Nico Hines was forced to apologise after writing a 'Grindr-bait' article publicising the identities of Olympic athletes using Grindr at the Rio 2016 Olympic games, including some users for whom homosexuality was a punishable offence in their home country (Stern 2016). US Republican State Assembly member Randy Boehning was 'outed' on Grindr despite voting against legislation for minority equality, including LGBTQ minorities (Moskowitz 2015), and Puerto Rican senator Roberto Arango denied using Grindr despite leaked 'selfie' photos identifying him (O'Connor 2011). Conceptualisations of public and private spaces become fluid in digital formats, and what would once be constituted as private is now frequently broadcast in a more public, digitally mediated setting. The increasing ubiquity of mobile technologies have blurred boundaries between work and home as discrete and separate spatial environments for different activities, which generates clashes between cybersexual activities and physical location. A practice like sexting, an exchange constructed in an intimate virtual sphere, can be indulged



anywhere, including schools, workplaces or public spaces. Negotiating this public/private dichotomy in an everyday context echoes queer struggles to ‘pass’ as heterosexuals in the workplace in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but compared to passing, the public/private negotiation charted via apps is more of a luxury because we might reasonably expect these boundaries to be recognised and adhered to in ‘real life’, only to find that they frequently are not. The fact that they are so routinely flouted suggests that media users are wilfully renegeing on normative social codes in public or ‘work’ space.

Manipulating this public/private boundary, artist Dries Verhoeven’s *Wanna Play?* installation (2014) publicly projected his conversations with unwitting Grindr punters onto an illuminated screen in a central Berlin square to expose, in the artist’s words, ‘the opportunities and tragedies of a phenomenon in gay culture’ (Verhoeven n.pag). Its controversy and fascination both seemed to stem from the fact that these conversations were broadcast to a heterosexual majority who were invited to consume a minority identity made (temporarily) public.<sup>29</sup> This work tells us as much about how users can subvert the ostensible primary purpose of the app being hacked as it does about how the app is presented for more straightforward consumption. Verhoeven’s installation shifts private, dyadic conversation into the public realm without transgressing any actual rules on behalf of the app developers, and in so doing his critique actually targets the user, rather than the developer, distributor, or wider commercial interests. This exposure reveals as much about the compromised privacy conditions of the networking platform as it does about individual exposure. What studies have not yet pursued is finding the tipping point where users become ‘privacy pragmatists’ (Raynes-Goldie 2010), sacrificing personal information in order to access the positive experiences granted by the locative platform.

### **Locative media as queer community**

Examining scholarship on queer community is important because it evidences the key role of ideas of kinship and community to queer life. One of the central aims of this thesis is to understand the extent to which online, and particularly hybridised

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<sup>29</sup> The outcry from the public, including but not limited to LGBTQ community groups, centered on the co-option of unwitting users; the installation was decommissioned after just five days.

locative platforms, can cohere community or sociality. For the purposes of this research I am especially interested in community as something spatially practiced, because it has often been seen as interchangeable with the physical spaces it is felt to inhabit. Community is a complex set of relations that operates multiply. In social conditions where community is more often figured in the service of hegemonic values than for queer bodies and their potential belonging, consideration of what queer community looks like in physical and digital terms is crucial.

Community implies shared identity, belief, and welfare. Frost and Meyer (2012) argue that a sense of queer community improves health and wellbeing for sexual minorities, which suggests that it is desirable, but other queer critics problematise queer community based on its inevitable shortcomings as a cultural unit.<sup>30</sup> Sanchez et al. (2009: 73) dispute the idea of gay male community as a collective ‘often perceived as accepting of individual differences’, arguing that this is not always borne out in attitudes or behaviour. The gay community also perpetuates restrictions in socio-economic terms, catering to white, middle-class males at the expense of other demographics (Barrett and Pollack 2005). Miranda Joseph (2002) argues that notions of community are valorised unquestioningly, while Jack Halberstam (2005: 154) points out that ‘quests for community are always nostalgic attempts to return to some fantasized moment of union and unity [which] reveals the conservative stakes in community for all kinds of political projects’. Sharif Mowlabocus (2010a: 8) powerfully argues that ‘non-heterosexual people rarely experience community as either naturally occurring or something which they are implicitly a part of’. Further, as Nathaniel Lewis et al. (2015: 1203) note, despite two decades of research into the concept of gay community, the idea of community has often come down to a single unified entity, which masks contingencies in how individuals ‘come to feel included or marginalized within identity-based groups and society at large’. Communities are not always the safe places we might assume; they can be empowering but also silencing (see for example Frye et al. 2014 on the online experiences of black and minority ethnic MSM). This potential for exclusion means that we must take note of which bodies are overlooked when ‘queer community’ is figured as an idealised collective that is portrayed as vulnerable across contemporary cities.

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<sup>30</sup> Which in turn speaks to work critiquing the murky concept of community in terms of governmentality; see Nikolas Rose (2003: 333) on the ‘open circuits of community control’.

Community has historically been identified by its spatial presence because traditional cartographies classified community via queer enclaves, for example Lauria and Knopp's 'gay village' (1985). However, over time scholarship shifted to focus on practices rather than static mapping (Bell and Valentine 1995), which has in turn evolved to theorisation in terms of spatial networks or processes (Castells 2012). Whereas in previous years spatial concentration represented the best way for queer individuals to develop a shared identity or solidarity, now social connectedness in more general terms informs integration. Thus traditional cartographies and the communities they map can be more subjectively reimaged, exemplified for example by Gavin Brown's (2001) exercise in queer cognitive mapping in which gay and bisexual men sketched maps of London's East End based on their experiences of pleasure and danger. The growth of digital technologies diversifies this networked potential yet further. Rather than communities of the past that were based on shared physical space, the internet now allows for individual bonds via shared interests (Frost and Meyer 2012), which can include (but are not limited to) sexual interest and can operate at a geographical remove. In fact, years before the advent of locative media, Zygmunt Bauman (1991) puts his finger on the unusual modern condition of community:

The 'dense sociability' of the past strikes us, in retrospect, as distinct from our own condition not because it contained more friendship than we tend to experience in our own world, but because its world was tightly and almost completely filled with friends and enemies – and friends and enemies only. Little room, and if any then a marginal room only, was left in the life-world for the poorly defined strangers (151).

Locative media introduces a rather more subjective range of 'poorly defined strangers' who might be said to constitute a community within the terms of online platforms. The potential for these strangers to become social or sexual partners, and in turn more significantly representative of community (however subjectively imagined) remains under-theorised. Given that community is such a complicated construct, implying as it does a sense of (subjectively defined) unity whilst negotiating fissures within that unity (as demonstrated by Halberstam, Sanchez and Joseph), the chance to unpick app users' conceptualisations of community as well as its interpretation via locative platforms should prove generative.

Bauman's later claim (2003) that online 'connections' have replaced relationships is equally relevant for consideration of locative media community. Theoretically, online communities are beneficial spaces that foster social networks, or 'webs of personal relationships in cyberspace' (Rheingold 2000: 5) that can grow based on like-minded identities rather than location (Cragg 2000; boyd 2010). Berry, Martin and Yue (2003: 9) argue that new technologies are dichotomous in their humanistic impact: 'the new connectivity enabled by these technologies feeds hopes for global human community at the same time it feeds fears about damage to face-to-face local community'. Locative apps slot into this narrative of dichotomy. One way in which online communities have been defined is as a group of people who 'come together for a particular purpose, and who are guided by policies (including norms and rules) and supported by software' (Preece and Maloney-Krichmar 2005, n.pag), and gathering for a particular purpose is indisputably the primary driver to locative apps, even if that gathering is more often for sexual release than socialisation. Apps can conversely be seen as the latest iteration of the internet as a social 'venue' for queer individuals (Campbell 2004; Ashford 2009; van Doorn 2011), but by bringing location back into consideration, they seem to be re-establishing physical co-presence via digital technology. Male-male locative media can strengthen and extend social-sexual networks, facilitating meetings with likeminded men across a borough, district or city, not least those for whom a queer community is out of reach because of their isolation, whether familial, social or geographical. Of course, the proximity brokered by locative apps is not an automatic predicate for community, but it might at least invite forms of sociality that are mutually advantageous. Given that community is such a contested concept (Schutt 2009; Mowlabocus 2010a; Lewis 2016), perhaps we can think instead about sociality more broadly incorporating some of the fleeting intimacies that are part of locative media's social-sexual structure.

Approaching from a different position, but also critiquing conceptions of community, Nina Wakeford (2002: 23) argues that there is no reason why a group of users who interact frequently online should automatically inhere 'community'. Health research on the other hand tends to uncritically assess online communication between queer minority subjects as representing something *more* concrete, suggesting an uncritical adoption of what Nikolas Rose (2000) argues is community operating as a pernicious

form of governance. For example, Adam et al. (2010: 506) argue that ‘online interactions enable virtual gay communities’. This kind of inference falls prey to the trap that Wakeford (2002) identified of online interaction being indiscriminately adopted as evidence of community. Mowlabocus (2010a; 2016) argues for the validity of gay male internet users as a coherent socio-cultural group worth studying, providing a welcome counterpoint to a research picture dominated by health risks for MSM locative app users. In a clinically oriented critical field, Mowlabocus’ study generates new debates pertaining to the cultural practices of gay locative media. However, like Wakeford he qualifies assumptions that queer internet users can be interpreted as a coherent community, arguing that many LGBTQ individuals experience a sense of non-belonging rather than community, because historically community has usually been predicated on heterosexual kinship. Mowlabocus demonstrates that queer people are more often seen existing ‘outside’ definitions of community rather than ‘in here’ (for example Campbell 2004, Hillis 2009). Certainly, looking beyond the positive familial aura of ‘community’ and scrutinising its normative iteration shows us that it can be interpreted as a rather inflexible site of traditional relations, and thus generates significant exclusions.

Today, disagreement persists regarding whether queer communities, structured online or offline, are concrete, fragmented, imagined or even ‘post-gay’ (coined by Paul Burston in 1994 but developed in spatial terms by Seidman 2002; Collins 2004; Ruting 2008). This is further complicated by the fact that individuals have other ‘identities’ to which they also align themselves, including cultural, familial or ethnic. Berlant and Warner (1998: 554) argue that community is ‘imagined as whole-person, face-to-face relations – local, experiential, proximate and saturating’, but that non-heterosexuals rarely manifest themselves (or are able to manifest themselves) in such forms. The logical solution would be a space to project alternative worlds, but Larry Gross (2007: x) verbalises the perspective of many critics in noting that ‘virtual communities can be gated and restricted as well as open and playful’. Polletta and Jasper (2001: 285) conceptualise a ‘collective identity construction’, which might provide a better route to community in the scenario in question because it only requires a ‘perception of a shared status or relation’, of which Grindr and its stablemates fulfil both the former (MSM) and the latter (seeking connection in some manner). However, the extent to which MSM internet users can truly constitute

community remains contested: the idea that sociality can be achieved erotically is unlikely to be acceptable to heteronormativity. Nevertheless, the growing commitment in geographical research to marginalised or non-normative cultures indicates openness within the discipline to new queer intersections that may well see such a group corralled under the banner of ‘community’, even if the grouping departs from *historical* understandings of the concept.

### **Apps as domesticators of queer space**

Community is impacted by the privatisation of queer public space, and locative media is implicated in this shift. Johnston and Longhurst (2010) define a community as a group of people united by their shared interests irrespective of geographic boundaries. Whilst this definition speaks to the diverse geographies of online subjects linked by their interest rather than proximity, as well as those brought together to queer ‘urban zones’ by their shared self-identification, it performs less well when we try to apply it to a locative media platform such as Grindr, which synthesises the two formats. The app functions as a kind of online gay bar that brings MSM together in virtual space, matching the first part of Johnston and Longhurst’s definition; but it also functions as an agent that ranks membership by geospatial proximity, making an ‘urban zone’ out of any neighbourhood with one or more Grindr user (and now including rural terrain). Yet Johnston and Longhurst’s distancing from ‘urban zones’ as sites of shared identity are indeed also realised via these apps, which offer a route for MSM to meet without having to enter identifiably queer space, de-emphasising the importance of that traditional site for queer sociality.

This socio-spatial transgression is particularly pertinent because it accelerates external factors in the privatisation of queer space. The ability of digital technology to facilitate cybersexual encounter and even long-term relationships online *ab initio* contributes to a larger decentring of queer physical meeting-places. Collins and Drinkwater (2016: 2) are unequivocal in their assessment that the ‘ubiquity of friend and partner search apps on smartphones have reduced the demand for, and thus rendered seemingly redundant, most smaller gay districts’. Where cybersexual practices *are* corporealised, app users are increasingly arranging meetings in advance for private spaces, usually the home (Fraser 2009; Schutt 2009; Giraud 2016). In the

process, they sidestep the risks generated by public cruising as well as negating the need to visit queer entertainment venues to network with potential partners, resulting in an incremental net loss of queerness in those spaces.

This shift to domestic space brings issues of its own, including the incorporation of socialised drug consumption into sexual meetings, often pre-arranged using locative platforms. Drug use amongst MSM is not new: methamphetamine-based ‘circuit parties’ have been a feature of some MSM social settings for many years. ‘Chemsex’ however encapsulates a distinct socio-sexual practice involving the use of the sexually disinhibiting drugs crystal methamphetamine, mephedrone, or GHB/GBL, or a combination of these drugs, for the ‘purpose of facilitating or enhancing sex’ (Sewell et al. 2016). Chemsex is ‘strongly’ associated with group sex, a higher number of different sexual partners, and HIV acquisition (Sewell et al. 2016: 33). Chemsex is also domestically oriented: 77% of deaths occurring from GHB overdose in London in 2015 were in a private home (Hockenhull et al. 2017). Given its interaction with sex, risk and queerness, it comes as no surprise that chemsex has fomented a popular mainstream media ‘moral panic’<sup>31</sup>, with newspapers and television shows dedicated to ‘uncovering’ the practices that appear to some commentators to constitute a queer epidemic of sorts. In calling a chemsex party attendee a ‘survivor’ for example, London’s *Evening Standard* (2015) continues a long history of cultural examination of a supposed deviance in queer practices, most notably echoing media narratives pertaining to the AIDS crisis in the 1980s. Likewise, *Buzzfeed* introduces its exposé of a chemsex ‘crisis’ in London, UK by highlighting the role of chemsex drugs in victims of Stephen Port’s murders (Strudwick 2016). Media coverage piquing public interest is less successful in looking beyond narratives of *acute* drug dependence to assess the more symbiotic relationship that seems to have developed between drugs, technology and private spaces of consumption.

Certainly, queerness continues to occupy, to varying degrees, a marginalised position within society; combined with the cultural memory of HIV/AIDS and institutionalised homophobia, it comes as no surprise that there exists deeply

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<sup>31</sup> A moral panic is defined as the ‘explosions of fear and concern at a particular time and place about a specific perceived threat [...] in each case, a specific agent [is] widely felt to be responsible for the threat’ (Goode and Ben-Yahuda 1994:151).

ingrained inhibitions around queer sex that might be temporarily suspended by drug use. This is not the case for all MSM, and nor is chemsex alien to heterosexual populations.<sup>32</sup> Nevertheless, the advent of locative media seems to have both raised awareness of the chemsex phenomenon through its visibilising tendencies amongst the user base, whilst compounding the practice by acting as a broker for chemsex parties. The combination of these factors means that technologies, chemsex and the private home all triangulate to form a complex relational practice that merits further exploration. Analysis of the locative turn offered by new MSM locative media therefore comes full circle from queer public space, to technological hybridisations, to locative platforms and their impact on queer environments and social life.

## **Conclusion**

By drawing upon literatures in digital technology, sexualities and space, the city and community, I have traced the foundations for a study into how locative media impact on experiences of queer space and queer social life. I have shown that research into locative media would benefit from further qualitative study on MSM app users to build on valuable debates germinating in the research field. Contrary to some of the claims examined in this literature review that suggest internet use and social media decentralise the importance of physical location in exploring queer encounter, I contend that location becomes *mediated* in a hybridised form. My review of existing scholarship also demonstrates that there is a need for this project in order to better understand issues of privacy and risk in locative media with particular reference to users' everyday experiences. There is also scope here to understand how locative media might reinvigorate or even invalidate forms of queer community.

There is a growing imperative to think of ourselves, visualise ourselves and even perform ourselves through technology. The need now is to consider locative media not just in terms of online presentation and affect but through patterns of lived behaviour. Focusing on the *use* of apps will offer greater insight into how technological mediation interplays with lived spatial and social concerns, indicative of

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<sup>32</sup> Notwithstanding the specificity of drugs tied up in chemsex practice, we might equally consider sexual self-medication practices such as Viagra, or a more widely accepted recreational use of alcohol, as disinhibiting tools for sexual performance.



larger socio-cultural themes that are valuable to the larger research picture. My approach recognises, 20 years on, the groundbreaking significance of Bell and Valentine's (1995) queer approach to the city and I intend to progress this practice-based study through a qualitative approach that foregrounds participatory knowledge in a (loosely) humanistic framework. With critical understandings of locative media still limited, this project offers a salient lens through which we can better understand these hybrid space-making practices.

# Chapter 3

## Researching queer lives

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This chapter sets out the methodological framework of this thesis. It first outlines queer theory as an epistemology within which I located my project and lays out my rationale for this approach. I also emphasise the role of locative apps as a benchmark for larger human-technology practices and processes so that findings from this study remain relevant despite technological change.

The second section considers the practicalities of conducting the research. It outlines London as the research setting, men who have sex with men (MSM) as the study sample, and volunteer involvement and snowball sampling as chosen methods for participant recruitment. I explain the rationale for employing in-depth, semi-structured interviews for data collection, and reflect on my positionality and ethical considerations in the field. I also evaluate the role of intimacy in fieldwork, arguing that the intimate space constructed between participants and myself proved valuable in generating rich data and encouraging a sense of ownership of the interview for the participant. However, it also prompted consideration of my duty as a researcher to participants beyond the interview timeline. Finally, I discuss my thematic coding approach to data analysis. An outline of the participant group finishes the chapter, 'setting the scene' for the empirical chapters that follow.

### **Queer methodological approaches**

Queer theory interrogates the relationship between self and other in relation to sexuality and gender in order to destabilise assumed identity categories. It is an epistemology designed to contest the idea, promulgated by hegemonic structures in Western society, that heterosexuality is natural and preferable. In society, a 'whole field of social relations becomes intelligible as heterosexuality, and this privatised sexual culture bestows on its sexual practice a tacit sense of rightness and normalcy' (Berlant & Warner 1998: 554). Categorising sexuality in binary terms allows dominant and subordinate positions to be established by (and for) a normative society

that tends to think in hierarchies of privilege. This allows the ‘continuation of cultural practices that reinscribe different or differential values placed on human life’ (Kobayashi 1997: 3) rather than opening up cultural practices to allow for a more broad understanding of what is accepted as ‘normal’. This project uses male-male locative apps to explore the negotiation between queer and ‘normal’ (i.e. hegemonic) social structures in an examination of queer life and queer space.

The existence of online social networks and virtual communities that interrelate with offline encounters is now widely accepted. My methodological focus contributes a new queer perspective to complement ongoing work in locative media that explores what hybridised digital space might look like for the sexual subject and how it figures in queer life on a daily basis. Queer theory is useful in ‘defamiliarizing and denaturalizing not only the past and the distant but the present’ (Sedgwick 1990: 44), and I wanted to use this idea of defamiliarisation and denaturalisation to highlight the complexity of everyday practices when we look at them with fresh eyes granted by digital mediation. This is an approach that, beyond social constructivist approaches more broadly, centralises the distinctive qualities of sex and sexuality in applied contexts. Purists may have a narrower view of the practical possibilities of queer approaches, especially considering queer theory’s historically theoretical bent, but empirical discovery relies on interrogating precisely these boundaries. I was keen to attend to the broad, even malleable, potential of queer theor(ies) in looking at what are, after all, the human (and digital) practices that rub up against normative sexuality and normative structures. Recognising that debates percolate around whether non-heterosexual practices are necessarily queer if they are not radically disruptive (Halberstam et al. 2005; Halperin 2012), I contend that *lived* experience is key: the phenomenology of sexual identity and practice is where we can best witness its variants. Additionally, in conceptual terms I employ a queer viewpoint as a way of looking at things aslant or ‘athwart’ (Sedgwick 1993: viii): analysis from an angle alert to the disruptive potential of queerness. This provides a different orientation from which to think about queer technology use, both to tell us more about queer male culture but also as a way into thinking about how human interaction with apps constitutes a distinct locative turn within more established hybridised digital-physical networks.

The ontological element of my research deserves consideration too. In the years since Foucault argued in *The History of Sexuality* that talk about sex is used by society as a way to ‘classify’ individuals (1978), there has been a growing appetite amongst scholars to question the privilege of sexual ‘normalcy’ and how sexuality operates in society. Queer methodologies and analyses are frequently applied to literary and cultural materials but less so in embodied social contexts; digital technology, with its flexible space, diffuse paths of access, and porous, ‘hackable’ boundaries, provides a relevant arena in which to do so. Whilst critical explorations into queer bodies and space have featured in public health discourse via locative media (Rice et al. 2012; Landovitz et al. 2013; Chow 2016), *cultural* explorations have not garnered the same exposure (although see Race 2015 for a persuasive fusing of the two). Nearly two decades on from the appeal by Berlant and Warner (1998) for a queer culture that could move beyond spaces for sexual encounters to a world in which heteronormativity is no longer the privileged subject position, and with locative technology enabling hitherto unforeseen sexual plurality, the interaction between sex and the spaces that contain it requires new critical evaluation to match representations cohering in popular culture.

Queer theory contends that rather than an individual possessing a coherent identity that they present to the world, identity is an ongoing practice, co-produced by the individual and their relations with other people and with ‘their’ space(s) (see for example Butler 1990; Muñoz 2009). It also provides a useful framework to think about how space is produced in the city. This approach builds on queer research into identity and self-presentation but rather than thinking about how the MSM user presents himself *within* these apps, I wanted to shine a light on how the densely connected user practices his identity *in space*, and how through these practices he negotiates social, sexual and spatial concerns in London. Certainly, identity is an important part of the social and sexual attraction that prompts technology users to pursue embodied connection. But queer approaches are being extended towards a wider reassessment of human identity and sexuality (Gandy 2012). If physical space can be reterritorialised from heterosexuality (Binnie 2001), perhaps digitally hybridised space can be too.

The value of my research lies in learning about the humanistic practices of locative app use in a scholarly field increasingly dominated by post-humanist practices. Equally, employing queer theory in a deliberately applied and quotidian context helps to actualise the practical insights that queer theory can offer. Recognising that ‘even the inherent anti-normativity of queer theory has crystallised into a new canon [...] producing silences of its own around certain other knowledges’ (Payne 2013: 98), I am developing the possibilities of queer theory as something that can be practically, rather than just theoretically, liberatory. In so doing, I address criticism regarding the limited percolation of queer theory outside of the academy, as well as criticism that queer theory’s supposedly inclusive ideology rarely translates into real life (for queer radical critique see Warner 1999; Oluchi Lee 2005; Puar 2007; Halley and Parker 2007; for assimilationist interpretation see Sullivan 1995). Queer theory’s strength lies in ‘leaving permanently open and contestable the assumptions and narratives that guide social research’ (Seidman 1997: xi), and in the spirit of this openness, my approach demonstrates how queer research can inform, as well as be informed by, real lived experience *outside* of the academy. To this end, fieldwork attended to participants’ typical practices. This mode of experience is often elided in queer theory’s grander drive to destabilise (or even dismantle) larger heteronormative structures. Yet focusing on everyday practice allowed me to draw out the different identities that the app user negotiates, and better understand their humanistic remediation of technology. This is a relationship variously debated as technologically integrated (Kinsley 2016b) and conversely a conscious pulling-away from technological hybridity (Rose 2016). Accordingly, I wanted to borrow Sedgwick’s ‘aslant’ approach to the (non)integration of these apps into the embodiment and performances of queer life.

The risk I took is that by choosing this applied, everyday focus, and by thinking ‘queerly’ in regards to apps that are in many ways representative of homonormative rather than truly disruptive practices (Halperin 2012), my research focus could depart from the intended radicalism of queer theory. Gavin Brown (2008: 1215) criticises urban sexualities scholarship for getting ‘caught in a trap of concentrating on the production of gay identities and spaces within small areas of a relatively small set of cities, against which all other spaces are implicitly assessed’, and this project is at least partly entangled in that metropolitanism. Bastardising Halberstam, Muñoz and Eng’s

provocation, 'What's Queer about Queer Studies Now?' (2005), I could almost ask: what's queer about MSM dating apps? The answer depends on what parameters we use to measure queerness. The apps can be read as either queer, or normative, or *both*. Recognising the growing mainstream appeal of gay dating apps (and by mainstream I refer not just to their appeal to MSM users but also to heterosexual imitators including Bumble and Happn), this assimilative shift might present an opportunity to reimagine queer theory not as disappointingly diluted but as a more applied apparatus for scrutinising hegemony and providing new conceptualisations of space, technology and power. Whilst MSM locative apps continue a history of technology brokering male-male sex, these platforms' nascent popularity in heterosexual populations could signal a change in sexual consumption in the mainstream. If, as Gavin Brown (2001: 51) argues, the history of queer space is synecdoche for 'the shifting dialectic between heterosexism and homophobia and resistance to these oppressive and normative tendencies', there is no reason why structures that do not at first seem terribly queer cannot realise queerness in application, particularly in comparatively striated hegemonic contexts.

Relatedly, whilst men are privileged within queer populations, this does not translate to heterosexist society at large. Recognising the multiplicity of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer experiences, I could not hope to comprehensively explore every area of queer space-making practices. Thus, following Sharif Mowlabocus' drive for specificity, rather than focusing on a general 'taxonomy of gay men's digital culture' (2010a: 3), I honed in on what my initial research highlighted as the particularly intriguing intersection of locative media technology and queer male space. What is interesting here is the extent to which participants' online connection resituates their experience of suppression or liberation, following a scholarly history that alternatively celebrates the virtual freedom of online space (Mehra et al. 2004; Austria 2007; Pullen and Cooper 2010) and tempers that emancipatory narrative with suggestions that online space replicates prejudices evident in real life (Gross 2007; Raj 2011; van Dijck 2013; Roth 2014).

## Technological change

A key issue concerning my research was the rapid pace at which digital technology develops. Geert Lovink (2003: 12) points out that ‘because of the speed of events, there is a real danger that an online phenomenon will already have disappeared before a critical discourse reflecting on it has had the time to mature and establish itself as institutionally recognized knowledge’. Lovink concludes that theorisations of contemporary technology must accelerate to match the developments themselves, but I would argue that this acceleration needs to be balanced by the time required for in-depth research. Locative media products are being continually redeveloped, and may in future look very different. For example, Grindr is developing a significant sexual health advocacy narrative, offering free at-home HIV testing kits (Rosengren et al. 2016).<sup>33</sup> Whilst apps provide a salient vehicle to think about bodies, sexualities and spaces, they reference larger technological processes too, and these larger debates hold true throughout technological change. In fact, the growing ‘digital turn’ in geography (Ash et al. 2016) suggests that technological processes will become yet more dominant in epistemological terms. Accordingly, this thesis explores conceptual issues beyond the immediate media environment. My findings on contemporary digital media provide transferable theoretical ideas about embodiment and queer space production and how these may shift as technology continues to develop.

We must also recognise that new developments in digital technology tend to be lauded by consumers and scholars alike for their innovation in contrast to the existing offering. Take for instance the uncharted territory of Web 2.0 back in 2002, a new conceptualisation of the internet that for the first time encouraged user-generated media instead of passive consumption of content. Or the ‘silent revolutions’ of industry start-ups, perceived as fundamentally different to older shifts in software building (Simanowski 2016). Some critics are more circumspect in their assessment of technological timelines, and we would do well to consider their measured approach. As Ash et al. (2016) argue, digital progress can be critically evaluated without having

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<sup>33</sup> Even over the course of the research project, MSM apps have evolved: Hornet has introduced a Facebook-style live feed to introduce a more social element to its architecture (2016), whilst new app Chappy (2017) tackles the clashing expectations of users by allowing each user to toggle between ‘Mr Right’ and ‘Mr Right Now’ selections. These developments evidence the appetite of app developers to capitalise on changing consumer appetites.

to define that progress for the sake of categorisation. Campbell et al. (2014: 31) demonstrate a similarly even-handed evaluation of a particularly anticipated device: ‘it is difficult to say whether Google Glass will translate into a revolutionary change in mobile communication for the larger population of users’. Google Glass was withdrawn just one year later. Being aware of the human propensity for novelty, and assessing the technological offering on its own terms, is crucial. As theorist Michael Stevenson (2016: 1089) notes:

Each new paradigm shift on the web may be conceptualized not just as technological innovation but also a rhetorical move that revitalizes familiar oppositions between the old and the new, thus “consecrating” a new genre or technology as a true departure from old media.

Technological research is characterised by rapid development, but understanding past platforms and how they functioned for users usefully informs exploration of the technology of the present and future.

Nevertheless, few would disagree that the opportunities offered by locative media are significant and do signal new ways that the internet is consumed and practiced by users spatially and temporally. The challenge lies in both providing a nuanced understanding of contemporary realities and developing empirical contributions that can, to borrow Gordon and de Souza e Silva’s (2011: 11) words, ‘be abstracted to address their broader function’. By better understanding the impact of locative media on space and embodiment, we can make valuable (but certainly not universal) inferences about the wider socio-technological environment. Beyond focused findings, this thesis aims to deliver significant epistemological contributions to considerations of technological mediation.

## **Outline of the Research Procedure**

### Scale and research setting

George Chauncey (1994) focuses specifically on the city scale in his influential research on the making of the gay male world. He argues that this particular scale allows the researcher to track ‘changes in sexual practices, the interaction between



men across lines of class, ethnicity and neighbourhood, [and] the changing uses of urban space' (1994: 28). When it came to my own sampling environment I wanted to consider what a whole-city scale might offer in terms of qualitative research. Chauncey's research is historical, exploring gay identity and movement in 20<sup>th</sup> century New York, and in his period of study the gay world was 'smaller' and more localised to urban enclaves in the global North. Thus for a study like Chauncey's tracking development over time, the city proves a natural fit. But the geospatial properties of locative media mean that I should not automatically assume that the city is the fitting place for my own research. After all, apps are uniquely placed to create new networks of queer activity. Such networks may exist in less dense but more significant assemblages that make study of the whole city either irrelevantly large or too small for evaluating the spatiality of a network with any significance. Further, critiques of 'methodological cityism' object to an 'overwhelming analytical and empirical focus on the traditional city to the exclusion of other aspects of contemporary urbanisation processes' (Angelo and Wachsmuth 2014: 16). This critique can be applied more widely to any city-based environment. What, then, makes the city scale preferable to the district, street or neighbourhood?

My answer is that thinking on a city scale allows me to attend to multiple forms of queerness across a range of spatial scales whilst also being able to drill down into individual experience. I can draw out in the process the parallels, as well as the differences, between modes of experience for app users within a broadly shared environment. City spaces have long been intertwined with sexuality and queer dissidence (Castells 1983; Bell and Valentine 1995; Turner 2003), but I wanted to offer a new perspective to this research environment based on rapidly proliferating locative technology practices in these spaces. Rural and suburban queer scholarship is growing all the time (Gray 2009; Browne 2011; G.Brown 2015), but in a national context where 83% of the UK population now live in urban areas (DEFRA 2016), with LGBT individuals disproportionately resident in cities (Hubbard et al. 2016) – most of all London (Office for National Statistics 2016a) – it remains relevant to track digitally-mediated relationships through (and with) urban space.

Conducting this study in London generated a set of results that may differ from other UK cities, because with 8.8 million residents (Mayor of London 2016), London is

Europe's largest metropolis, and is by a range of definitions a global city (Sassen 1991; Scott 2002; Datta 2012). A global city has bound up in its large size distinct patterns of migration, diversity and density. Another issue I considered was movement. Locative app users might be present in London only for a fleeting visit home, or for a holiday or business trip, and whilst their journeys into and out of the city are of interest, they are not reliably routinised. With this in mind, I sampled only London residents, but within this sample accessed a range of participants across ethnic and socio-economic demographics. Finally, London provides a geographic counterpoint to the predominance of North American-based queer research, offering a new perspective from a western European context.<sup>34</sup>

### Sampling and recruitment

I commenced recruitment in June 2014, and conducted my first participant interview in July 2014. I continued recruitment throughout the fieldwork period until interviews reached a natural point of convergence in participant experiences (as per Strauss and Corbin 1998), conducting my final interview in February 2015. I recruited 36 MSM participants who were using, or had used, MSM locative networking apps within three months of the time of interview. Participant recruitment matched my target for a sample size large enough to include variability and a breadth of experience, but a manageable number for ensuring sufficiently thorough analysis; my research questions were aimed at understanding experiences in depth rather than gathering a large field of data at a superficial discursive level. Within the scope of the project I focused on men,<sup>35</sup> noting that within this category there are heterogeneous identities including trans men, MSM who do not identify as gay or bisexual, and those who practice sex as trade. The age range for this study was 18 years old and over,<sup>36</sup> and I imposed no upper age limit on my research.<sup>37</sup> Recruiting a broad age range boosted the diversity of experiences recorded.

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<sup>34</sup> Recognising at the same time the over-representation of both North American and European perspectives compared to spaces of the global South.

<sup>35</sup> I nevertheless recognise the potential of this project for replication amongst a growing landscape of female-female locative apps.

<sup>36</sup> Under 18s are officially barred from using these locative dating apps by the network. In reality, there was some evidence of minors using the apps by lying about their age, but it would be unethical to expose these users via my research as violating the terms of appropriate app use.

<sup>37</sup> The comparatively lower volunteer rate amongst older users reflects lower internet usage (whether mobile or static) amongst older men (Office for National Statistics 2016b).

My chosen recruitment method of loosely purposive sampling matched the definition of a homogenous sampling technique because it focused on London-based MSM app users. However, I remained alert to the risk of convenience sampling, whereby participants are recruited based on their access to the researcher. I was also conscious of a possible locative media user bias because the portion of recruitment conducted online relied on the areas where I ‘checked into’ apps for recruitment. Eliminating this bias would be impossible, but I mitigated it by ‘checking into’ the apps across different areas of London, especially in high-density areas such as Oxford Street, Waterloo and Liverpool Street.

The only deliberate selection process within my recruitment occurred in selecting a known contact for a pilot interview. This interview proved useful for checking that there were no problems in my interview structure or question schedule, and ensured my approach was methodologically rigorous. The pilot interview also encouraged me to reflect on my research-gathering practices before the bulk of interviews began. As a result, I re-worded some of my questions in a more accessible way that participants could better relate to. Specifically, I replaced references to ‘locative media’ with their more popularly-known product names.

Participants became involved in the project in three ways: ‘snowball’ volunteers who expressed their interest as a result of hearing about the study from the pilot interview (1+7 participants); those responding to recruitment posters (Appendix 1) offline in public spaces around London including libraries, health centres and universities, and online via email newsletters (8 participants); and finally those who contacted a recruitment profile on Grindr, Tinder, or Hornet (20 participants) (see Figure 3.1). Participation skewed to those recruited via locative apps, but this was advantageous because they were the most demographically varied. Snowballing also proved an efficient recruitment strategy because, as Morgan (2008: 816) notes, snowball participants often share the characteristics that make them relevant for study, in this scenario both MSM status and residence in London. Snowball sampling is particularly suited to queer recruitment because of the strong, often subcultural social networks that exist for sexual minority populations (Browne 2005). Whilst this group does not, today, constitute the hard-to-reach population it might have historically,

snowballing facilitates access to participants who are more likely to stay involved because they are referred by a contact who has experienced the project and can vouch for its validity. One disadvantage of snowball sampling is that the sample may not be indicative of trends within the wider result group. However, this was mitigated in my project by combining the approach with offline and online recruitment.

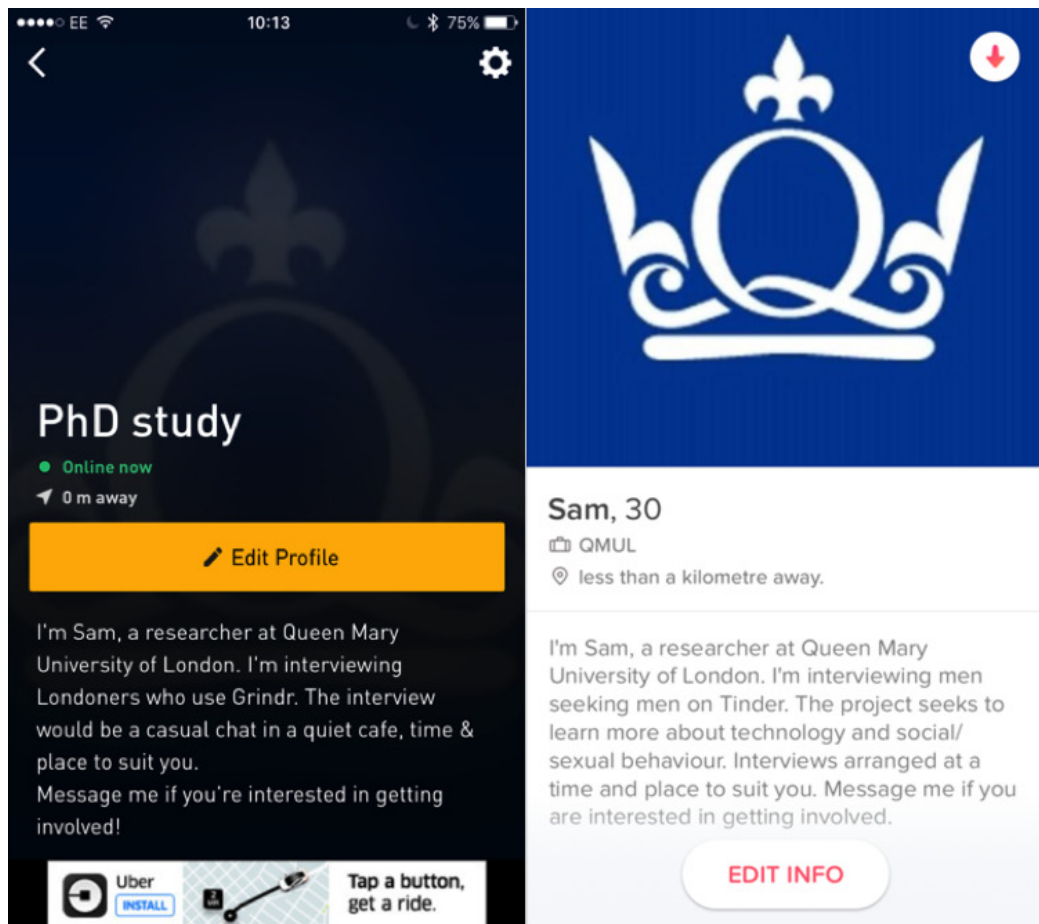


Figure 3.1. Grindr and Tinder recruitment profiles.

Locative networking apps require membership for access, so with ethical clearance from QMUL ethics committee (code QMERC2015/28), I created a researcher profile with the title '[App name] research: seeking volunteers' and the QMUL logo as the profile picture (see Figure 3.1 and Appendix 2). I also had to consider the process of volunteering for the study on these apps. Requesting participation directly from users would be unethical because it would compromise their own capacity to opt in to the project, so rather than approach participants I only responded to those who contacted me having read the call for participants. I successfully sought permission to display my poster at queer venues including popular gay bar The

Joiner's Arms<sup>38</sup> and Whitechapel men's health clinic Positive:East. I also emailed gay men's online community groups and UCL and QMUL LGBTQ mailing lists requesting email bulletin slots, which were granted and resulted in further expressions of interest.

There was, invariably, a layer of filtering that took time when communicating with participants. I received communications from those curious about the project and interested in learning more without wanting to participate in the study itself, as well as contact from *former* users of the app, who for various reasons including app fatigue, finding a partner, or a change in health status no longer used the apps but still wanted to be interviewed. It was a difficult decision to not interview them as a thematic counterpoint to the viewpoint of current users, but with such diversity already within the existing participant group I retained the original recruitment parameters. I also tried to be cognisant of participants' self-selection bias: clearly, not all app users would volunteer to participate in a highly sensitive study about social and sexual encounter, and this may have led to lower participation from straight-identified MSM for example, or men not 'out' to their family, peers or community.

Reading back over my research diary each day proved useful in reinforcing areas of good practice for participant retention. For example, whilst online app recruitment resulted in the highest initial interest but also the highest number of dropouts, these reduced when I emailed the participant with a meeting reminder two days before the interview rather than one day before. I adopted this as standard practice for the remaining interviews and found it improved retention. The other impact on conversion from introduction to in-person interview was finding a time that was convenient for participants, who were often very busy, lived and worked across the city, and most importantly were volunteering their time to my study. Yet throughout the fieldwork period I was surprised at the commitment expressed to the project from these participants. Interviews were in some cases weeks or even months after first contact but they had worked hard to find a slot where they could commit to an interview. Progressing to interviews was also made easier by the fact that unlike many social science fieldworkers, I did not experience any issues from participant

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<sup>38</sup> Closed permanently soon after, leading to significant protest; see Campkin and Marshall (2017) for discussion.

‘gatekeepers’ because participants were individuals amongst the general (online) public. Where liaison with institutions or public venues was required, for example in displaying posters in GP surgeries or university notice boards, experiences were positive.

### Co-constructing interviews

Interviews have a complex history in the social sciences tradition (see for example Thrift 2000; Winchester 2000; Latham 2003; Laurier and Philo 2006), and most scholars recognise that interviews can never be a ‘true’ representation of phenomena, providing at best an account of things relayed secondarily (Thrift and Dewsbury 2000). However, they have the potential to access rich qualitative data across a demographic spread, and are particularly useful for capturing the complexity of individual experiences. Qualitative interviews further offer a vehicle for exploring the experiences of people who might have been misrepresented or ignored in the past (Byrne 2004: 180), and this speaks to the liminality of queerness. Whilst I was alert to arguments against the deployment of interview as ‘the standard methodological choice in studies of everyday life’ (Creswell 2003), the ongoing utilisation of this method suggests that interviews continue to generate insight at the everyday scale. I wanted to pay attention to meaning formed through social interaction (Creswell 2007: 8), and for participants to tell me what they did in their own life settings offered an excellent way of achieving this.

There are, of course, different ways of ‘telling’ about society (Becker 2007). I considered pursuing more intensive ethnographic approaches, noting the success of John Campbell’s dynamic work in the field (2004) and Laurier and Philo’s (2006) ethnomethodological approach that rejects what they argue is the staged nature of interviews. However, in-situ participant observation proved impractical in the context of my research, and while it might have been interesting to perhaps shadow participants as they used the app – seen for example to good effect in Kristian Jorgensen’s (2016) ‘media go-along’ method in interviewing non-heterosexual app users – the individualised nature of smartphone use makes participant observation difficult (Leszczynski 2017). Further, following the approach to its potential end point

could take the study into sensitive scenarios, which would be highly unethical<sup>39</sup> (although see Race 2015: 265 for sexual self-disclosure in intimate settings).

Alert to the beneficial potential of ‘narrative inquiry’ (Flyvberg 2006) when working with participants to understand their stories, I conducted one-to-one, semi-structured interviews lasting from one hour to 90 minutes. I felt that an open-ended, semi-structured interview technique was the best way to achieve the ‘conversational, fluid form’ (Valentine 1997: 111) that offers the richest data. The power dynamic between interviewer and participant is rarely even (Creswell<sup>40</sup> 2007), so a flexible approach, with opportunities for freer debates, helped participants feel more comfortable and less intimidated by the research task. I conducted interviews in a public venue of the participant’s choice: mostly quiet cafes in central London and bookable meeting rooms at several university campuses. The fact that participants chose the venue themselves had the encouraging effect of imbuing the space with a personal connection to the interview. Within these environments I secured comfortable spaces where participants were unlikely to be overheard by others. Venues with ambient background activity ensured that the participant did not feel exposed and helped put them at ease (following Jorgensen 2016: 41).

I developed an interview schedule (Appendix 5) with key themes and questions to loosely guide conversation. The structure of qualitative interview is flexible enough to allow for changes in questions asked (Brinkmann and Kvale 2015), and in reality I was soon familiar enough with my guidance materials not to need to consult them often, which had the added benefit of ensuring fluency in interviews. I prefaced our interview by explaining that participants could stop at any time if they felt uncomfortable, and I invited initial questions. My own questions for participants were open-ended (after Longhurst 2010), leaving room for discussion outside of the parameters of the initial enquiry. I began with unchallenging warm up questions relating to everyday experiences, which then progressed into wider lines of enquiry exploring the themes of locative app use, social and sexual encounter and spatio-temporal practices. In our conversations I encouraged flexibility, inviting the

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<sup>39</sup> For an example of this problematic ethnography see Laud Humphreys’ (in)famous *Tearoom Trade* (1970).

<sup>40</sup> Not to be confused with geographer Tim Creswell.

participant to lead on topics discussed, and to express experiences on their own terms and in their own time. The result was extensive, uninhibited and fluent communication from almost every participant.

Interviews provide a way to explore individuals' subjective relationship with their environment (Brown 2001: 48; see also Mason 2002), and conducting one-to-one interviews rather than focus groups allowed me to learn more about each individual's journey across time and space in more depth than a focus group structure would allow. I also wanted each participant's disclosure to be unaffected by a group dynamic. Moreover, conversation in a group setting makes it harder to attend to non-verbal cues: these 'subtle shifts in affect, tone and bodily comportment [that] are as significant as what is said' (Pratt 2009: 605; see also Back 2007 for the 'art' of listening). Russell Hitchings (2012: 66) argues that even subtle gestures are worth evaluating because they offer 'a valuable window into the subjective experience that says much about how stable practices actually are'. Thus attending to *how* participants react, as well as the verbal content of their reaction, furnished me with a richer picture of the levels of meaning within their utterance. On balance, interviews provided the best way to explore experiences thoroughly, in a collaborative format conducive to knowledge co-creation.

I also considered using cognitive maps as an interview aid. These subjective 'mental' maps of a locale provide a way of visualising space in personal terms. Participants could draw maps of how they conceived private and public or social and sexual spaces in their lives as an 'appraisive process' (Brown 2001: 50). Yet my pilot interviewees showed more confidence in verbalising their spaces in narrative terms. Noting this preference, I focused on a kind of 'verbal mapping' in the interviews that followed, and found participants 'drew' detailed mental maps of their mobilities, behaviours, and spatialities, negating the need for cognitive mapping as a specific interview tool. I also considered conducting repeat interviews with participants to track changes in their experiences and attitudes, but the interviews provided such rich data for me to process – and such a *quantity* of data – that they came to function as a valuable insight into each user's technomediated experience at a specific point in their life. One rationale for repeat interviews is that a rapport would be established from our first meeting, furnishing a more trusting relationship for extensive data



collection, but from the outset of each interview the tendency of participants to talk freely negated my anxieties about rapport-building. It is testimony to the relationship between both parties that such candid and intimate conversation felt like the norm rather than the exception.

### **Positionality and reflexivity**

This research favoured a pragmatist and social-constructivist approach, attending to participant meanings and narratives and from there generating socially-oriented findings. However, there are positionality issues to consider when conducting interview-based research (Pile 1991). Andrew Sayer (2011: 14-15) cautions that social scientists must be wary of ‘projecting their contemplative, discursive relation with the world onto actors who have a more practical relation to the world’. As a self-identified gay male living in London, my research had the potential to fall into traps of ethnocentrism because I was observing and interacting with a demographic in which I located myself as an ‘insider’. As a result, my research into technologies and bodies could impinge on the way I related to the participants who were telling me about their own app use.<sup>41</sup> Yet my commonalities with themes arising from queer urban research are also the root of my interest in it, and grant me situated knowledge: I am ‘writing what I know’, but seeking out a diversity of experiences as I do so.

Positionality played a key role in the way that my participants and I co-created our interview scenario. Self-reflexivity is important, but even this has limitations: it cannot ‘elude the dynamics of power’ (Rose 1997: 316), despite the researcher’s best efforts to equalise the balance. The historical tendency to attribute objectivity to the interviewer as being a context-free forum for knowledge collection has been replaced over time by approaches that argue for an awareness of the discursive act of the interview itself (Thrift 2000; Becker 2007; Hitchings and Latham 2016), as well as the subjectivities inherent within social science research (Baxter and Eyles 1997; Rose 1997; Della Porta and Keating 2008). Indeed, John Campbell (2004), an active participant in his own research, points out that research in sexuality and space studies

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<sup>41</sup> Assuming oneself as an ‘insider’ may also not take into account other identity differences such as ethnicity or socioeconomic status (Dowling 2000).

is invariably deeply embodied, despite theories of virtual reality that might imply otherwise. I was as located in social, political and cultural terms as the people I was interviewing, and felt in some way compelled to recognise this located position in order to build a rapport, echoing Gavin Brown's (2001: 51) emphasis on sharing experiences to develop trust. Even my status as 'researcher' exploring the experiences of a 'participant' places me in a specific position, with historical and socio-political baggage. Here, my research diary played a useful role in encouraging self-reflection on my role as researcher, and in reflecting on participant experiences not just as academic discourse but as embodied and real.

A key issue in interview work is the 'storytelling' aspect of participant narratives, oriented to what the participant thinks the interviewer wants to hear (Polletta et al. 2011; Leszczynski 2017). This 'social desirability bias' (Passerini 1989; Uski and Lampinen 2016) is particularly common in recounting sexual behaviour retrospectively (Plummer 1995), whether the effect is to understate or overstate the practice in question. Kath Browne (2005: 48) further argues that 'the study of sexualities is a sensitive subject because there may be risks to participants if they are transgressing dominant heterosexual codes'. Alert to both this hegemonic influence and the subjectivity of narratives, it was important to remember that I cannot take my participants' utterances completely at face value. Participants may exaggerate some things and forget others, but their account is still their truth (Passerini 1989), and it was important for me to value and support this truth. Indeed, their narratives may not even align with our theoretical expectations. Hitchings and Latham (2016) argue that to expect people to give accounts of their lives that map easily onto our conceptual concerns is to fundamentally misunderstand the grounds of that action. In my own interviews, participants sometimes explained their behaviour *contra* existing findings from the research field. These narratives were valuable precisely for their difference, so I made sure they were given equal consideration in my analysis. The doubled narrative of participants' hybridised practice *and* the motivations and emotions informing that practice became a distinctive feature of this study's empirical results.

## **Intimacy in the field**

The co-production of an almost intimate interview environment between myself and interviewees in this project deserves further unpacking. In human geography, intimacy can be defined as thinking about personal lives by focusing on bodies, identities and public-private dichotomies (Valentine 2008a: 2097). Gill Valentine draws on Lynn Jamieson's (1989: 1) work on intimacy to define it as a 'specific sort of knowing, loving and caring for a person' that can span not just sexual relationships but also affective structures such as friendship (Valentine 2008a: 2106). Laura Ann Stoler (2006: 15) defines it as something that, for many, cannot be 'measured by physical distance so much as the degree of involvement, engagement, concern and attention one gives to [nearness]'. Conceptualisations of intimacy are also of increasing interest to humanities scholars, who are moving 'toward a relational, affective, sensual, dynamic and non-representational approach' (Price 2014: 510). As researchers in sexuality and space studies have noted, the relationship between researcher and participant can develop a real sense of intimacy in the research setting (Cupples 2002; McDowell 2010; Diprose et al 2013; Smith 2016). The imagining of intimacy as a kind of closeness or proximity between people holds significance for my methodology, encouraging me to consider what it means to sit in a public café and talk to a stranger about his beliefs, his relationships and his sex life.

How we relate in interviews involves intimacy on several different levels – in building a rapport between participant and interviewer, in divulging personal details and narratives, and in being willing to mirror back those narratives with one's own experiences, reflecting Katz's (2009) model of field and fieldworker as co-constructors that produce knowledge together. I was determined to foster a relationship of trust and confidentiality to 'make legible' the participant in the research process (after Domosh 2014). I felt that at times my experiences with participants achieved an affective structure resembling friendship, albeit one temporally bound to the interview. These more-than-representational meetings inherited a cognitive and even, at times, emotional intimacy, without crossing the boundary to over-involvement or physical intimacy. It also provokes difficult questions about how the researcher manages participant behaviours when the research invites emotional connection or even flirting (Kaspar and Landolt 2016). The answer is that we cannot, in any

concrete sense, ‘manage’ participants because they are humans with their own autonomy, behaviour and attitudes. Nor would we want to: it would impose a power structure in an exchange we are trying to level. Nevertheless, if we accept that intimacy is co-constructed, we have a responsibility to monitor our own involvement in that construct.

In fact, meeting participants for interviews mimicked meeting an app user for a ‘blind date’, with its concomitant anxieties. After all, I wanted to build a relationship through which they would warm to me and share with me; this is a desire shared by anyone preparing for a first date with a stranger. Pilot interviews notwithstanding, interviews were conducted with men who I knew almost nothing about. I had left photos of myself off each app recruitment profile, having decided that the physical appearance of the interviewer was not the focus of the study.<sup>42</sup> Yet when meeting the participant, I had to share a photo of my face to them in order for them to find me in a public venue, and I considered whether it might affect the dynamic of the meeting. Most interviews started a little awkwardly, with participants arriving in the venue, checking that the space around them was suitably private, and often manoeuvring themselves closer to my chair so that we could talk freely. This contributed to a temporary, semi-private space between interviewer and participant that lent interviews an almost confessional feel. The fact that most of these strangers were single and looking for a social or sexual relationship, as testified by their presence on an online dating or hook-up app, contributed to the date-like dynamic, even though they were presumably not seeking that connection from our interview. Nevertheless, I balanced my own disclosures by gently manoeuvring conversation back to the participant when the focus occasionally swung to me. Thus in addition to managing the power balance between interviewer and participant (McDowell 2010; Kaspar and Landolt 2016), questions of embodiment and representation required consideration, paradoxically reflecting the complex protocols of actual online dating.

What surprised me most in this environment was how much I learned about my own research practice. The dynamic shared in each scenario was an intense experience for participant and interviewer alike, and I found myself experiencing empathy for the vulnerabilities and anxieties expressed by many of the men I met. Care was taken

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<sup>42</sup> Tinder profiles link to the user’s Facebook profile, so I anonymised mine accordingly.

in approaching conversations about participants' sex lives, noting the complexity of fieldwork that explores personal issues (see for example Smith 2016). I learned how to better inhabit the role of interviewer as an active listener, attentive to nuance and non-verbal communication in conversation, and how to value participants' omissions and hesitations as equal to their utterances. I was able to see how this communication format relies on turn taking, responding, and affirmation, not symmetrically but from the interviewer 'drawing out' the experiences of the respondent. I felt gratified by how effectively we co-produced a meaningful space within the constructed nature of an interview between strangers. We see, then, that interviewing is more than a technical skill: it is about learning to cultivate a disposition attuned to intimacy, trust and sharing.

Whilst the empirical and epistemological contributions of this research project are what drives the research undertaken, I contend that considerations of intimacy within the interview environment constitute a methodological provocation all of their own. Whilst the value of my findings is primarily empirical, my experiences of intimacy in the interview setting offer a reflection on the valuable subjectivities of qualitative research. The temporally limited, spatially unique relationship created when researcher and participant co-construct an interview space is highly valuable as a way of exposing, or testifying to, the 'complexity of unique experiences' (Bennett 2001: 151) in social sciences research. It is an approach to intimacy in the field that is transferable beyond this project to wider methods research where interpersonal rapport and participant inhibitions are mediators to the process of information gathering.

### **Ethical considerations**

Ethical considerations were of paramount importance to my project. In advance of each interview I provided participants with an information sheet and consent form detailing the study, including a request to record and transcribe interviews (Appendices 3 and 4). I also included ethical guidance on their rights as a participant, including the right to withdraw from the study at any time. My participants were not from specifically vulnerable groups, but noting that there is always a chance that a participant might be vulnerable, I made sure participants were competent to consent

to take part in my study by explaining the parameters of the study and checking their understanding of what it entailed. The coded transcriptions were anonymised, with identifying features such as workplaces or home addresses removed to ensure confidentiality and pseudonyms employed.

One issue that I discussed with my supervisors was the tendency for participants to unpack significant emotional issues in the space of our interview. The almost confessional nature of interview meant that many were verbalising, perhaps for the first time, their emotions and feelings; for me to then finish the interview and leave them still processing their thoughts was hard to do, and I felt some responsibility for those who were emotionally involved in sharing their stories. Recognising the impact of ‘entangled subjectivities’ of the researcher-participants relations (Bennett 2001), I addressed these issues of trust by ensuring that all participants were clear about the boundaries of the interview, and by ensuring (discreetly) that all participants went away with a copy of the ‘Advice signposting’ sheet (Appendix 6) as advised by the QMUL ethics committee. I thus maintained clear boundaries within my researcher role whilst ensuring that participants were able to access third-party help if necessary.

Recognising the importance of feeding back to participants the knowledge gained from our collaborative project, I put in place plans to circulate my findings amongst participants via a fact sheet summarising key findings from the thesis project. This recognised their meaningful and collaborative stake in the research and minimised power imbalances between researcher and participant by promoting a healthy environment for knowledge exchange.

## **Data analysis**

Transcriptions are not necessarily genuine expressions of experience (Domosh 2003), but are a trace of that experience – and a valuable one. They can be understood as texts, and with a text comes different options for qualitative interpretation. I used my audio recordings to transcribe each dialogue into Word documents. I transcribed all interviews verbatim myself and in doing so became familiar with the material in great depth and detail, which allowed me to draw out previously unnoticed aspects of the interviews. Following good ethical practice (Seale 1999), I emailed the transcripts

securely to those participants who had provided their email address and had ticked the box in their ethical consent form asking for a copy. Only after checking that participants were satisfied did I begin analysis.

Coding can be thought of as a heuristic: an ‘exploratory problem-solving technique without specific formulas to follow’ (Saldaña 2009: 8). A pragmatic paradigm recognises multiple different contexts in the data (M. Patton 2002), allowing the researcher to be flexible about what coding methods work in different scenarios. Coding was an important step in my data analysis because it helped me to move away from particular statements to more abstract interpretations of the interview data (following Charmaz 2006). My treatment of the interview fieldwork comprised coding and analysis of transcriptions using a loose thematic coding, calling on Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six phases of thematic analysis to create established, meaningful patterns. These phases are: familiarisation with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes among codes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing findings. The inductive and exploratory approach of this study called on elements of grounded theory, particularly in terms of its openness and flexibility. It did not however rely only on codes created post-event; some loosely interpretative themes emerged from the literature review.

After logging the transcripts in NVivo software I coded manually within the program rather than using auto-coding because it helped me immerse myself in the data. Thematic analysis need not adhere to implicit theoretical commitments (Braun and Clarke 2006: 8); instead it can be used with a variety of frameworks. Coding and re-coding my transcripts developed into a cyclical process of analysis. The first level of coding was informed by my existing conceptual knowledge and my experience of interviews. A second-level coding drew out subtler analytic and theoretical concerns including, for example, perceptions of community and experiences of app addiction. I created new codes as they emerged from my review of transcripts, such as ‘gamification of apps’. These codes were not anticipated in advance but were mentioned by different participants and could be linked to more dominant themes, such as ‘technology’ and ‘daily use’. In-vivo codes are important because they prioritise the participant voice (Saldaña 2009: 74), and I wanted to stay alert to those voices in the research process. As per Charmaz (2006), I utilised a flexible approach,

bringing together shared properties of codes and the relationships between codes into categories. Finally, I revisited the full dataset again to think about overarching theories, drawing from my initial thinking, scholarship in the research field and the data I had collected.

Aside from in-vivo coding, John Creswell's (2007) 'lean coding' formula proved useful. I started with a short, open set of categories and expanded it to 27 codes by the end of the second coding cycle. After a break from the data to consider different angles and stories emerging, I performed a tabletop coding. This exercise, which followed Johnny Saldaña's (2009) interpretative approach, offered up new connections, assemblages and visual patterns. This was a very visual exercise, which involved arranging and re-arranging paper markers in different structures to think about how different categories interacted with each other and formed or disrupted networks in my cohering empirical narrative. In fact, Saldaña argues that the researcher cannot code for themes per se: instead you code for categories, whilst a theme is what an utterance suggests more subtly (2009: 13). I played with this distinction in my own structure, coding for categories whilst positioning themes not so much as the inference made by utterances as Saldaña implies, but as the interpretative label that I as researcher affix to a gathering of categories. This, combined with 'constant comparison' of codes and categories (Strauss and Corbin 1998), helped me build up connections between participants, ideas and even places.

Because my research proceeded from a qualitative, social constructivist framework, the measure of its quality comes from the narratives that emerged from the fieldwork. Fascinatingly, codes emerged from my data that productively disrupted assumptions within existing research. For example, whilst popular media has telescoped discussion of chemsex as a pathologised epidemic, my participant narratives complicated that portrayal with considerations of sociality and caregiving within the practice (as explored in Chapter 7). The stories I heard were sometimes quite different to those which percolate in the field, and as a result of this divergence I cycled Braun and Clarke's (2006: 93) six-step coding framework repeatedly to ensure I was alert to the more subcultural networks that ran between mobile technologies, users, and the city. These assemblages seemed to construct and dissolve themselves in different iterations, but this cyclical production actually highlighted in helpful ways the porous



boundaries that exist in the hybrid relations between humans and technologies. Throughout all this I had to be comfortable with contradictions and tensions to remain: not everything can be theorised, grouped and interpreted smoothly.

In my interpretative thematic analysis I called on elements of non-representational theory (Thrift 1996; 2007) and more-than-representational theory (Lorimer 2005). This is an approach that is comfortable with existing within the research picture as a human agent. By active ‘witnessing’ (Dewsbury 2003), I was able to be ‘present’ in the journey of research with the participants I was studying. This approach provides a scaffold for ‘storytelling’ the data, rather than relying on the data to reveal itself through its representation. Recognising, but progressing beyond identity-based representations, allowed me to think about participants’ embodied experiences, whilst avoiding structured identity categories so prevalent in queer hermeneutics. That is not to say that identity *per se* is not important: take for example Rachel Colls’ (2012) argument for the importance of recognising bodily difference within non-representational approaches dominated by a focus on practice. What I am interested in is thinking processually rather than categorically, whilst remaining attuned to sexual and bodily difference within my focus on what Colls (2011: 430) dubs the ‘taking-place’ of practices.

I believe that keeping the participant front and centre in thinking about their sociotechnical relations ensures that the research voices their ontological experiences with minimal manipulation in my researcher’s hands. One example of the muddying of fieldwork analysis is the strange ‘flattening’ of participant transcripts when laid bare on the page. Participants who asked for copies of their transcripts were surprised to see that, detached from the embodied context, their personal reflections were (literally) cast into unforgiving black and white. This contrast to the richness of the interview itself may have had a lot to do with the more-than-verbal bond built between researcher and participant. Nevertheless, by explaining that the richness of the interview could not always be captured in text and discussing how multiple transcripts wove together to tell bigger stories, participants better understood the different parts of the analytical journey in process.

## **Introduction to the participant group**

A total of 36 men took part in this research, as detailed in the participant matrix that concludes this chapter below. Thirty-one men identified as gay, two as bisexual or bicurious, two as queer and one as straight but sexually involved with men. It is worth commenting on the distinction between my queer methodology and my participants' subject positions. The descriptors 'queer' and 'gay' are often treated as interchangeable, as lesbian and gay studies has incorporated more fluid gender identities and as the queer movement has lost some of its radicalism. However, there are important distinctions between the two and they should not be confused.

Most participants were single at the time of interview (31), but five were partnered, of whom three were in mutually-agreed open relationships. Ages ranged from 18 to 65 years old, with an average age of 30. Age skewed towards younger participants (54% aged 18-28; only 6% were aged 51 or over), matching wider demographic trends in app membership (Brubaker et al. 2014; Goedel and Duncan 2015). Education level and employment was varied, with the sample including students, waiters, teachers, an accountant, an IT consultant, a sound technician, and a subeditor, as well as a sex worker and several participants not currently employed. Whilst several participants had been born and raised in London, most had moved to London for work or study. These ranged from those who had moved 40 years ago to those who had become resident in the preceding year.

Male-male locative media apps have been shown to reflect and reinscribe gendered and racialised inequalities (Raj 2011; McGlotten 2012; Woo 2013). This project worked within those realities but incorporated participants from a broad demographic range in order to interrogate such positions, resulting in a snapshot of the sheer diversity of the larger context in which the research was conducted. Of the men interviewed, 25 participants were white/Caucasian, six were 'BAME' (black, Asian, or other minority ethnic) and five were mixed heritage. Interestingly, a disproportionately high percentage of participants were foreign-born London residents at 54%, higher than the London average (36.7%) and significantly higher than the UK average (11.9%, Office for National Statistics 2015). There is a certain metropolitan identity tied up in the cultural image of urban(e) locative media users,

and yet my participants did not reflect this identity. Kane Race (2015: 254) notes that the sociotechnical infrastructure of apps is based on privilege, with the ability to sign up for phone contracts dependent on economic security, but while access to mobile technology would assume financial stability, in this study several of the least economically secure participants nevertheless owned smartphones whilst struggling financially in their daily lives. In fact, they prioritised device ownership over core outgoings, and their ownership of an ostensibly 'luxury' item belied financial precarity.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has outlined the methodological decisions taken in this thesis project. It has discussed my rationale for choosing an applied queer approach, and highlighted the unique potential of the qualitative interview approach as a way of generating extensive, rich data that captures the experiences and viewpoints of MSM living in London. I have discussed the rapid pace of technological change and demonstrated how the arguments developed in this thesis apply to larger sociotechnical processes that persist beyond different products. The chapter has also detailed my reflections on positionality and interview co-construction, and discussed my interpretation of intimacy within the project. Finally, this chapter has rationalised my loosely inductive approach to coding, calling on elements of grounded theory (as per Charmaz 2003) and thematic analysis (as per Braun and Clarke 2006). It has outlined the prioritisation of participant narratives emerging from interviews as the drivers for investigation. Having set the scene for the project in regards to methods and approach, the next chapter will present the first empirical findings.

**Table 3.1. Table of Participants**

**REDACTED**





# Chapter 4

## Locative media and the hyperconnected user

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Everyone talks about Grindr, from non-straight people to straight people. The only person who hasn't is my great-grandma. It wouldn't even surprise me if she'd heard of it.

Interview with Oliver,<sup>43</sup> 19

This chapter focuses specifically on online practices, progressing to embodied experiences in Chapter 5. Here, I define the hyperconnected user, exploring how this definition relates to locative media and to habituated daily use. The chapter compares popular male-male dating and 'hook-up' apps, highlighting the similarities and differences between the conceptual positioning of Grindr and Tinder for their users, as well as their blurred boundaries with popular mobile games and mainstream social media networks. I then explore how users in this study refute critical theorisations of an age-related digital divide, displaying technological confidence across the age spectrum. I finish the chapter with a consideration of the different cultural implications that accompany labels to name those who are part of technological entanglement, concluding that 'users' best defines their conscious technological involvement.

As Oliver's narrative demonstrates, the influence of male-male locative media is culturally significant and increasingly widespread. The contribution of this chapter lies in examining how male-male locative media are conceived and operated by users, and consumed for their promised social and sexual possibilities. The chapter demonstrates how locative media impact *online* queer spaces and practices as well as hybridised or offline scenarios. It also highlights how hyperconnection entails deep involvement in technology for the contemporary user, and how these assemblages generate their own ambivalence.

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<sup>43</sup> Names of all participants have been changed.

## **Defining the hyperconnected user**

This project understands hyperconnectivity as connection across multiple communication platforms including email, telephone, face-to-face contact and web 2.0, enabled through a process of technological convergence. The Collins English Dictionary defines it as ‘the state of being constantly connected to people and systems through devices such as smartphones, tablets and computers – and sometimes through software that enable and promote constant communication’ (2012, n.pag). Hyperconnectivity is variously described as a productive acceleration of technological pace (Verbeek 2015), or as an excess of connectivity leading to information overload, impacted performance and productivity (Kolb et al. 2008), as well as something between these two extremes (Ganascia 2014). Technologists have examined the idea of a hyperconnected world, often in business contexts (Biggs 2012; Settembre 2012; Vermesan and Friess 2015).

Beyond established contributions (namely Quan-Haase and Wellman 2005), the concept has not been extensively developed, and the hyperconnected *user* even less so (*pace* Parisi 2015; Floridi 2015; Standlee 2016). The International Data Corporation (2008: 2) understands the hyperconnected user as someone who is ‘always available’ and who uses a wide range of networking devices for both personal and business purposes. The definition is workable but fails to address the extent of connection. Breaking down the word ‘hyperconnected’ gives us the ‘hyper-’ prefix, suggesting excess or extreme practice, with ‘connected’, referring to linkages or relations between two agents, objects, or ideas. The hyperconnected user, then, is someone participating in or subject to an accelerated or extreme version of normal digital connection. They are someone connected not singly or simply, but multiply and in complex relations. Their hyperconnection does not just involve technology but also other humans, with relations requiring a higher processing power, or human ‘bandwidth’ (Shannon 1948; Hardesty 2010) than ever before.

What I term ‘hyperconnected user’ has more often been described in terms of the technology alone: ubiquitous technology, pervasive technology, wearable technology, and location-aware technology are just a few of the angles which have captured the contemporary zeitgeist of continuous connection. My perspective however focuses on



the user, and how they mediate their connections with technology and other humans in a context of almost overwhelming technological sophistication. I contend that male-male locative app users in the contemporary cultural moment provide us with a specific technological experience that can provide transferable answers to questions about connectivity, socialisation, and hybridisation in the digitally-inscribed city. What we read as a 'hyper' connection can in fact be considered the 'new normal' for locative media users. Technology has for a long time acted as a mediator between humans and their environment (Ihde 1990), but the relationship between the human, the device, the environment and others is denser and more entangled than ever before (Latour 2006; Troxler 2011). I believe that there is nothing abnormal about that entanglement: it defines the modern technological condition of the global North. What is more distinctive is thinking about how the hyperconnected user understands their own hyperconnectivity and the ways they inhabit these hybridised spaces, participate in their networks, and navigate the opportunities and pressures of being 'plugged-in'.

My imagining of the hyperconnected user is a deliberately humanistic interpretation of technology because hyperconnection is often interpreted as a pathologisation of internet use: unhealthily connected or addicted, or made somehow extreme by internet use. Certainly, the usage patterns some participants in this study exhibited might suggest addiction (as explored in Chapter 7), whilst others used the apps more irregularly or fleetingly. But a humanistic conception folds in the layered, multiply figured connections that mobile device users now forge and maintain. After all, the average mobile technology user is likely to accept, rather than reject, the opportunity of hyperconnection if given the chance because it offers a richer form of connection. Any smartphone owner can constitute a hyperconnected user not because they are an online addict but because the technological landscape of our cities and the functions of our mobile technologies are so complex, and so threaded into our daily lives, as to accelerate not our use *per se* (although that can contribute) but the *density* of our use.

Gay and non-heterosexual males have long incorporated software into their lived experience, and locative media is a provocative chapter in this history. These men are hyperconnected not just to their neighborhoods or the people with whom they

communicate, but also a network of strangers whose details they can parse in the interests of social or sexual encounter. Add to this the digital technology that mediates these connections and does so instantly, effortlessly, and wirelessly, and we see how richly connected these users are. In fact, participants in this study often struggled to articulate their technologically involved lifestyle. They explained that their devices were simply part of their lives, suggesting an almost cyborgian technological sophistication (as per Haraway 1985; Lupton 2013). Their habituated involvement also alerts us to the challenges inherent in navigating encounters in a hybridised scenario that is seemingly without established social codes or in-built guidance for use. Locative media offers a growing technological landscape, but understandings have yet to catch up to what this might mean for lived experience.

### **Dating apps or hook-up apps?**

The orientation of locative media towards dating (meeting in a public environment for a shared social activity, often repeated in the interests of a longer-term relationship) or ‘hook-ups’ (casual sexual relations, often one-off) is a pertinent question in an era when it is often assumed that online daters are more occupied by transient connections than meaningful relationships (Bauman 2003). At the time of interviews all participants were using or had recently been using a locative dating app, with most subscribed to several simultaneously, reflecting average usage of 3.11 locative apps per MSM user (Goedel and Duncan 2015). Participants co-opted apps for a wide range of uses, including making new friends, networking with existing friends, making work contacts, trading drugs, buying and selling sex, and self-education. Sex and dating were however of primary importance across the sample. Grindr was most widely used, followed in order by Tinder, Hornet, Scruff (‘bears’ and hairy men), Recon (fetish), PlanetRomeo (dating and friends), Th3ndr (multiple partners) and J-Date (Jewish matchmaking). Yet the marketing and branding of male-male locative apps seems deliberately vague. Grindr is marketed as merely a ‘social network’ (Grindr 2016) and refers to dating but not sex (Woo 2013: 81), whilst Tinder, an app also hugely popular for heterosexual users, simply describes itself as ‘real life, but better’ (Tinder 2016). However, both apps were conceived in more specific terms by users, and this specificity gives us a window into their sociocultural function.

The internet may have become by many measures the ‘normal and legitimate way of finding a sexual partner’ (Kauffman 2012: 5), but opinions varied regarding whether the apps catered to dating or hook-ups. This reflected critical perspectives of male-male locative apps, with different scholars labeling the products as ‘dating apps’ (as seen for example in Roth 2014; Blackwell et al. 2014; Shaw and Sender 2016), ‘people-nearby applications’ (Tong and de Wiele 2014), or ‘hook-up apps’ (Brubaker et al. 2014; Race 2015; Mowlabocus et al. 2016).<sup>44</sup> Participants were at least clear that ‘hooking up’ referred to actual sexual contact, *contra* Holman and Sillars’ (2011) findings that suggest ambiguity in the term as taking in a wider range of less sexual relations. Participants were also united in perceiving important differences between different apps, and these different orientations informed their use. Complicating the critical idea of a division between sex-oriented and relationship-oriented users (Alston 2013; Blackwell et al. 2014; L.LeFebvre 2017), here participants were either or both, at different times. Fluidity, rather than fixity, defined motivation for app use. For example, some users explained that they had pursued casual sexual encounters for a period before seeking a longer-term partner; when this relationship ended the cycle began again, with casual sexual encounters again progressing to longer partnerships.

Grindr was by some distance the most popular of the apps used, accounting for almost half of participant recruitment. Grindr’s wide usage is to an extent self-perpetuating: few would reject an app that is the market leader. But it also delivers the irresistible novelty of a locative ‘cascade’ (Grindr 2016), an algorithmic grid that orders nearby users by proximity. Mainstream media has long painted Grindr as a forum for casual sexual encounters or ‘hook-ups’, particularly within heterosexual culture and even in commentaries which are broadly supportive of the platform (for example Witt 2014; Wiegler 2016), and the visual impact of Grindr’s ‘cascade’ of potential matches is subtly implicated in this messaging, but interestingly this hook-up orientation was not uniformly perceived by participants. Users variously described the app as ‘intimidating’ (Alex) ‘notorious’ (Heng), and ‘sordid’ (Aaron), but also as ‘a community’ (Joseph; Richard) and a useful forum for meeting new people (Ethan). Users embraced and rejected Grindr in almost equal measure, and within each interview sometimes

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<sup>44</sup> In the research field, definitional labeling seems *not* to be linked to public health versus sociological disciplines, contrary to what might be expected.

expressed conflicting sentiments. Lenny, aged 21,<sup>45</sup> defines Grindr thus: ‘it’s definitely not a dating app, no matter what people tell you’. Likewise, Heng (21) admits ‘its reputation, I guess, is not good’. Despite its wider reputation, users coded Grindr as a dating-oriented app as often as a platform geared towards casual sexual encounter. Thus the perceived flexibility of the app was the source for its appeal as well as its interpretative range.

Following a long-held pop culture fascination with Grindr, Tinder was lauded at the time of its launch in 2012 as a ‘Grindr for straight people’ and as a ‘holy grail’ of dating apps (Witt 2014) because of its geolocative function, a first for what was initially a heterosexual dating app. Yet several participants noted that in heterosexual culture Tinder was considered more ‘slutty’ or promiscuously oriented than desktop-based programs such as Plenty of Fish or Match.com, seemingly engineered for more serious relationships. This suggests that sexual orientation informs social expectations of the platform. As Brandon (20) reflects: ‘in the heterosexual community - this feels weird to say - Tinder has the same stigma that Grindr does, that most guys are there to hook up with girls’. Brandon is identifying both a stigma associated with Grindr as a broker for casual sex and Tinder as aping this non-hegemonic sexual practice. This is in contrast to Hobbs et al. (2016), who found that long-term relationship-seeking dominates heterosexual Tinder users’ motivations on the platform, suggesting that cultural identifications are not easily shifted by the reality of embodied practice. Either way, former user Mike (38) argues that the geospatial dating apps that once constituted a niche technological practice for gay men have now migrated into the mainstream:

It was something that gay men started five or ten years ago which straight people found really weird, even a few years ago. [It] has now become the norm for straight people as well. And that’s probably been one of the biggest changes, I think, in society.

Tim (28), an office worker and filmmaker, goes further, perceiving hypocrisy from a heterosexual culture that broadcasts disapproval (as well as curiosity) to the sexualised approach of Grindr, yet now valorises Tinder uncritically (although in reality, warnings about Tinder proliferate in mainstream media; take for example ‘10 Signs Your Tinder Match is Rapey’ [sic], Zhou 2013). Tim’s employment of

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<sup>45</sup> Hereafter participant age is referred to in brackets.

heteronormative practices as a point of comparison is interesting because it is a decidedly queer discursive technique. He highlights both the perceived and actual differences in use between the heterosexual and non-heterosexual users. Tinder caters to both markets and yet its mode of use is different between the two, showing how heteronormative constructs of dating and relationships restrict how these forms of socialisation can be practiced in reality for straight users, whose pursuit of casual sexual encounter has historically been inhibited by cultural conditioning. Tim's critique of the growth in heterosexual locative apps centres on his identification with these platforms as specifically queer resources: 'I feel like that the more heterosexual culture appropriates it, the less ownership queer culture has over it'. These apps thwart or 'queer' the dominant social reality of their physical environment,<sup>46</sup> enabling the user to invert or re-position dominant norms. Thus the mainstreaming of what was once uniquely Grindr's locative function arguably represents the hegemonic co-opting of subcultural practice so visible across queer culture. But perhaps more valuable is the way that this co-option opens up space for more public discussion of Grindr, Hornet and Scruff – all apps with enormous user followings yet disproportionately limited public exposure and consequent critical exploration.

Counter to participants' evaluation of Tinder as liberating or even queering heterosexual normative expectations, in the context of male-male encounter Tinder users seemed to have adhered to significantly more traditional dating patterns. Alex (26) experienced misunderstandings with other Tinder users for what they perceived as his overtly sexual approaches when he moved from the sexual candour characteristic of Grindr to interacting in the more 'vanilla' online space of Tinder. As an inexperienced, bicurious man exploring these platforms for the first time, Alex interpreted both online spaces incorrectly: he struggled to vocalise the forthright approach to conversation typical of Grindr, but having learnt this mode of interaction, he then fell foul of the more reserved social codes that structure Tinder conversation. Relatedly, Simeon (35) points out that getting bombarded with attention on Grindr, where as he perceives it, 'everyone is straight into sex and probably invites you for drugs', is an exhausting prospect to mediate; as a result he tends to migrate to Tinder where advances are more conversational. Thus we see that the short space of time

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<sup>46</sup> In so doing, these apps demonstrate one way in which the locative turn in digital-physical hybridisation can enable the insertion of a queer lens into otherwise heteronormative spaces.

within which virtual communication can emerge into material encounters can constitute an instantaneity that some users experience as almost threatening.

The disconnect generated by these clashing expectations is mitigated somewhat by the reciprocity built in to the architecture of the apps to match users. Because the Tinder platform only matches users with other people who have indicated a mutual attraction, there is less chance of being overwhelmed by unsolicited advances, and this held particular appeal for less experienced participants. As Owen (20) points out: ‘you can decide who you’re exposed to or what you want to be exposed to’. There is also a sociality offered by these apps that may be overlooked in the tendency to code them as sexual facilitators. Brandon (20) argues that Tinder users are generally not looking for hook-ups but social or dating experiences, all in the service of emotional rapport. Whilst he is loathe to admit that he uses Grindr to anyone but his closest gay friends, he is happy to talk with less-known acquaintances or colleagues about Tinder: ‘I don’t think that I’ve been asked once to have sex on that app, so that’s why I feel comfortable saying I have Tinder: it’s not sexual’. This exemplifies how each user’s experience of an app builds together to inform how that app is perceived in the wider public sphere, and consequently the extent to which it shapes cultural messaging about its social or sexual narrative.

### Subjective sociality

When new users enter a service, in this case a locative dating platform, they will learn from others how to act in that particular context (Burke et al. 2009). In the context of male-male locative media this seems to inform how these new users then behave online, replicating the behaviours they see most often displayed on the app. Users should therefore develop modes of acceptable use for the app and behave in relation to those codes, but apps are not always universally perceived. Advertising executive Liam (44) points out that ‘Grindr has a reputation, and I don’t remember its initial marketing but it doesn’t actually, from a formal standpoint, necessarily signal that it’s a sex app. It’s the users who engage [it] in that manner, I think’. Nevertheless, a popular joke tagline seen on Grindr profiles reads ‘we can lie about how we met’, suggesting that these apps are still sullied by sexual inference or found somehow morally lacking in a way that heterosexual versions are not. The evident disparity in the social status of

male-male apps compared to their heterosexual versions in public society echoes the slow progress amongst heterosexual dating website users to feel comfortable talking openly about their practices as legitimate (Blossfeld and Schmitz 2011).

The ambiguous positioning of queer male apps invites users to formulate their own use, and the resulting flexibility can be simultaneously liberating and confusing for the hyperconnected user. Participants recognised that some users embody different identities, or perform different roles, on different apps despite *being the same person in real life*. The ability to bring out different traits in different technological contexts has long underpinned our obsession with the internet (Rheingold 1993; Turkle 1995; Campbell 2004; Bullingham and Vasconcelos 2013). Here, identity subjectivity was in evidence across different platforms. As Kevin protests: ‘the same person who you chat to on Grindr is a completely different persona on Plenty of Fish’. This suggests a malleable, always-in-production identity that many disliked because they deemed it dishonest.

However, this specific behaviour reflects a more widespread adaptability in presentation across different platforms that was by contrast unproblematically accepted, reflecting Ellison et al.’s (2011) finding that users justify their own online misrepresentation. Reflecting the ‘imagined audience’ that social media users write for (Marwick and boyd 2010), participants emphasised different personal characteristics in their online profile and conversational behaviour as a way to cater to different apps with (real or perceived) different markets for partners. Thus participants spoke of inviting a user round for sex via their Grindr app after merely cursory introductions, whilst at the same time furnishing their Tinder profile with a range of photos, hobbies and employment information in order to attract other users looking for long-term relationships. Whilst some may see such practices as duplicitous, there is nothing inherently unethical about this adaptability, nor in searching for a long-term relationship whilst also practicing casual sex: it represents a welcome complication of culturally-inscribed ‘types’ of app user to instead make space for multiplicity in app use, and it exemplifies how individuals might engage in ‘strategic performances’ in pursuit of love and sex (Hobbs et al. 2016: 6). This is also not a phenomenon new to locative media; identity manipulation was often tangled up in the socialisation of online chatrooms of the 1990s (Campbell 2004). But in this locative context, participants’ distaste for what they judged as blatant transmogrification evident in

other users' profiles came from 'othering' that behaviour whilst their own manipulation of a variety of identity aspects online went uninterrogated. Essentially, individuals judged other users as being too flexibly oriented whilst *practicing an identical scoping*. Recall that space is not a neutral backdrop for human action, but is constantly produced *by* humans (Lefebvre 1991). Thus we see that the online spaces of apps are socially mediated through norms that hybridise online self-presentation with 'real-life' moral judgements.

The embodied sociality of these apps provokes a final reflection on online practice. Participants frequently mentioned that their Grindr account generated a particular fascination for heterosexual colleagues or friends, despite its broad similarities to Tinder, which friends might reasonably be assumed to be familiar with. As a result, the user was often persuaded at social occasions to demonstrate how the app worked. In a societal context where queerness is still frequently veiled or functions in the subcultural realm, this curiosity around the sex lives of sexual minorities is not in itself novel (Mowlabocus 2010a; Doran 2014), and it can also be argued that the app merely provides a vessel for discussing homosexual culture and practice with the uninitiated, primarily in the *visible* enactment of queer sexual identities. We are again reminded of the striking *mélange* of images that constitute the platforms. But in showing friends and colleagues their apps, users seemed unconcerned by their responsibility as gatekeeper for other users. Ideas of a supposed code of conduct for online sharing and communication (Lampinen et al. 2011) were frequently absent in this respect, with some participants reasoning that locative dating apps were public domain, and therefore so were users' details. Such nonchalance was surprising: after all, describing one's own personal life is different to sharing information of app users nearby who may not be publicly 'out'. Indiscriminate sharing of the app risks 'outing' other users to a larger group than that contained by the online network. Some scholars take issue with this hegemonic curiosity. As Steven Doran (2014: 14) argues:

Grindr has become the punchline to the joke that is the mainstream reading of gay culture. And as a punchline it feeds into the mainstream's construction of gay culture as vacuous, shallow, and sex obsessed. The attention directed towards Grindr therefore brings heightened mainstream scrutiny of gay sexual culture and intensifies the effect of heteronormative evaluations of gay culture.



Admittedly, sharing apps with heterosexual friends was unevenly practiced. Some participants expressed horror at the idea, but others viewed it as a form of group entertainment that could educate the uninitiated into queer subculture. Doran's point is that Grindr is codified as an artefact of a larger sociotechnical assemblage of 'homosexuality' that reinforces some of its common pitfalls whilst failing to account for other intricacies and subjectivities. The result of this visibility in heteronormative mainstream culture is an essentialising of what the platform is and does, at the expense of a more considered examination of what it might mean for users in a larger context of hyperconnection. Therefore even though perceptions of designated use are variously figured for different users with different motivations, the locative platform remains essentialised in mainstream culture like so many queer technologies before it, from classified ads to chatrooms.

This section has argued that locative app users constitute hyperconnected users in terms of their constant connectivity and relations with technology and other humans, as well as their habituated daily use. It is clear that MSM apps are ambiguously and variously interpreted as tools for dating as well as more casual sexual relationships, and engender a subjective sociality for some users that reveals a paucity of established social codes for ethical technology use. Finally, some participants vocalise concerns about the hegemonic co-option of the distinctly queer capacity of MSM locative media to overlay heteronormative space with more multiple hybrid networks. There is more to unpack here regarding how locative media involve the queer hyperconnected user in complex assemblages of technology, online space, and connection. One of these assemblages is the gamification of apps, to which we turn now.

### **Hyperconnected gamification: 'the thrill of the swipe'**

Having considered how participants perceive locative maps and their intended use, this section explores the gamification of locative apps as another way in which these media are impacting queer life. Game apps are one way in which locative media has been popularly harnessed by mobile devices. The release of location-based augmented reality game *Pokémon GO* in July 2016 was a worldwide phenomenon, downloaded over 500 million times in the space of several months. The commonalities between dating apps and game apps may not be immediately apparent, but elements of gamification

were in evidence via app design on behalf of the developers and also in the mode of use by participants. In fact by some measures, entertainment constitutes the *primary* reason for using dating apps (Carpenter and McEwan 2016). The entertainment value of partner-matching is not lost on critics: Zygmunt Bauman (2003) critiques online dating as a type of ‘liquid love’, making courtship into entertainment, whilst Jaime Woo shrewdly situates Grindr as ‘a game’ with players aiming for the ‘goal’ of connection (2013: 38). My findings extend Woo’s definition by showing how this goal of connection highlights a reward cycle predicated on peer affirmation.

Dating apps already reflect many of the attractions of location-based games, but develop a yet more engaging model by shifting locative interaction from a human-environment to human-human domain. The ordering of Grindr users across a grid by proximity is undeniably intriguing: as the user moves around their own area, the faces that match to that vicinity are replaced by ‘newer’, closer users. Thus moving through the city transforms the homescreen display, and with it, the opportunities to ‘score’ new connections. This enhancement constructs a social reality for users that is imbued with choice and potentiality. Pranesh (40) and his partner use Grindr together when travelling abroad to learn about the queer culture of the places they visit. The novelty of Grindr’s geolocative capabilities provides specific entertainment; Pranesh argues that ‘it’s like a video game sometimes!’ Meanwhile, Brandon (20) enjoys revisiting his Grindr profile after a period of time offline because it ‘rewards’ him with a backlog of messages from interested matches like bonus points in a platform game. The goal is not simply what Woo (2013) interprets as connection, but *quantity* of connections, matching with as many interested parties as possible and enacting an assessment for quality only later. Success is predicated on multiple connections in the different spaces of daily life and at as many points throughout a user’s routine as possible. For example, Ethan (24) explains that he ‘plays’ on his apps during his commute and before he goes to bed. He rationalises it as an activity to do when he is bored and available, situating apps as erotically charged entertainment: ‘a game, left, right, left, right. Neural pleasure, I got a match!’ The hybridisation of the digital and physical encourages the user to parse their surroundings for new matches in much the same way as Pokémon overlays physical terrain with virtual prizes to be won.

Contrary to Grindr's grid of men, suggestive of prizes on offer, Tinder presents profiles singly rather than multiply, accompanied by a 'swipe' bar. This format proves no less appealing as a game, with profiles virtually stacked like a deck of 'playing cards' (Hobbs et al 2016); here, 'love, sex and intimacy are the stakes of the game' (2). Popular culture frequently riffs on this idea: 'the swiping phase is as lulling in its eye-glazing repetition as a casino slot machine' (Witt 2014; see also Thompson 2016). Users can swiftly swipe left to reject the 'look' of a match or right to express their approval, saving them to a folder of other such approved matches. These men are controlling their online environment simply through a finger gesture, the contemporary equivalent of a mouse click. The haptic media response that has for so long been a popular feature of video games such as the Nintendo-64 *Rumblepak* (1997) is now resituated as the vibration that notifies the app user that they have 'scored'. Aaron (27) admits that the thrill of swiping through swathes of online matches can be reductive: 'if you actually take the time to click on people's profiles...you get a better picture of the person. But that's honestly not what I'm doing most of the time'. Jason (23) swipes *every* profile to the right, and only when he sees who matches him in return does he choose who to start a conversation with. It is the tantalising prospect of reciprocity from others that keeps users coming back to 'play'.

Online game play has increasingly converged with 'real' life (Gordon and de Souza e Silva 2011: 60), and for participants this extended to ideas of gambling. Kevin (33) admits that having swiped yes for a match, he has a tendency to continue pursuing other available matches instead of starting an (online) conversation with any of the contacts who have matched in return. He recognises the confusing logic of this habit, but expresses his compulsion as a way to achieve a larger imagined prize that remains forever ahead: 'you think: am I going to waste my time talking to that person when maybe, possibly, someone better is further down the flick-list?' Thus a sense of eternal potentiality can stop the user from actually committing to developing conversation with those contacts already 'won'. The reward is forgotten soon after it is gained in pursuit of the next opportunity. For Kevin, the consequence is an intensification rather than streamlining of the technology on offer: 'the matches build up and someone who would have been perfectly lovely to talk to ends up ten people down your list'. By Kevin's own admission, the matches are plentiful but the next stage of online conversation, to say nothing of embodied encounter, is significantly lower. The

gratification of online connection with another user diminishes as the number increases, which leads in turn to scoping for more men, resulting in less time dedicated to each virtual meeting. As Zygmunt Bauman notes: ‘when the quality lets you down, you tend to seek redemption in quantity’ (2003 xiii). Thus whilst making systems of interaction game-like increases user motivation to engage (Gordon and de Souza e Silva 2011: 65), the terms of that engagement are decided by the user and may be unevenly practiced.

Finally, there is a tendency to talk about male-male sex itself as a form of ‘play’ (Meunier 2014; Race 2015; 2017), exemplified in locative apps by users ‘looking’ for ‘fun’. Sex between men who do not identify as gay or bisexual may constitute a ‘game’ (Ward 2015), whilst amongst-self identified gay men, sexual group play can be seen as an attempt at a pornographic heterotopia, an ‘elsewhere’ scene for encounter (Race 2015).<sup>47</sup> Technology is implicated in this heterotopia, because in addition to sex, there might be just ‘chilling, chatting, watching porn, browsing profiles’ (267). Sexualised terminology of play, and the popularity in some circles for ‘PNP’ (party’n’play) gatherings aided by drugs (as explored in Chapter 7), establish play as a carefree metaphor for group sex practices that do not themselves suggest ‘play’ in the traditional sense. In this scenario, apps act as the central mediator in matching interested players, as well as networking group ‘sessions’. Thus the gamification of apps extends beyond their virtual promulgation of suspense – their flashing lights and cognitive rewards – to an *embodied* form of play as a shorthand definition for some of the queerer or riskier sexual practices on offer. As a *facilitator* for play the app is no longer itself the site of gaming, but becomes a game that can mediate new games.

Hyperconnection clearly underpins app-mediated gamification, but the net result is harder to gauge. If app-based encounter truly fulfilled the tenets of a game there would be a sense of competition or progress, but because there is no tally of compliments nor ever-climbing matches to be compared between users, the competition really only exists within the self. The feedback loop of positive affirmation mediates ongoing use, because the more interest a user receives from other parties, the more validated that user feels, and consequently the more successful their ‘playing’. Yet this persists even when the rewards (physical meeting) fail to exceed the resources committed (time and

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<sup>47</sup> For etymology of heterotopia, see Michel Foucault (1984).

effort). The game is never over because there is no end point; peer interest constitutes the reward but participant use patterns suggest that these rewards are transient and need to be pursued once more the next time a user enters the platform. This gamification of dating via locative apps typifies the difficulty in achieving physical encounter for any given user. Their own conscious, self-aware use does not preclude their neglect at the hands of other users, who may be ‘playing’ the app in search of virtual affirmation as much as physical encounter. The aim is not physical meeting or even significant virtual connection, but a positive neural stimulation that mimics the instinctive buzz of smartphone games like Candy Crush or Angry Birds. Thus these apps reconfigure user behaviours to be more mediated by technology, more involved in their locative media, and ever-more conditioned by peer interest online. The result is a hyperconnected body that is as preoccupied by online practice – both theirs and other users – as they are by physical embodiment. As the next section demonstrates, play is not the only repurposing of queer locative media in the interests of hyperconnection; these apps also share conceptual territory with mainstream social media platforms.

### **Queer locative apps as social media**

This section explores how locative media are changing queer lives by conditioning hyperconnection through shared territory with mainstream social media assemblages. Social media platforms are clearly central to mobile users’ social lives, counting some 2.3 billion social media users worldwide (Chaffey 2016). Networks like Facebook, Twitter and Instagram are inherently spatial (Leszczynski 2017) and facilitate ‘mass self-communication’ (Castells 2009). They featured for almost every participant in this study on a daily basis, across the age and occupation spectrum. All these ways of connecting lead to what Lorenza Parisi (2015) calls ‘a networked place experience’ (5). But these social network compositions also overlap intriguingly with dating apps. Products like Grindr and Tinder combine older iterations of digital matchmaking including chatrooms and Gaydar with contemporary mainstream social media. These platforms tempt the user into regular visits throughout the day, they offer users the ability to ‘check in’ to a location or area, and like social media, they encourage multiple social connections with many different users. In short, they provide ideal conditions for a ‘promiscuous network culture’ (Payne 2014). Yet the sociality implied

by social media seems to be only partly translated to locative media, suggesting that hyperconnection is shaped by the format of online experience.

Grindr is (in)famous for the relative anonymity offered to its users, who can develop a profile with very little in the way of identifying information. By contrast, Tinder authenticates its users by requiring each user to link their profile to Facebook. As a result of this identity-linked feature, the profile of every potential match is accompanied by a list of mutual friends skimmed from Facebook. This compounds the legitimacy of a Tinder match (insofar as the presence of mutual friends can vouch in any significant way for the potential of the match in question). Linking Facebook to Tinder highlights shared connections as a way of (subjectively) testifying to a stranger's personality. As Ali muses: 'you tend to think, well they like the same people as I do, maybe we'll have a similar personality'. Situating itself so closely to mainstream social media helps to legitimise Tinder itself as an open, friendly platform. On the other hand, such a positioning assumes that users are as open about their sexuality and their use of MSM dating apps as they are about their social media platforms. Locative technology synthesises a user's online and offline worlds (Blackwell et al. 2014), which may complicate interactions by uncomfortably co-situating acquaintances, friends and family members. For 'out' gay or bisexual men this poses few problems, but for others a need has emerged to manage multiple online and offline identities that were once more distinct.

Eric, the oldest participant (65), and Patrick, one of the youngest (21), each separately recounted painful memories of downloading and then quickly deleting Tinder because it compulsorily connects users to Facebook to activate its 'friends in common' tool, which was a problem as neither user was publicly 'out'. The anxiety this unforeseen exposure provoked speaks to Jason Orne's (2011) definition of 'strategic outness', with degrees of openness regarding sexual identity varying from person to person. Managing 'coming out' to different social networks autonomously has clearly been adversely impacted for both Eric and Patrick by their unconsidered integration of social media. Their experiences show that the encouragement of personal divulgence and personality broadcasting – indeed, of self-promotion – so typical of social media (Lovink 2011: 39) is more problematic when it is propagated to a dating app without reframing what is broadcast. This propagation is not usually a problem because the

app is so popular with heterosexual users with nothing to ‘hide’, but it is clear that for non-heterosexual users the social media model and its drive for authentication on linked apps may require consideration for those operating different public-private identities or navigating Orne’s ‘strategic outness’. For the contemporary hyperconnected user, sharing on one platform does not automatically predicate against sharing on others. As a result, the onus is on the user to navigate which platforms they ‘perform’ publicly.

There are nevertheless benefits to these apps’ imbrication with mainstream social media. The internet has historically served as an environment for bringing together shared interests, and whilst social media is the more obvious resource for this sociality (Papacharissi 2010; Ellison and boyd 2013), locative media can assist new users too. In the same way that a social media app like Instagram allows users to explore their own creativity, participants – particularly those still coming to terms with their sexuality – conceived of the apps as platforms on which to explore their burgeoning sexuality. The apps provide an information-gathering role reminiscent of the peer guidance offered in earlier virtual chatrooms (Campbell 2004). Some recalled feeling comforted or even relieved at seeing so many other users online. Owen muses: ‘that’s comforting when you’re 16, and you can’t say anything to anybody [about your sexuality] and just knowing that there’s other people out there is quite good’. Owen in particular relied heavily on apps when he first moved to London, aged eighteen. He remembers that whilst he was coming to terms with his sexuality, older friends were:

Going out in Soho and hooking up with people. So they were able to do it face to face, whereas I didn’t have the confidence in myself to do it face-to-face as successfully. So I was doing it online instead. Because online I can control how I look and what I come across as. I can be myself as well, and talk like normal.

Tinder and Grindr acted as portals for Owen to explore an equivalent-but-virtual queer space that substituted his peers’ ability to meet men face-to-face, and online he was able to skip embodied rejection. At its best, the ‘space’ in which users interact online is freeing, liberatory and consequence-free, and as a result they may feel less inhibited online than they are in ‘real’ life.

In fact, there is a negotiation at stake between what people perceive as public and private spaces online. For those who are comfortable with their sexual identity, adding social media profile information to their dating app profiles provides a way of legitimising their identity online via a social ‘verification’ (Jason) as well as building a denser description to better attract others. *Contra* the unintended ‘outing’ of Eric and Patrick, here social media relating practices prove beneficial. There was a consensus that the addition of photos, interactions, and school and city networks serves to humanise dating app profiles: as Owen reasons, ‘[linking] Instagram is like another layer of information confirming you’re real’. This drive to ‘layer’ social media networks as a route to intelligibility comes as no surprise when we consider that platforms such as Facebook have integrated requirements for users to prove authenticity. Online dating has historically been perceived as a suspicious realm (Anderson 2005), and the fact that so many participants value online authentication via linked social media profiles suggests that authenticity remains an issue in locative apps, despite a comparative relaxation in attitudes towards other identity-based online activities such as online banking (Hanafizadeh et al. 2014). At the same time, Aaron sounds a note of caution, arguing that Twitter in particular ‘reveals quite a lot about you, like your personality, your beliefs. You don’t wanna give that all away straight away to just anybody’. Fellow participant Ruo-jian shows us why, ‘confessing’ to taking screenshots of men he finds attractive on his social media platforms for his own consumption. Ruo-jian recognises that this behaviour occupies uncertain moral territory, but reasons:

They’ve put out those pictures and Instagram profiles, you know the fact that they’ve shown those profiles, well it gives me the license, effectively, to note down their usernames and sort of stalk them a bit on Instagram [...] if I’m being rational about it you might say that it’s a bit unethical [but] it is a sort of product of the world that we’re in.

In Ruo-jian’s online practice we see a more morally ambiguous facet to the visual focus of locative platforms as places of seeing and being seen. Social media is a more public platform than locative media because it prioritises public forms of address; this distinction becomes clear only when its users co-opt more subcultural locative media, which are less public and more intimate.



The increasingly blurry boundaries between locative apps and social media mean that the two forms are becoming co-constitutive as forms of relating. But locative apps diverge from mainstream social media in their focus on networking strangers rather than friends. Toby (34), for example, makes a distinction between ‘socialising’ and ‘communicating’, defining Facebook as a ‘virtual hangout place’ to socialise with his friends whereas Grindr and PlanetRomeo are for meeting strangers. Social networking sites take relationships made offline and transfer them online (boyd and Ellison 2007), whereas male-male dating platforms form relationships *online* and transfer them to the offline world. For many participants, the attraction of dating apps lay in the way they helped them to meet people they would otherwise not have the chance to. The apps also provide a window into a world of choice and user volume that users found refreshing in a daily context where most people are assumed to be heterosexual and therefore off-limits. Locative apps reflect social media in that both are an ‘imagined collective that emerges as a result of the intersection of people, technology and practice’ (boyd 2010: 39), but they are different enough to provide distinct attractions for the hyperconnected user, and therefore make different demands on that user’s time and bandwidth. Nevertheless, these findings suggest that locative media positively impact queer men’s lives in terms of educating those exploring their sexuality through networked social and sexual assemblages.

### **The age-related digital divide and locative dating apps**

Another variable in exploring the hyperconnected user is the extent to which an age-related digital divide is in evidence in locative male-male dating apps. Scholarship has long highlighted an age-related or generational ‘digital divide’ in technology use (Golding 2000; Loges and Jung 2001; Katz and Rice 2002; Friemel 2016), including incorporation of technology into daily life (Selwyn 2004) and internet and app use in youth (Gardner and Davis 2013). The presence of the digital divide so often pitched between young and old in critical debates was complicated in this study by individual technological affinity and the context in which apps were used. Participants used the internet across both work and leisure contexts including email, Skype meetings, online shopping, locative mapping, route planning and social media, and they described the internet as powerful, useful, and vital for their work and personal lives, as well as a principal means of connecting with other people. Their enthusiasm for online

technology as a ‘helper’ reflects scholarship emphasising benefits in mobility (Fortunati and Taipale 2014) and social mediation (boyd 2010; van Dijck 2013; although see Murray and Campbell 2015 for mixed results in relationships). General internet usage was not significantly age linked, and nor was mobile communication use, which was widespread, reflecting research showing that mobile communication as a social practice is increasingly taken for granted (Ling 2012; Ling and Donner 2013; Westlund 2015). In fact, locative dating apps were singled out by some older participants as a particularly impressive tool in assisting their search for same-sex encounter.

Younger participants were almost uniformly comfortable with locative apps. This is to be expected considering that their lives have been characterised by the integrated and pervasive mobile technologies proliferating in recent years. For these users, the imagining of mobile phones as prosthetic extensions of the body, allowing them to ‘connect anytime, anywhere, with anybody’ (Pertierra 2005: 27) is particularly apt. Their comfort with locative apps extended to the ‘profile work’ (Silfverberg et al. 2011) of incorporating and regulating information in their online profile, refuting Gardner and Davis’ (2013) argument that youth are risk-averse in constructing online identities. Technology has been extensively incorporated into the lives of this group, from computer and broadband access at home or school, followed by mobile phone ownership at a comparably far younger age than older participants. This density of use, indicative of hyperconnectivity, was the sole age-related difference from older participants. Indeed, participants younger than 23 or 24 have *not known* adult life without locative dating apps and the associated processes of mediated, embodied encounter (Miles 2017). The geolocative abilities of smartphones not only means that today’s youth have never gotten lost, because they can simply turn to their GPS-enabled smartphone (Gardner and Davis 2013), they are also never isolated from networks of likeminded individuals, including other queer technology users. Sakio (22) is aware that he is young enough to have no comparison to contemporary digital apparatus as a means of queer connection: ‘when I started getting into the scene, the app was already there’. Equally, at 20, Brandon reflects that Grindr has always been his primary resource for meeting boyfriends, flings and even a significant number of friends, because the app was well-established by the time he downloaded it aged 15.

For these users, consideration of antecedent formats for online sexual encounter are moot because their usage begins and ends with locative platforms.

The one exception to a pattern of confident app use among young participants is interesting for its subtext. Oliver, at age 19, fits the ‘digital native’ demographic much discussed in popular media as a way of describing technologically literate youth (Prensky 2001; Oblinger and Oblinger 2005; Bennett et al. 2008). Having grown up in the ‘digital age’, these users are usually favourable to emerging platforms. Yet in interview Oliver declared himself technophobic, having only recently purchased a smartphone and professing difficulty in using it. He dubs himself a ‘late adopter’ amongst his fellow university students: ‘in that respect, I’m much like my grandma’. Yet his actual usage indicates confident app use, extending even to ‘digital promiscuity’ (Payne 2014): the ability to attend to multiple different online platforms simultaneously and expertly. Oliver’s cognitive mismatch could be attributed to underplaying his technological ability, or the intuitive app design of Grindr and Tinder compared to other features of contemporary smartphones, or the social/sexual rewards that justify the time expended learning to use these apps specifically. Alternatively, Oliver’s self-perception of poor digital literacy may be in comparison to his peers (at 19, still teenagers) in an environment of ubiquitous technology. Whatever the reason for the disconnect, Oliver’s narrative shows us that there is a difference between digital literacy and personal *embrace* of intense connectivity and its consequences for the user. The fact that Oliver’s statement is unusual amongst the cohort evidences the way in which pervasive technological integration now functions as the status quo for users.

In contrast to younger app users in this study, larger cultural and media discourses are suggestive of youthful naivety regarding technological confidence. The critical picture presents online space as a dichotomous resource for youth, offering both education and support but also exposure to risky material and other, dangerous, users (Buckingham and Willett 2006). Young people are often painted as vulnerable users of the internet (Livingstone and Boba 2006; Michaud and Bélanger 2010; Livingstone and Smith 2014), and this implies a subtext of youth being inexpert or ‘learner’ users who need adult guidance. As Jackson and Scott (2016) point out, society positions children as simultaneously vulnerable online but also open to consumerism, and adults’ reluctance to discuss these issues leaves children to negotiate cultural

sexualisation alone. In this study, whilst older participants volunteered cautionary views regarding internet safety and privacy concerns, they were also *less aware of those same concerns in their own practice* compared to younger participants, whereas younger users – perhaps having absorbed more information, more recently, from their peer groups or educators – were acutely aware of the social, sexual and security issues at stake. Their sophisticated understanding of online communication complicates traditional cultural consensus that suggests children need protection from the online world and that it is adults who bear the responsibility of protecting them.

Amongst older users, neither locative dating app adoption nor daily app use patterns were age-influenced. In fact their daily use frequently outstripped younger participants' use both for total time connected and frequency of connection. Still, as Oliver's experience showed, self-perception can be deceptive regardless of age. Phil (40) declares he is 'far too old to be a digital native', yet it is clear that he has long been technologically proficient, having worked with technology extensively over several decades and maintaining multiple dating profiles. Meanwhile Eric (65) argues that one of the reasons why he is chronically unsuccessful on the apps is because younger users are better able to latch onto technology and communicate more naturally in the style favoured amongst users. In reality, conversational style varied greatly, even when we include the common codes and abbreviations that permeate these apps (Woo 2013; for 'textisms' see Herring 2001; Drouin and Driver 2012). Thus the age-related digital divide that Eric perceives is more likely to be symbolic of his larger emotional dissatisfaction with the apps. His ongoing perseverance with apps he perceives as youth-oriented implies that he hopes to be proven wrong in his own conclusion.

The other discovery complicating simplistic notions of an age-related digital divide was that older participants highlighted the historical significance of technology for their queer development, contrary to recent research maintaining that younger MSM tend to meet partners more via apps than old people who still prioritise physical venues (Chow et al. 2016: 151). Scholarship attests to a long history of gay males as pioneers in internet-mediated encounter (Campbell 2004; Skeggs et al. 2004; Daneback et al. 2005; Simpson 2015b). In this study older participants discussed in some depth their experiences of earlier iterations of online dating and hook-up platforms, with fascinating narrative inquiry (as per Flyvberg 2006) reflecting different ways in which

users practiced their sexuality historically. The sheer scope offered by contemporary locative media dwarfs earlier tools for queer encounter, but participants were unfazed, having incorporated digital technologies into their ‘practices of sex sourcing relatively early on in the history of domestic Internet access’ (Mowlabocus et al. 2016). IRC (Internet Relay Chat) forums provided the first in a series of tools for Darren’s hook-ups. Meanwhile, Mike (38) remembers using Yahoo list-serves and online chatrooms in internet cafes, when photos were rarely exchanged between users because the bandwidth was so poor. In a contemporary context of convergence, it is easy to take for granted seamless downloads of videos and images as a condition of our internet usage, but these facilities have not always been so assumed. Graham (51) remembers using the ‘very slow’ GayUniverse online chatroom when visiting America in 1994, made possible by an unlimited dial-up internet connection unavailable at home. As Graham points out, older dating technology was desk-based and therefore static:

You’d go home and you’d open it up and you’d hope there would be replies in your inbox. It was a bit like having a pen pal in those days, it was much slower. Not everyone had an email address – you had to have a longer-term strategy.

The growth in ubiquitous computing (Dourish and Bell 2011; Farman 2012) means that digital connection is not just more widespread but more mobile, meaning that Graham’s strategy no longer needs to be so carefully planned. His access to ‘thousands’ of men in any given area of central London is a marked contrast from the hunt he remembers from earlier iterations of dating technologies, and for this reason he uses Grindr almost constantly. Graham has developed confident spatial awareness, but dismisses the physical maps of his past in comparison to today’s intuitive locative technology: ‘the A-Zs we used were black and white, and they didn’t really actually give you a feel for where you were’. As he reasons, now ‘you get to meet people that you wouldn’t meet otherwise. I’ve met some really interesting, diverse people’. His almost constant app use marks him as a hyperconnected user, but this density of use comes from the richness and efficiency of today’s technological resources. Users were not *able* to practice hyperconnectivity in previous decades when internet use was tethered to a desktop PC or limited by dial-up connection.

Virtual queer hangouts have always been modelled in some sense on geographical spaces – consider, for example, the ‘where’ of a chat ‘room’ (Turner 2003). But locative apps have progressed from desktop-based dating to make actual location central to the user encounter. In the process, several older participants expressed fears that valuable elements of desk-based dating were lost, testifying to the novel value of those platforms in connecting users with similarly-identified peers (as per Daneback et al. 2005). Liam, 44, exhibits nostalgia for Gaydar and Manhunt, despite their ‘cumbersome’ architecture. He argues that they cohered more sexual potency because although images were scarcer, the information shared between users covered great depth. Rather than swiping through a plethora of users, the emphasis was on extended conversation with fewer matches. These warm (and subjective) recollections of desktop-based male-male dating contrast with widespread distrust of the format in society at the time (Baym 2010). In this study, the subtext seems not to be that online technology signals dissociation from emotional connection, but that the speed and brevity of locative media encounters negatively impact that connection. What was once seen as quite daring image exchange via webcam a decade ago is commonplace with today’s mobile cameraphones. Yet whilst today’s hyperconnected user can take advantage of streamlined computer-mediated communication, the associated norms are less developed. There is a lag between the rapid transformation of online communication and those participating in its processes. The hyperconnected user experiences glitches not with the technology in question but in its associated human-human communication.

### **Hyperconnected subjectivity?**

Having defined and unpacked ideas of hyperconnectivity throughout this chapter, does ‘user’ remain the best term to describe those participating in or subject to this technological mediation? We might reasonably consider the term ‘hyper-connected *subject*’, which distinguishes itself from cultural assumptions relating to the ‘user’ as a signifier for commerce or business. However, the idea of a ‘subject’ suggests a deterministic framework, whereas this research emphasises human agency-centered understandings of technology use. ‘Subjectivity’, rather than ‘subject’, would allow for more complex relations between the cultural and the social, with the subject articulated more broadly (Hall 1988; Modleski 1991). For example, Rosalind Gill

(2008: 444) suggests that we may have to make ‘compulsory (sexual) agency’ a required feature of postfeminist, neoliberal subjectivity. This addresses what she argues is a growing reluctance in scholarly contexts to recognise the presence of subjectivity. Gill’s frustration that ‘autonomous choices [are] so fetishised’ (2008: 436) within a critical scenario preoccupied by resistance to dominant culture is valid, and Tania Modleski’s work also remains significant in arguing that despite supposed ‘resistance’ to mass culture’s manipulation, we nevertheless exist inside ideology and are, much as we might dislike it, ‘cultural dupes’ (1991: 45). Yet as a result it is hard not to feel the guilty weight of being somehow complicit in a neoliberal or postfeminist environment that fails to recognise our own ‘duping’.

This subjectivity framework is inadequate in recognising the autonomy of users who willingly download locative apps, even accepting the cultural currency that unconsciously informs some (but by no means all) of their supposedly independent decisions. Foucauldian ideas of the human as subject (Foucault 1982) have scaffolded a productive body of sexuality and space scholarship, but thinking strictly in terms of a subject compromises the potential for human agency other than direct (often queer) resistances. This chapter has shown that participants do not unconsciously absorb cultural conditioning but recognise it and sometimes challenge it. That is not to say that subjectivities were absent; cultural conditioning was evident in participants’ assimilative modes of living and working. Yet in other ways, participants were very aware of enculturation, especially in hegemonic terms. Research by Ahn and Jung (2016: 1249) suggest that users enact a risk-benefit appraisal in using technology, and this was borne out in this project, with participants questioning their own motivations for, or rationale against, upholding the status quo as it pertained to their hyperconnectivity. As a result, they formulated personalised positions on their app use, social media behaviours, and – amongst older users – personal histories of queer technology.

This participant autonomy complicates easy labeling of hyperconnected technology users as ‘cultural dupes’. Certainly, participants were influenced by larger coercive systems; these individuals are not uniformly ‘entrepreneurial actors who are rational, calculating and self-regulating’ (Gill 2008: 437), but nor are they passive agents. Whilst they are not resistant to cultural codes (indeed, who is?) their app use evidenced an

awareness of these socio-cultural metanarratives, and they frequently troubled their supposed inculcation into such narratives as assumed by their sexuality, locality or gender. As a result, the hyperconnected ‘user’ remains a better fit than ‘subject’, attending as it does to practice and experience. Positioning these individuals as ‘users’ also highlights the way that they tend to define themselves autonomously, with their technology use just one behaviour in their larger praxis.

A different issue in referring to my participants as technology ‘users’ comes from scholarly suggestions that researchers should refer to ‘people’, not ‘users’, because humanising participants helps to highlight their interests, concerns, knowledge and rights (Lievrouw and Livingstone 2006; see also de Ridder et al. 2016). Yet I seek to emphasise their use of the apps *as precisely that*: users. I do so fully aware of Lievrouw and Livingstone’s argument that the word ‘user’ connotes individualism: ‘there is no associated collective noun, one may merely aggregate users’ (2006: 14). This connotation actually feels appropriate when considering my participants, who overwhelmingly emphasised solo practices in using what are marketed as intensely social apps, reminiscent of the ‘networked individualism’ promulgated by supposedly ‘social’ media (Baym 2010). Perhaps the apps even synthesise the private with the social in such a way that makes it difficult to dichotomise individualism and collectivism: both are present, and both mediate the user’s experience.

Regardless, acknowledging the different issues bound up in each definitional tag for users is one way to address uncertainty. As Gillian Rose (2016) concludes: ‘[n]one of these terms – citizen, user, public – address the fact that people are different in all sorts of ways’ (n.pag). My humanistic approach does not align *exclusively* with humanist critiques of technology as pursued by Jaron Lanier (2010; 2013), Michael Sacasas (2015) and Gillian Rose (2016); I share Noortke Marres’ (2017) view that positioning humanist approaches against scientific approaches as adversaries is unproductive (see also Kinsley 2016b). Rather, I think it is productive to think of technology via its human *scale*. After all, ‘when is whatever we mean by “the digital” not “human”?’ (Kinsley 2016b, n.pag). My focus on behaviour rather than just identity means we need to consider users as conscious players in the processes that they participate in. The focus, then, becomes re-inhabiting the hyperconnected user with explorations of sociotechnical processes informing human experiences, as Chapter 5 will explore.



## **Conclusion**

Understanding how locative media technologies are changing queer social life and queer spaces must include online practice. This chapter has located queer male locative app users in a contemporary moment of hyperconnectivity, for whom connections with others are multiple, dense, and continuous. It has explored how popular platforms Grindr and Tinder are conceptualised, and evidenced how practice is shaped by users as much as app architecture and cultural perceptions. I have also highlighted the imbrications between social media and male-male locative media, arguing that contemporary dating apps utilise and layer personal networks in a recognisable way to anyone familiar with mainstream platforms including Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. However, the emphasis on introductions between strangers rather than friends, and the focus on embodied rather than virtual connection, mark male-male apps as distinctive. My analysis of age-based app use finds commonalities across age groups, but for older users, the internet has shifted from a 'place' we visit to access information or communicate with others to a continually connected resource. We now turn to Chapter 5 in order to consider the embodied social and sexual impacts of locative media through study of time and space in the hybridised city.

# Chapter 5

## Navigating time and space in the hybridised city

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Online is just the words, but when you're with someone you get the body language. The connection between you is more kind've immediate when you're actually in a space with someone, in their physical presence.

Interview with Ruo-jian, 23

The hybridised city is a place where digital and physical spheres coexist, mesh or interrelate. Here, walkers transform a place into a space by their presence and movements: their bodies 'follow the thicks and thins of an urban "text" they write about without being able to read it' (de Certeau 1988: 93). This chapter explores different forms of this 'text' by exploring how queer men meet each other in the city when mediated by contemporary locative technology. Cities are full of people we may not know or want to talk to (Amin 2012), but these apps are unique in letting us decide whom we would like to meet and on what terms (Race 2015), a process simultaneously liberating and commodifying. We have considered the hyperconnected user in terms of their online relations; this chapter moves virtual concerns into the 'when' and 'where' of embodied space, and asks what queer encounter looks like when it is brokered online by locative apps but actualised in physical space.

This chapter first examines the role of male-male locative apps in everyday life. I explore how usage patterns are adopted and vary between users and evaluate the complicating factors at play in converting online conversation to offline encounter, including 'timewasters'. I consider the practices of 'pin dropping' and locational scoping as examples of online connection mediating lived experience. I also consider whether virtual sex constitutes its own practice or substitutes as foreplay for the embodied sexual encounter. Finally, I examine the way that locative media hybridise

physical and digital by overlaying embodiment with online connection, and discuss the implications of this layering for how users parse the city for queer encounter.<sup>48</sup>

### **The daily Grind(r): the ‘when’ of app use**

The relentless incorporation of smartphones into our everyday lives signals a hybridisation of digital and physical domains, but in a quotidian context this effect often goes unrecognised, despite critical work emphasising the significant relations between technology and everyday life (Silverstone 2005; Hine 2015). The sheer ubiquity of locative media in the hyperconnected user’s mediatised environment means that the apps are almost seamlessly incorporated into ‘real’ time and space, because locative media ‘combine the affordances of constant connectivity with the daily ritualised routines of a locality’ (Gordon and de Souza e Silva 2011: 108). Participants logged in to their apps throughout the day, from the ‘morning ritual’ (Ethan) to ‘the 3am drunken or horny and high messages’ (Darren). Check-in times followed common lifestyle patterns of commuting, work breaks, and more sustained at home in the evening. For example, Ali’s check-in schedule has developed by habit:

When you wake up, or after a shower, or when you go to the toilet, or when you have your lunch; those kind of times where you really don’t have anything to do and you’ve got spare time. So I think all those like in-between hours [...] Every time you’ve got a spare like 5 minutes you just jump on, see who’s around and what to do.

Ali’s routine shows that connectivity beyond the physical environment intrudes into the patterns and configurations of his daily life, but because the use of the locative app brings tangible rewards of its own – a sense of purpose, a respite from boredom, an affirmation of self-worth – it is not *perceived* as disruptive. Indeed, participants tended to feel that they integrated apps into their lives, rather than adapting their behaviour in order to use the apps. This still constitutes adaptation because technological integration may be routinised yet still externally mediated, meaning that integration is not totally passive. But what is important here is users’ perceived personalised incorporation of technology, rather than effort expended for hybridisation in any more onerous sense. The ease with which integration was

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<sup>48</sup> Selected results from this chapter have appeared in article form; see S.Miles (2017) ‘Sex in the digital city: location-based dating apps and queer urban life’, in *Gender, Place and Culture*.

experienced by users may also be due in part to a perceived stigma of being in thrall to technology in a cultural climate of ‘digital detox’. After all, being disconnected has ‘taken on new value, just as being continuously connected is the object of existential angst’ (Wilson 2014: 551). Volunteering these apps as dominant forces in daily behaviour might risk social opprobrium. The sentiment suggesting that apps wielded no discernible impact on phenomenological practice was justified by participants treating their online conversation as routinised use of the internet at a domesticated scale (as per Silverstone 2005). By being implicated in everyday routine, apps become part of personal online maintenance in the same way as their social media counterparts or email programs already are.

Exploration of the ‘when’ of app use is a form of temporality, and the temporality that mediates locative media is double-edged. On one hand, these platforms offer many more potential partners than are present in physical venues such as nightclubs, so the time spent searching for matches is condensed, leading to an impressive compression of scale. David Harvey’s (1989) theory of time-space compression is usually applied to contemporary global flows, but if we conceptualise the city as a huge space to be processed and nightlife as a ‘portion’ of time, locative apps compress the two variables so that from one spot the app user can survey thousands of metres in radius, and do so in mere seconds. Therefore we see that not just de Certeau’s (1988) aforementioned walking, but also networks of digital software, work to spatially reorder the city to make it habitable (Thrift 2004). On the other hand, the sense of gratifying immediacy promulgated by these apps means that the user has to appear always available in order to increase their chances of online introductions and therefore offline encounter. Because digital and physical modes of living are so hybridised, the digital labour practiced by app users impacted on ‘real’ daily life. Strategies were developed to maximise exposure to other men, including turning the app on but darkening the screen whilst in the workplace to ‘harvest’ more introductions. But the hybridisation of physical and digital spaces often fails because the *potentiality* promulgated by online platforms distracted users from their embodied reality.

Conversely, online ‘pace’ is so quick that users spoke of missed connections because necessary time away from the app for real-life commitments impeded the

conversations they had started previously when their schedule was less pressured. Desire is, after all, temporally specific. As Tim surmises: ‘people are wanting sex now, or wanting to meet now, and if you’re not replying within ten minutes you’ve missed the opportunity’. We see then that the ‘when’ of app use is personal but the larger temporality of the processes it generates are universal. There is a disruptive element to the technology here, because its temporality makes specific demands of the hyperconnected user. The seemingly relentless in-the-moment demands levied by other app users for encounter cannot always be ‘synced’ seamlessly into one’s embodied experience. Users who are heavily involved in their locative dating platforms experience more difficulty subsuming their apps into their embodied routines, adapting instead to the demands of their technology. Thus the hybridised integration seemingly experienced by users actually belies more disruptive elements.

Imagining locative apps as online spaces is rather more straightforward than conceptualising them as hybridised entities, but doing so allows users to foreground the virtual realm at the expense of embodied encounter. Finkel et al. (2012: 2) show that longer periods of computer-mediated communication prior to meeting reduces romantic prospects. There is no reason why online conversation cannot in itself constitute virtual intimacy, but almost every participant expressed frustration at what they perceived as a delay to the intended goal of physical encounter. For example, Craig wants to avoid thinking of the apps as a virtual reality because he wants to prioritise their role as a tool for real-life encounter. Yet across the group the conversion rate from virtual communication to physical meeting was strikingly low. Those who enjoyed a healthier conversion rate were the users who were unequivocally clear in their profile and in their conversations with other users about what they were using the app for (usually no-strings-attached sex). They were also the users who minimised online conversation, presenting to users a direct invitation to meet and moving on to another match if a reciprocal desire was not forthcoming. They were thus able to capitalise on the quantity of potential partners, matching with men who would mirror their desire to expedite meeting. Yet virtual introduction of some sorts, even if cursory, is necessary for physical encounter in locative apps. Interaction with virtual space is therefore routinised for users to the extent that it is seen by many as a tedious preamble to physical connection rather than a desirable

space of its own. However, because internet-brokered encounter still offers better odds for scoping new partners than analogue methods, users persist with the format.

### Timewasters and timewasting

The inherent ambiguity of what apps can realise for users results in a space of encounter contested by conflicting expectations. Graham metaphorises the dismal ratio of online conversation to embodied meeting: ‘you could compare it to standing on a platform at the tube: the tube goes past and *one* person may be standing on the platform. I mean you can *talk* to hundreds of people’. The implication is that wider choice merely provokes tighter selection, to the extent that numerous online approaches are still parsed to limited meetings. Success with others is mediated by availability (time) and proximity (space), so the more time spent online and ready to converse results in a more successful user. Because of this, the experience of ‘time wasters’, characterised by endless message swapping without a commitment to meeting, proved frustrating for users. This provides a counterpoint to research finding that men use MSM apps to ‘kill time’ (Rice et al. 2012; see also Goedel and Duncan 2015). Indeed, a full quarter of Rice et al.’s sample never had sex with anyone they had met on Grindr (2012: 5). In the context of locative app networking, time-wasters are unsuccessful not only because they do not convert introduction to encounter, but also because they negatively impact *the conversion success of those they talk with*. For Liam for example, timewasting looks like ‘chatting, chatting, chatting with someone’ without a mutually agreed plan to progress the relationship to a physical context. Thus the mechanics of digital-physical hybridisation are exposed by their failure: if the two parties do not reach consensus then the virtual space they share cannot translate to a physical context.

What is fascinating about this mismatch is not just that it was perceived as a common issue, but that it pathologised the timewaster as someone not chatting for the ‘right’ reasons, prevaricating via laziness, vague intentions, or worse, an inauthentic identity. Inscribed through deviance, the timewaster is elongating the virtual realm rather than appropriately lapsing it into a physical encounter. The conversational timewaster seems almost like an automated ‘bot’, and yet in reality they too are human users, about whose subjectivity we know nothing because the connection

pursued is semi-anonymous. Perhaps as a result of the unaccountable motivations of those they communicated with, participants questioned their own practice, wondering out loud how they found themselves online time after time or expressing anxiety about their own unconscious motivations. As Liam asks: ‘most of the time I go there I think “why am I even coming here?” I’m not *looking* for anything’. Liam’s attitude actually mirrors the timewasting that he perceives in other users, because his own aimlessness discourages commitment to physical meeting. There is clearly an issue of deindividuation here because users are frustrated by other seemingly less committed users, and yet they themselves exhibit some of the same avoidant behaviours. After all, the participants online at work or commuting were unlikely to be able to actually *meet* for sex within the near future, and yet at the times when they were available to meet, they resented conversation from those who were unavailable. Thus app users unconsciously dehumanise other users as inhibiting their sexual gratification whilst overlooking ways in which they themselves similarly behave. The hyperconnected user desires a sexual partner on their own terms as if it were an individualised consumption rather than collaborative negotiation.

In this fraught relationship is there any defence for the castigated timewaster? Jaime Woo (2013: 54) suggests that timewasting is not a coherent identity: you can be a timewaster at one time and desire a physical encounter at other times. This dichotomy indicates a larger complexity within contemporary hyperconnectivity of users who may not be sexually confident or entirely comfortable with their own queer identity. Apps allow inexperienced users opportunities to come to terms with their sexuality, and uncertainty should be accommodated within this exploratory scenario. Brandon, in his late teens, fits the definition of ‘timewaster’ but reveals a more complicated picture. He admits getting cold feet about meeting strangers for sex: ‘I’ll not show up [...] we’ll make arrangements, and then I’ll kind of end up not wanting to, so then I’m like “nah, I don’t wanna do this”’. His youth and inexperience clearly inform a precarious emotional position, which results in behaviour interpreted by other users as timewasting. The repetitious cycle of near-meets and cancellations propelling Brandon towards sexual encounter, only for him to immediately delete the app afterwards suggests a kind of endurance test that can only be relieved by achieving erotic release, at which point a self-surveillance of subjectively imagined morality impels him to delete the app. As Brandon’s experience grows, so may his

sexual equilibrium, but the scenario demonstrates that a ‘timewaster’ need not be a static identity but can instead be a condition of technological mediation disrupting individual sexual subjectivity.

The assumption that these apps are as efficient at hybridisation in the service of encounter as they are marketed is clearly contested. By promising users eternal potentiality, these apps discourage the user from fully committing to current prospective partners, reinforcing the argument by Finkel et al. (2012) that access to a large pool of potential partners can elicit an evaluative mindset that reduces willingness to commit to any one match. In the process apps invite yet more online browsing using the very apparatus that was supposed to speed up matching in the first place. The frustrations articulated by users testify to the daily labour involved in maximising opportunities supposedly promulgated by the app (see Chapter 7). Moreover, the tendency of some users to focus only on physical meeting, dismissing online conversation as a tenable pursuit, invalidates a more emotional context in which the apps operate as a way of combatting loneliness or isolation. That the apps contain a network of similarly non-heterosexual, similarly located men is clear; as such, an online rapport can be built between strangers without difficulty. More obliquely evidenced is the fact that users may not always be truly looking for encounter so much as connection. In a hybridised scenario oriented to minimising distance as the goal of the online platform, virtual communication is inevitably de-prioritised in favour of ‘real’ encounter. The attraction of proximity serves as a reminder of how far locative properties have changed the internet from a site of cyberspace unmoored from geographic coordinates to an apparatus mediated by place.

### **‘If I can walk to it, it’s a yes’: mapping the physical encounter**

This section considers the impact of locative media on considerations of distance and proximity. A world away from the static desktop, the sheer mobility of contemporary dating platforms for users on the go evidences the interconnected processes that undergird contemporary technology (Dourish & Bell 2011). The appeal of locative dating apps lies not in their ability to connect users at a global scale but to facilitate meeting on a micro-scale. Licklider and Taylor argued in 1968 that looking to the



future, ‘life will be happier for the on-line individual because the people with whom one interacts most strongly will be selected more by commonality of interests and goals than by accidents of proximity’ (40), but locative apps invert this logic, boasting of their ability to bring the object of desire to ‘0 feet away’ (Grindr 2016) through almost instantaneous connection. These apps aim to save time in looking for partners for social or sexual encounter whilst minimising the distance covered to achieve those encounters.

Locative technology folds in a rich array of geographical context in digital form. Gordon and de Souza e Silva (2011: 33) point out that the technological sophistication of locative mapping programs can itself be a feature: ‘the map has before only facilitated physical exploration. Now, the map becomes a location that is itself worthy of exploring’. Gordon and de Souza e Silva’s focus is on online maps offering interactive services, but we can see this idea of the map as its own feature in the popular ‘dropped pin’<sup>49</sup> function offered by Grindr and its imitators, a critically under-examined app feature that has become *de rigueur* for users who are serious about meeting in person. A user can send those he is communicating with a virtual map of his area with a pin dropped in his exact location to emphasise proximity or aid navigation. Its popularity even extends to its use as an orientation tool. Craig, resident in London for just 7 months, has learnt more about the geography of the city via crowd-sourcing pins: ‘you get the location and you think ok, so that pin is here, and you can see where your pin is as well, and then you can pinch out a little bit and you’re like “ok, so that’s where I am and they’re out there”’.

When users share their pinned location they are negotiating a shared hybrid space, with the virtual space of their conversation overlaid onto actual geographical coordinates. The dropping of the pin shifts communication from a virtual, unmoored space to something that acts as referent to a concretely located position. Divulging this location echoes de Souza e Silva and Frith’s (2012) definition of the ‘presentation of location’ as a locus of bonding and trust for locative media users. In this project, when users offered a dropped pin they expected their conversational partner to do the same, not just to rationalise how long it would take to meet the partner at either

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<sup>49</sup> It strikes me that the digitally-inscribed ‘dropped pin’ recalls the ‘dropped pins’ that historically ascertained shared lesbian desire (see for example Valentine 1996: 149).

home but also because the action constituted an offering of private information. Failure to reciprocate resulted in a sense of betrayal because the user's locational information went unmatched, leaving them at an informational disadvantage.

The dropped pin is just one of several ways to map encounter. The city's extensive public transport network provided another way to conceptualise distance, and it was considered particularly useful in opening up the metropolis to men scattered across the city. Yet London's density throws up so many matches in each area that for many participants a 100-strong 'grid' of men may all be walkable. In this density context, one can afford to filter for proximity. Particularly when arranging sexual encounters from their homes, participants met with proximate partners more often than distant ones, and some contended that their desire to meet for sexual encounter meant that proximity actually took precedent over the appeal of the man they were meeting with. Thus distance operates as a deciding factor for sexual relations like never before. By increasing the volume of opportunity (contact) with matches (other proximate men), the prerogative to meet matches that might be better suited but further away is reduced. On occasions where participants were communicating with more than one other user, proximity often became the deciding factor in whom to arrange a meeting with. A partner's distance directly influences the time taken to meet, so the urge for a sexual encounter in particular is predicated on finding someone who can be co-present as soon as possible. Correspondingly, users tended to travel further for a date than for a hook-up, especially via Tinder, reinforcing its popular perception as a vehicle for longer-term relationships as argued in Chapter 4.

There is a flipside to the convenience of ranking partners by proximity. Whilst users are opening up new ways of seeing into their neighbourhood and these ways of seeing are expediting new queer encounters, from a different perspective they are *limiting* themselves by geographical location rather than filtering through a more personally relevant metric. Participants over-emphasised the status of near neighbours, despite those people having no automatic commonality with the user other than their proximity. The 'ground zero' of a locative dating app is wherever the user is at that moment, but there is no inherent value to that place and no reason why an ideal match for a user should necessarily also be residing in the same street, block or neighbourhood. For example, Darren explains that in his former home on England's

south coast, a single Grindr grid of 100 men would show matches as far away as the Isle of Wight, whereas in Darren's current home of Vauxhall, London, a popular gay district, 100 men will be tracked within a mere 500 metres of his 'ground zero'. Darren's willingness to extend his range in search of a better-matched partner was rare amongst participants who tended to foreclose their success in meeting better-matched men by disproportionately prioritising proximate users. These apps rationalise new encounters on a human scale, narrowing a user's horizons from potential encounters across a whole city to only those on offer within the neighbourhood. Mediating encounter by proximity is reductive because whilst it expedites meeting, it undervalues other criteria for successful matching.

Proximity even remains a deciding variable for choosing partners when users consider long-term rather than casual relationships, because shared geographical territory promotes physical co-presence. In such a large city, it is not hard to see why users try to cohere a sense of locality in any way they can. Toby points out that London represents a frustratingly transitional space of movement. Globalisation may serve to highlight hyper-local territory in distinctive ways (Massey 1994) but London's huge size impairs Toby's ability to build meaningful connection: 'it's just not a city for relationships. I think it has to do with pace, and people come and go'. This fast-paced 'transit' culture filters down into relationships and dilutes their intensity. Because there are so many opportunities, the commitment to working on any one relationship is diminished. In this context, attempts to localise social and sexual experience are understandable. Geolocational networks like Grindr do in a sense strengthen relations between physically proximate users because they introduce users in the same neighborhood. Several participants commented that the app had brokered meetings with nearby residents when they first moved to a London borough, some of whom went on to become friends. In this sense locative media helpfully actualise the role of digital technology in developing a sense of place (Plunkett 2011), in contrast to the placelessness of earlier virtual realities, and this place-making impacts social assemblages beyond sexual encounter.

That is not to say locative apps synthesise place-making without complication. The residential density of urban space means that proximate neighbors introduced online often feel *too* close, especially in high-rise apartment blocks and with a specificity of

measurement in the locative programming that borders on pathological. In the same way that media, whether broadcast media or internet, can create a sense of nearness whilst at the same time provoking ambivalence or even distress at this nearness (Couldry and Markham 2008), locative media can generate an attraction-repulsion dynamic, not just in terms of involvement but also spatial proximity. Aaron expresses a discomfort shared by many when he describes a reluctance to respond to those less than 50 metres away: 'it's that kind of danger of coming to talk to you, or finding you, or I don't know, it seems a bit threatening. You don't have that safety buffer of distance'. The result of this density is a more critical assessment of the locational ability of these MSM apps. Participants realise that the ability to familiarise the stranger within the anonymous metropolis provides a hybridised intimacy which is attractive but at the same time indiscriminate. We see, then, that geolocational proximity is not a neutral politics.

### **Locational Scoping: 'fresh fish in the pond'**

The geolocative capability of dating apps encouraged users to think in strikingly cartographic terms about their surroundings, but not in the geographical sense we might assume. Instead of the orthodox spatial cartography seen in traditional maps, here users envisioned partners relationally, ranked by proximity in radius. These apps match with Sara Ahmed's (2006) conception of position as something mobile and relational, rather than attached to fixed coordinates. Because apps are most often accessed at home or work, the range of other users can become repetitive: on Grindr, for example, without a paid subscription potential partners are limited to the 100 nearest users, forcing users to choose matches from a comparatively limited scope. Logging on in a different area refreshes opportunities. This exploratory process has been referred to as 'environmental probing' (Alston 2013: 29), but I choose to term it 'locational scoping' as a way of emphasising the humanistic (i.e. distinctive *qualities* of place) rather than just geographical (i.e. environment as place-based) properties of this sampling. Whereas Alston argues it is used in familiar as well as unfamiliar areas over an extended period to establish a sense of the temporality of the queer landscape (29), this study encountered it skewed to unfamiliar localities.

Locational scoping combines cruising with mapping to explore new territories via the characteristics of their eligible population. Participants enjoyed turning on their apps when visiting or even passing through an area in order to sample an entirely different grid of men. By logging on in different areas of London, the user is, as Jason terms it, ‘fishing in a different pool of people who are around me’. Whether or not the locational scoping results in more concrete encounters is almost beside the point; it is multiplying the *potentiality* that is important. Users persisted in this locational scoping even when they knew they were unable to physically meet matches. With the recent introduction of tube station wifi, Jason even logs on through his commute across the city to maximise the geographical range available for introductions from others. It seems illogical to broadcast spatial inaccuracy in order to maximise exposure to scattered users when a consequent meeting is so unlikely, but Jason’s argument speaks to a poignant deeper desire: ‘it’s more to see what’s actually there. To expand the chances of actually meeting someone who you really like, who might be someone who acts *differently*.’ In this sense, the ‘always-on’ culture associated with mobile phone ubiquity (Turkle 2011) is actually being harnessed by Jason specifically to *seek* intimacy rather than foreclose it, as in Turkle’s predictions. Whether Jason is seeking an intimacy that technology has progressively impaired as argued by Turkle (2011: 34) is harder to gauge, but if locative media can constitute Castell’s spaces of flows (1997) rather than static geographic nodes, there seems no reason why the apps cannot progress the ‘ideal’ match, given their almost limitless potential.

In fact, altering one’s journey through London to ‘check into’ districts with a specific cultural cachet or known density of users was not uncommon. Technologies are shaped by the places in which they are located (Dourish and Bell 2007), and this locational variance is evidenced when participants check into distinctive or high-density areas including City of London and Canary Wharf<sup>50</sup> to satisfy their curiosity regarding who these (often affluent) users are and what they might offer. Participants identified specific demographic differences in different areas, including ‘money’ men in West London and a concentration of young professionals in London’s financial district. For Sakio, locational scoping reaps rewards in Soho: ‘you want the traffic to be as fast as possible – you know, looking for the right person for the right purposes’.

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<sup>50</sup> Both areas are banking and business hubs.

Away from the home he shares with his parents in the southern suburbs, here the faces are new and the churn is continuous. Locational scoping even extends internationally, with ‘Passport’ (Tinder) and ‘Explore’ (Hornet) functions inviting the user to remotely scope different locations across the world in real-time. A world map of queer culture, relayed in real-time, is an arresting prospect. But in the same way that online sex was prioritised as a prerequisite for embodied meeting, users were not interested in making international introductions online without the reward of a physical meeting to follow. Despite the opportunities for digital world-making, the nearness of encounter retains primacy.

### **The hybridised ‘where’ of app use**

Having explored when people use apps, the ‘where’ of app use generates some interesting tensions that help us understand the impact of locative media on queer life. Locative apps represent a way in which technology mediates bodies in space. The portability of the mobile device itself (Beer 2012) means that for participants in this study, settings as varied as a house party, a nightclub, a hospital and even ‘on the toilet’ all featured as physical portals for digital connection. Whilst homes spaces invite more intimate communication, and may be more likely to include ‘sexting’ (as defined in Chapter 2 of this thesis) or image exchange, a user can just as easily circulate in the urban public environment and virtually communicate with a non-present partner. Contrary to the suggestion by Kane Race (2015: 254) that the ability to use apps is predicated on the privilege of private space, men in this study frequently used their apps in public, albeit employing techniques for inconspicuous use.<sup>51</sup> Differentiated spaces of connectivity inform how the hyperconnected user uses their app. Beyond the expected gradations between different spaces, normative sociocultural considerations, particularly the work environment, informed app use across the city.

Far from critical concerns that attending to mobile phones may reduce awareness of a user’s physical environment (Gordon and de Souza e Silva 2011: 86; see also Hampton et al. 2010; Keilj et al., 2013; Nakamura 2015), participants in this study

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<sup>51</sup> Race’s rationale of private space for app users may be related to his focus on group sex, which is more likely to occur in residential settings.

were conversely hyper-aware of their environment and those present in it. As Graham enthuses of the connections his app brokers: 'it's amazing when you think how many people you can meet, and know how many different homes you've been into in your area'. But users were hyper-aware of their environment in more self-conscious terms too, because it was through gauging their physical surroundings that they decided whether or not they could 'get away' with opening their dating apps. The ways in which participants navigated what Kitchin and Dodge (2011) term the 'social contour' of software were context-dependent, but independently of each other, participants developed remarkably similar micro-environments to facilitate app use in the city. Small private corners within larger public spaces, such as a library reading room or a corner seat in a coffee shop, were popular. Busy, high-footfall spaces such as shopping malls seemed to exert an irresistible force on users because of their density and concomitant potential for encounter, but the sheer amount of people in close proximity means that the risk of embarrassment in being seen online sometimes made connection fraught. As Gill Valentine (2008b: 329) argues, encounters in public space 'carry with them a set of contextual expectations about appropriate ways of behaving which regulate our coexistence.' MSM app use in public space contravenes these expectations, and as such disrupts the normative status quo even though the ever-growing popularity of apps might logically suggest more accepted (and indeed acceptable) 'public' use.

Whilst participants did not feel they had anything to hide by using their apps in public, they nevertheless wanted to privatise this use. Users checking their apps on a bus or overground train spoke of angling their phone away from other commuters or lowering the screen brightness to help construct a semi-private space. Grindr's software update has removed its distinctive yellow interface so that users are no longer exposed by a telltale glow when checking their app, but suggestions that this adaptation now allows the whole world to become 'a potential place for sexual auction' (Jacque, cited in Rees 2016) may be rather overstating its impact. Brandon still shields his app use by using features of the environment around him: 'if I'm alone and people are definitely minding their own business I'll go stand by a wall and use it'. Alex similarly craves privacy and fears exposure: 'maybe it's just the fear of having been homophobically bullied [...] if I have that on my phone, everyone will know I'm gay'. On the other hand, Ethan enjoys checking into his networks on trains and

in airport lobbies because they are public spaces that nevertheless have a kind of privacy built into them. He is less concerned about strangers seeing his use here because in this transitory environment, meeting them again is so unlikely.

### Spaces of work and app use

The boundary between work and home is being progressively reimagined by technology, and the mobility of locative media provokes new considerations for appropriate use. The responsibility sits with the app user to decide how he hybridises his practice, contrasting autonomy with uncertainty. Participants reported guilt in being ‘caught’ using their apps at work by curious colleagues, echoing wider anxieties about disclosing non-heterosexuality in the workplace (Rumens 2008; 2010). In rational terms it is no cause for panic – after all, dating apps are just one of numerous digital distractions that workers might legitimately check in on at their desk, till or station – but being disturbed when attending to an online space so far removed from the workplace environment is cognitively jarring. This is compounded by widespread cultural stereotypes of Grindr in particular as a conduit for sex, which is unlikely (albeit not impossible) in these conditions. Being caught or worse, ‘outed’ by using the app at work echoes the ‘context collapse’ of too many, or the wrong, audience(s) being party to a user’s social media practice (boyd 2010). Attitudes regarding whether app use at work was appropriate were influenced by what users were happy to share with colleagues, and many felt that work and pleasure should remain separate. This was especially true where a workplace was large, reducing emotional connections with colleagues because of the sheer volume of employees. Some workplaces were not only heterosexually-dominated but in the case of one accountancy firm, overtly homophobic. There was also a particular reluctance for teachers to use the app in or near their place of work. Kevin recounts the anxiety he felt walking into school as he received a Grindr message:

It was just the fact of knowing that someone could see me and then see where I worked, and could make a connection between an online me and a real-life me, really easily. I couldn’t stop him walking into work and going to speak to that teacher or whatever, or see him causing a scene. I decided it wasn’t a good idea.



For Kevin, the hybridisation of work life and private life provoked complications rather than enrichment. A related tension using apps at work came in the form of colleagues or customers *appearing on* apps. Oliver used Grindr when working as a shop assistant in Soho because it was so exciting to see how many men were nearby. But he perceived a precarity in this use too: ‘I’d then be really self-conscious when I went downstairs: what if someone comes in who’s just seen me on Grindr? That type of shit could get me sacked.’

Aaron summarises the feelings of many when he admits that when it comes to work, ‘the thought of getting caught looking at Grindr doesn’t really bear thinking about’. The risk is not so much punishment as a disclosure to colleagues of highly personal information, and with it, the reputation for a sex drive powerful enough to interfere with a work schedule, even though logins rarely directly correlate with sexual encounter. Therefore whilst locative media offer a liberatory potential in overlaying hegemonic space with queerness, in a normative work environment this queering is avoided more than it is sought. As this section has shown, locative media can influence and be influenced by a range of spaces. We now turn to the spaces of online sex to continue exploration of locative hybridisation.

### **Online sex**

As virtual conceptualisations of space, locative platforms can themselves constitute places to ‘go’ to, providing moments of intrigue, erotic potential and new encounters. Online sex is not only a source of ‘instant pleasures’ (Craft et al. 2012) but can be mutually rewarding, safe, and a way to sidestep the effort of a physical journey. Virtual sex on mobile devices is seen by society as dangerous or risky for adolescents (Albury and Crawford 2012; Ringrose et al. 2012), but there exists an evident relish for the practice in mainstream media as a healthy erotic activity for adults (Hasinoff 2012; Witt 2014). Yet it was generally pursued by participants only as a precursor to physical encounter. Despite its secondary status, it nevertheless comprised frequent and deceptively complex social relations.

Participants emphasised the importance of having an open mind to the idea of online sex, and it was widely practiced amongst the participant group. Sexting was a

particularly popular activity, ‘almost as foreplay’ (Toby), with the advantage of being unique to each conversation because it was constructed on the spot and cooperatively. Online interaction is different from embodied meeting because the former lacks the visual and non-verbal cues that are a function of offline conversation; perhaps as a result, users preferred visual to audio exchanges, reasoning that photos entailed less effort than audio. Further, for users who resided in shared accommodation, it offered a more discreet form of online sex. The imbrication of technology and sexual practices is nothing new, but what is new is the convergence of digitally mediated communication and ease with which we can distribute images (Cruz and Miguel 2014). Whether photos or sexting can be seen as any more embodied than audio depends on the erotic potential of the visual against the audible: certainly, photographs are more recognisable as erotic markers in the wider cultural context of contemporary pornography. In addition to the communication of fantasies and desires, sharing erotic photos with strangers online seems to be motivated by the positive affirmation granted by image recipients.

More ambiguously, sacrifice of personal information in the interests of improved matchmaking was clearly in evidence. Participants navigated a trade-off whereby they released more personal information, more often, in return for a higher chance of positive sexual experiences. These users are adopting the role of ‘privacy pragmatists’ (Raynes-Goldie 2010), who negotiate sharing their information based on the benefit it offers, whether this includes more ‘humanising’ information such as surname or job title or more revealing body photos, unsettling in the process distinctions between what constitutes private and public visual terrain. Users in this position are neither totally unconcerned about the intimacy of what is shared, nor so concerned by the handling of their information that they refrain from app membership altogether. They calculated that the personal information they sacrificed would be exceeded in value by what they could gain.

Nevertheless, picture trading comes with its own set of unwritten rules. Grindr and other apps are not neutral environments for photo trading, and critical exploration testifies to the subjective decision-making processes of those participating in online photo exchange (Ray 2007), including inexperienced users (Tiidenburg 2015). At least some picture swapping, even if not nude, was an unspoken requirement of many

conversations, especially conversations with an intention to physically meet. The reluctance of some users to offer a face photo was met by other users' frustration at the withholding of this key piece of information, so vital to the humanisation of online encounter. Users were not however expected to show their naked body and face together, and in fact many of the men interviewed actively avoided this combination based on privacy concerns. Yet photos of only the naked body without an accompanying face picture were rejected, perhaps because they inhibited the ability to humanise the conversational partner or even prove their legitimacy. Further, those who received a picture sometimes felt a compulsion to return one in reply or risk accusations of 'catfishing', a term referring to online identity theft for nefarious purposes (Harris 2013).<sup>52</sup> Therefore the tendency amongst users to operate introductions by degrees is a laboured but prudent self-protection in an online environment of anonymity and deindividuation.

More positively, the virtual realm offers distinct erotic possibilities independent of physical meeting. For users who are nervous about the potential awkwardness of a physical encounter, the online space of apps provides a commitment-free alternative. Online communication helps users explore their sexual desires (Döring 2000), and it seems reasonable to suggest that online sex might in turn help users decide if they want to progress to co-present encounter. It also invites co-constructed online fantasies, with erotic chat resembling a kind of jointly produced script (Adam et al. 2010). Kane Race (2015: 270) argues that 'sexual media can be approached as a specific structure of entanglement that gives rise to new capacities, modes of interaction, and affordances', and speculative cybersex constitutes precisely such an affordance. Relatedly, Ramirez et al. (2015) find that when online conversation is intimate and successful, so is resulting co-present conversation. But I would argue that whether virtual sex fantasies are ultimately realised in an embodied context, or indeed whether the virtual conversation ever results in a meeting at all, is beside the point. The fantasy has acted as a realisation of mutual desire, creating an intimate but virtual shared space for erotic connection.

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<sup>52</sup> Here, the criminal figure is the user who steals someone else's identity online for sexual gratification.

## Pornification and objectification

The excitement of sex talk between app users lies in the tangible reality of the exchange compared to more traditional pornographic consumption. For Travis, its appeal lies in its dialogic set-up: ‘you know the person, and you know it’s happening right there, it’s like having your own porn show’. It is more of an *exchange* than pornography, because it is an interactional rather than producer-consumer model that (notwithstanding user deceptions) offers pleasing reciprocity. The quotidian context of the conversation intensifies, rather than dilutes, the thrill of pornification; the excitement lies in the hyper-real potential of the conversation even if each user is ultimately treating the experience as a stimulus.

Taking the pornographic parallel further, we can see online sexual as peer-to-peer versions of popular live chats with pornstars. Apps offer themselves as ready substitutes for this sexual format, with the erotic potential of online sex coming not from the intimacy of the relationship formed but specifically via its anonymity. Sharif Mowlabocus (2007) has argued that the ‘pornification’ of gay online dating environments should prompt us to question uncritical celebratory narratives of these spaces as liberatory zones for queer bodies; the argument is developed in *Gaydar Culture* (Mowlabocus 2010a: 113), which contends that gay male online self-representation appropriates pornographic style as way of writing the digital self into being. Online sex channels the same visual conditioning, with choice proliferating almost infinitely in the app space. Antonio, for example, hypothesises using Grindr as a pornographic resource: ‘What do I want to experience today? Today I’m into this. So I will find someone who is into this. Tomorrow I am into that, and I’m going to find someone who is into that’. The categorisations mediating pornography leak into app design, because the user is invited to consume content (other users) from the desired genre (filtered field). This commodification is made possible by the sense of individuation promulgated by the platform.

As a result, a dichotomy emerged between users who identified a problematic commodification of apps as stand-ins for pornography rather than as dating apparatus, and others who relished this element to their operation. Liam complains

about the ‘porny’ feel of his online conversations, accurately deducing that some men are in pursuit of ‘live’ photos to masturbate to:

[I]f you do it, which I have done in the past, you sort of feel like – and I know this sounds really dramatic – but I feel like a little bit of my soul is lost when I send it out there, I don’t really want to, and then someone doesn’t reply back. Basically, someone is masturbating over your picture.

In striking contrast, participant Ethan admits: ‘quite often I’m horrible, and have a long conversation and masturbate, and then don’t talk to them any more’. Ethan’s attitude reflects the problematic end point of what Rainie and Wellman (2012) term networked individualism. Virtual sex may be more energising than passive consumption of commercial content, but Ethan himself admits that it is unfair to ‘lead a person on about the stuff you’re going to do, then decide “oh ok, I’ve done it, I’ve orgasmed in my hand so I may as well not do it anymore”’. The individualistic tendencies on display on an app like Grindr are often personal accommodations to the sexual commodification that undergirds the platform. Whilst Liam objects to the process itself, others adapt in ways that ensure their own sexual satisfaction is not foreclosed by others’ manipulation, but Ethan’s narrative suggests that Liam’s anxiety is justified. As a highly intelligent user, Ethan himself seems cognisant that his actions objectify others and foreclose opportunity for ongoing interaction. Yet rather than self-reflect on his behaviours in the larger social context, he blocks the user if they take issue with his behaviour. It serves to highlight the subjectivities inherent in this kind of exchange: using technology as the mediator to human communication and at the same time turning to technology as the broker when emotions or social codes threaten the potential gains of that connection.

It is easier than ever to form and to break connections in the contemporary digital age (Bauman 2003) and this drive is compounded by the anonymity offered by the apps. Tangled up in the dynamic of virtual sex is a self-conscious perception of compromised relations that is a direct consequence of the networked individualism typical of the platforms. As a defence against the dizzying array of data on a locative dating platform, the user becomes reluctant to think altruistically about other users and prioritises instead what he himself wants from the connection. As Francis explains: ‘I’m going to use you for what I want. And if that gives you what you want,

that's fine but I don't care.' Therefore not only does a wide range of potential partners promulgate a perception of endless choice, it encourages users to streamline socialisation to prioritise their own needs, often at the expense of online etiquette. Similarly, the emotional disassociation Graham feels in digital encounter encourages him to cut off online conversations more brutally than he would do in 'real life', particularly in a large city with almost endless new faces. After all: 'it's purely electrons on the screen'. Francis and Graham both evidence the idea that mediated communication encourages users to treat others as disposable. Conversation can be blunted online because there are no embodied repercussions, and the ability to simply 'press delete' (Bauman 2003: 65) without consequence means that responsibilities to each other are diminished. Intimacy is difficult in mediated technology when users are not co-present, so it is inevitable that less intimate bonds are more easily broken.

However, despite the contemporary app ideology promoting as its *raison d'être* a fast track to embodied meeting, we should note that intimacy need not be restricted to embodied scenarios but can structure digital conversation too, even if its presence tends to be overshadowed by more individualistic pursuits. App use need not always be embodied to be hybridised with physicality; Tim, for example, has only ever met with a few men in person but Grindr has played a significant role over several years in helping him to understand his sexual identity through online relationships. He argues that cyber relations deserve value independent from physical conversion: 'there's a definite value to having meatspace meeting,<sup>53</sup> but it doesn't mean that those cyber-relationships are any less valuable.' The fact that this viewpoint was rarely expressed by others shows that online connection was more often seen as a broker for physical meeting, crowding out the minority of users who might experience cyber relationships as gratifying on their own terms. It comes as no surprise, then, that many users feel that virtual sex is not conducive to developing intimacy. The architecture of these apps emphasise physicality so readily that exploratory online conversation deviates from the ideal embodied outcome of digital-physical hybridisation and is therefore seen as something to be avoided.

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<sup>53</sup> 'Meat-space', coined by William Gibson (1984: 239), refers to physical life as distinct from (often utopian) virtual reality.

A final, often overlooked issue is that prior sexual involvement online problematises meeting for a date because the intimacy already cohered is so far advanced beyond the traditional context of a first date. Whilst skipping those introductory stages is convenient because it eliminates obstacles that could impair potential connection before partners progress to physical encounter, it accelerates connection without an associated familiarity between the users who are meeting. It typifies the subjectivities generated by these apps amongst users who must navigate shifting sociotechnical relations in a not-so-seamlessly hybridised environment. The results of this section show that despite its specific pleasures, virtual sex is for most users secondary to physical encounter, although it plays a valuable role in partner matching. The minority who find it fulfilling on its own terms are outweighed by the majority who prioritise embodiment, and are willing to attenuate online etiquette to progress their aims. The complications of hybridisation are not entirely solved when users convert virtual conversation to embodied reality, as the following section will demonstrate.

### **Physical encounter**

Corporealisation of technology incorporates digital processes (in)to the body (Baym 2010), and this hybridisation impacts in important and underexplored ways on queer embodied sexual practice. As Bourne et al. (2013) point out, there is little critical research into MSM sexual desire outside of clinical discourse focusing on sexual health (*pace* Dowsett 1996; Rhodes and Kusick 2000). Their own study hones in on 13,000 UK respondents to the 180,000-strong European EMIS sexual practice survey (2011) to find that respondents value sex within long-term committed relationships as the ideal kind of sex, but note that MSM also seek volume and variety in their sexual lives. As Bourne et al. (2013: 9) note, the clear primacy of monogamy in participant responses is in stark contrast to media representations of MSM as promiscuous and anally oriented. By comparison, whilst app users in this much smaller, in-depth study exhibited a diverse set of sexual goals from long-term relationships to multiple hook-ups, they expressed less monogamous tendencies in desired forms of intimate connection, perhaps because respondents are made up of those currently pursuing connections via locative platforms. Some, though by no means all, participants' sexual agency also suggested a queer *jouissance* in direct refutation of the contemporary hegemonic expectation of 'good' sex. Rather than

sexuality being realised indoors and with known partners, it was for some men realised outdoors, ‘on the go’ and often with strangers. There were also disparities between what users said they were looking for and their actual experience, echoing what Kane Race (2015: 271) identifies as a ‘potential disconnect between people’s normative identifications and their actual sexual practices’. Essentially, a gulf may exist between what users feel they should say they want in terms of sex or relationships and what they actually *do* want.

The affordances of hybridisation in ‘real’ life are fascinating. Kevin for example has logged onto Grindr at his local park in order to check whether men who he sees exercising appear on his online grid, a passive route to confirming the sexuality of a stranger that neatly sidesteps the potential awkwardness of an embodied approach. However, Kevin is quick to vocalise his dissatisfaction at app users in a nightclub who turn to Grindr to make introductions online rather than strike up conversation with other clubbers. Whilst he concedes that it might feel more comfortable greeting a new match online than in person because navigating possible rejection is ‘easier’, he argues that the sight of two strangers messaging each other virtually whilst being co-present physically, possibly even within view of each other, is farcical. Kevin’s first scenario exemplifies the informational benefits of hybridity, whilst the second demonstrates the sometimes counter-productive logical endpoints of what this hybridisation achieves. Both scenarios highlight the slippages involved in progressing online communication to offline encounter.

When it comes to progressing from virtual to physical connection, Francis, a highly analytical thinker, deconstructs his experiences in fascinating detail. Uniquely among the participant group he separates rather than hybridises his app use from lived experience, despite the physical sexual connection it brokers:

There is a sense of virtual reality because it never, it doesn’t ever feel, even if you’re having a hook-up, it doesn’t feel real. It’s like this weird kind’ve exciting but bizarre version of reality where the conventional rules of engagements even within gay or queer society are still kind’ve really deconstructed. But I guess I just consider the little world that Grindr inhabits in my life and in my phone is literally just that, and it doesn’t really bleed into the rest of my life at all.



Francis' powerful narrative exhibits what Schwartz and Halegoua (2015: 1649) dub the 'spatial self', a bricolage of 'private and public meanings and narratives of place' that in this scenario are encapsulated within his smartphone. Francis exemplifies the performative element of sexual contact brokered by the apps, because despite their integration into daily life, the encounter they progress is often removed from the rest of a user's public life. Matches made online are between strangers and the resulting meetings constitute entirely new relations. For Francis, these relations are separate to 'real' life despite their presence *in* physical space. Keeping online app encounters at a conceptual remove from his everyday life is conceivable, but how does Francis stop embodied sexual encounters bleeding into his consciousness? Grindr commodifies sexual encounter in a way that helps him to expedite meeting men for sex without complications. The result is not only an online space in which to play with sexual transgression, but a physical space for it too. It is a liberating and erotic experience:

I'm in complete control of what this person sees and we're gonna meet for this very specific amount of time if we do [meet]. And so within the confines of our engagement, I can kind've be whatever I want to be. And then for whatever reason I was like, let's be a boy. And I mean equally I could be trans now! Like you can invent a character and be that character in that kind of engagement.

Francis' queer identity and his job as a drag performer clearly inflect his thinking about how a sexual encounter can work outside of reality even when it is happening in embodied time and space. Rather than the physically located encounter that locative technology normally enables, Francis uses identity play as an 'experiment' to make sex via these apps happen in the ways he wants it, and limit encounters to a space of exception separate from his 'real' life. But amongst those for whom physical encounters strip away the protections of virtuality, the resulting tangled, fleshy experience ranges from mutually satisfying casual sex – what Barry Reay (2014: 1) describes as 'uncommitted, fleeting, non-romantic' encounters – to more complicated meetings. These 'meatspace' encounters can invalidate performances that were previously made online because the meeting is now embodied and encapsulates only physical performance in the 'here and now'. Technology is constitutive of the human body, it does not surpass it (Munster 2006), and perhaps *because* online conversation is in many ways so 'different' to co-present conversation (Baym 2010), the progression from virtual to physical meeting strips out the self-confidence or bravado channelling

online exchange. Mutual gratification is by no means guaranteed, yet the myriad complications inherent in physical meeting rarely overcome the drive to enable it.

Conversely, the sexually reserved user may find their intentions for a long-term relationship inhibited by others' predilection for casual sex, testifying to the subjectivities that persist in a platform ostensibly conducive to clear communication. The reality is often anything but clear. For these users, converting virtual conversation is not the problem; it is matching with their partner's expectations of what would happen in the physical encounter that proves difficult. Notwithstanding critical approaches arguing that technology impairs intimacy (Bauman 2003; Lanier 2010; Turkle 2011), there is nothing to suggest that apps cannot facilitate long-term relationships in the same way they are so conducive to hook-ups, yet users seeking relationships via locative apps reported mixed outcomes. For example, Ali's aim in using Grindr is to meet a long-term partner, but it is an ambition rarely shared by those he meets, despite him clearly stating his interests in advance. This straightforward establishment of boundaries paradoxically results in Grindr dates ending prematurely: 'when people realise I'm actually serious and not gonna jump into bed with you straight away, they most of the time, after a drink, will just leave'.

Relatedly, Cain worries that apps make sex so convenient that unsafe sexual practices increase. This prompts him to request from partners a firm agreement to safe sex in advance of meeting. He gets tested regularly for STIs and requests that his sexual partners do too. Cain's palpable anxiety is reasonable given that he can only trust his sexual partners to honour a preparative online commitment to safe practice and their honest relaying of sexual health status. Discussion of sexual health status is widespread in app conversation, most notably in HIV serosorting (Race 2015). However, this relies on mutual trust for honest negotiation. Online conversation between strangers is not predicated on any specific public health commitment beyond socio-cultural values held in common, meaning that trusting in declared health status is a gamble for the online user. It is, however, a calculated risk that most participants accept. We therefore see that online norms construct a narrative of offline risk as well as the mitigation of that risk.

In this rather ambiguous larger scenario, it is worth noting that locative apps proved useful as networks for facilitating queerer sexual practices, including open or group configurations and fetish-based sex. Ethan, for example, notes that Grindr has allowed people curious about BDSM (Bondage/Dominance/Submission or Sadoomasochism) like himself to explore the practice in a non-judgemental space amongst users with a mutual interest. Meanwhile, participants who practiced polyamory or open relationships frequently employed locative apps to meet other men, both for group sex including their partner and for sex outside the primary relationship. Richard has a 'primary', meaning a main partner to whom he is committed, whilst also pursuing polyamorous groupings. He uses apps both to socialise and to scan for 'satellite' partners with whom he might want to meet for a date or sexual encounter. Even for participants who at the time of interview were single or who were newly in monogamous relationships, locative apps were the forum they would use if considering an open relationship in future. These platforms neatly expedite the process of finding partners outside of the primary relationship because the user can simply 'pick' from an online selection rather than relying on analogue methods. As a result, participants in open relationships praised the role of apps as enablers for their queer practice.

More surprising, perhaps, was that the democratising sociotechnical assemblages of locative media did not queer sexual practice *more*. Aside from the queer potential of BDSM or fetish, the re-inscription of offline structures of hetero- and homonormativity by apps tended to inhibit their potential to 'queer' relations. This reflects Kane Race's (2015: 256) argument that these apps do not merely reproduce existing characteristics of sexual cultures; 'rather, they act as mediators: that is, material actants that modify the practices and encounters they enable in quite specific, potentially impactful, ways'. Perhaps this limited transformation is for the best: open relationships proved perplexing to several participants who had found themselves sexually involved with men who were themselves in open (or supposedly closed) relationships. Their frustrations extended to experiencing deception online from users pretending to be single. A third group of users were more sanguine, comfortable in connecting with men already in long-term relationships. Some men professed to ambivalence about a partner's relationship status or even enjoying the idea that their sexual partner was being unfaithful to their partner by pursuing sex

with them. Thus whilst MSM locative dating apps function as effective networkers in bringing together those who share a sexual niche, their mediation of the ways in which users divulge information and cohere trust is more subjectively iterated. These frictions complicate the status of hybridisation as an effortless space of flows.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has extended critical consideration of digital and physical meetings (Gordon and de Souza e Silva 2011; Farman 2012; Race 2015) to applied contexts as a way of revealing the multiply figured and sometimes confusing outcomes of the process. Locative platforms have vastly sped up the matchmaking process from older desktop-based iterations, and the result of this acceleration is hyperconnected users parsing their environment with attention to both spatial and temporal concerns. Apps can be used in the home, at work, or whilst journeying through the city, and these modes of use impact on how the app is used, who it locates, and how encounter is mapped, including considerations of proximity and distance, locational scoping, and the 'dropped pin'. In simultaneously navigating these apps and navigating their spaces, users are 'caught up in the fabric of the world' (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 256). The implications of being 'plugged-in' for users' daily lives is significant.

Whilst some may argue that layering digital technology onto physical movement through the city increases efficiency and enriches the analogue experience (Gordon and de Souza e Silva 2011), users in this study find the hybrid space they navigate via dating apps to be simultaneously liberating and confusing. Suggestions that physical experience is augmented rather than compromised by technology underestimate the variance of human subjectivity. Locative technology supposedly streamlines access to a physical encounter, but even after sidestepping the (often misunderstood) timewaster, meeting is not guaranteed, and where it does occur is complicated by individualistic preoccupations and clashing expectations. Related concerns include how and where to connect online whilst in public space, whether virtual sex constitutes a sufficient goal for connection, and how users measure up to each other's personal expectations. These men constitute technically attuned bodies, yet they navigate meetings of digital and real-life spheres with some difficulty. Digital-physical hybridisation is still a relatively new experience for most users, and it shows.

# Chapter 6

## Urban encounter, public space and queer sociality

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I think that the apps, they've made the village – I don't think the village really exists properly in the way that it did, and that's not a bad thing, it just isn't the same. But it's certainly made it all much more disparate.

Interview with Phil, 40

The previous two empirical chapters outlined the hyperconnected user as someone multiply and densely connected not just to a network or assemblage of technology, but also to other humans seeking connection. We have seen how the locative dating app user goes about their daily life in an increasingly hybridised environment, subject to overlaps and imbrications between physical and digital contexts that mark the when and where of app use. As participants explained, online sex may boast its own attractions, but it is often purposed as a form of temporary gratification between users seeking erotic connection through embodied meeting. It is clear that physical encounter remains a primary goal of locative app use. Having recognised the conditions of hybridity that mediate queer practices for men living and working in the modern city, this chapter considers another form of hybridisation: the negotiations between public and private spaces brokered by locative technology users.

Demonstrating the changing significance of the urban public realm for queer men is important to this project because it reframes both queer histories of an 'escape' to the big city but also a waning affinity to established physical queer sites. One of the biggest shifts in male spatial practice is in cruising, which once defined queer male encounter but is increasingly marginalised as an embodied practice. Recognising recent scholarly debates regarding the deconcentration of queer spaces (Ghaziani 2014; Roth 2016), including London specifically (Andersson 2011; Collins and Drinkwater 2016), this chapter evaluates the often-maligned role of locative media in changing queer publics. I argue that beyond 'gay gentrification' (Knopp 1990) and

the alleged decline of the gayborhood in a ‘post’-gay era (M.Brown 2014), economic processes that accelerate urbanisation are responsible for deconcentration of physical community. That said, locative app users are turning to digitally mediated encounter as a way of parsing potential partners, and as a result further reducing the centrality of physical queer spaces. This is especially true for younger users, who in an era of ubiquitous networked technology may not *know* a life without digital-physical hybridisation as facilitated without locative platforms. Finally, rather than community declining as a condition of more individualistic and fleeting forms of encounter taking precedence, it can be reinterpreted (with varying success) through introducing proximate neighbours via apps, and in more abstract terms might be imagined as a gestational but developing element of locative media sociality.

### **Escape to the big city**

Queer men have long capitalised on the anonymity and the diversity of the city for social and sexual possibilities. In cultures that have historically restricted the ability of sexual minorities to be open about their identities and practices, cities provide a gathering point for queer individuals to exist in a denser population context, with networks linking together ‘sexual dissidents’ seeking contact (Chauncey 1994; Binnie 1995; Valentine 1996). The social value of public space (Iveson 2007) allows the city to offer opportunities for marginalised individuals to find and connect with one another. Over the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, distinct areas within different cities cohered as gay and lesbian communities or ‘gay villages’ (Knopp 1987; 1990; Nash 2006; G.Brown 2008). These are spaces which ‘take on value, and are hence consumed, by many in the LGBT community who experience forms of homophobia and/or transphobia elsewhere’ (Hubbard et al. 2016: 570). The *plurality* of urban space is key here; London’s multiple spatial scales provide valuable sites through which to investigate these shifting relations in an era of technological hyperconnection.

As a ‘world city’ (Massey 2007),<sup>54</sup> London is a complex global hub that represents an (often subjectively imagined) ‘principle beacon of homosexual tolerance’ (Collins and

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<sup>54</sup> Whilst Massey does not interrogate the hierarchies implied in positioning only certain conurbations as ‘world cities’, others do so as a way of destabilising dominant narratives of the global North, for example Robinson (2006); and in geographies of sexualities G. Brown (2008).

Drinkwater 2016: 8).<sup>55</sup> London's population churn engenders a sense of constant renewal. Indeed, participants' movements away from and toward the city supported the idea of queer 'journeys and returns' (Waitt and Gorman-Murray 2011). It has long been seen as a gathering space for sexual minorities (Whittle 1994) and for queer cultures including pubs and clubs (G.Brown 2001; Caudwell and Browne 2013) but also public sex environments including nightclub darkrooms (Andersson 2011) and bathhouses and outdoor parks (Houlbrook 2005). The different ways in which participants in this study understood London's extensive queer culture, from political organising to public sex environment, evidences many of the ways that sexuality is rendered visible in the contemporary city (Hubbard et al. 2016). For example, participant Joseph emphasises London's status as a densely-networked, internationalised city, with sophisticated public transport networks and airports contributing to a constant flow of potential sexual partners: 'it's like a pond with fresh streams coming into it because of people travelling, because of the tube system'.

Research has suggested that for self-defining gay men in particular, the big city represents the end goal of a rural or an 'exodus' to sexual liberation, whether locally, nationally or internationally (Chauncey 1994; Weston 1995; Escoffier 1998; Knopp 1998). More recent research has critiqued this narrative of unidirectional urban migration (Phillips et al. 2000; G.Brown 2008; Podmore 2016), questioning the 'metronormativity' implicit in such analyses (Halberstam 2005). Despite critical problematisation of a simplistic 'escape to the city' narrative, for many men in this study moving to London truly represented a conceptual rite of passage. As Simeon (35), a former asylum seeker from Africa, remembers:

London was where I first went to Soho, the gay bars, and I saw a guy and he winked at me and I winked at him back, and we decided to do it properly in a nice way, [where] you don't have to hide from anyone, you are holding hands in the street, and that was a powerful moment, where I said: 'you know what? This is me now.'

Simeon exemplifies the homecoming narrative to the metropolis so distinctively experienced by queer individuals (Fortier 2001), whether real or imagined. These

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<sup>55</sup> 'Subjectively imagined' because when measured by *increased* tolerance in recent years London may no longer outstrip other UK regions (Collins and Drinkwater 2016).

spaces that Simeon describes – both the individual gay bars and the larger environment of London’s Soho district – have historically accommodated sexual minorities, giving them a home and a way to perform their identity (Berlant and Warner 1998; Houlbrook 2006) and that liberatory potential persists today.

London’s perennial queer appeal seems surprising given that digital technology has in recent years helpfully extended queer connection across what were previously less inviting suburban or rural territories (see for example Li et al. 2015; Gray et al. 2016). For non-heterosexuals living in small towns and suburbs, locative dating apps represent vital tools for brokering encounter in the absence of queer physical venues; London, in contrast, already enjoys an extensive and diverse embodied queer scene, and yet app use seems to be no less popular. Aaron (27), born and raised in northern England, moved to London for his first job and shares Simeon’s understanding of the city as a place of freedom. He recognises the potential for encounter that locative apps foster across different geographical scales, but London holds an appeal unmatched by his childhood home:

In [medium-sized UK city], when I go back now and switch on Grindr, it’s still the same people from 2 years ago. Because it’s really a small – well it’s not a small town, but interesting people – I’m going to sound like a terrible person, but interesting people tend to leave.

For participants who had experienced homophobia growing up, a perception that London would offer not just sexual possibility (Bech 1997) but also social anonymity informed their move in adulthood. As Kane Race (2011: 36) argues: ‘the mix of anonymity and critical mass to be found in cities has afforded many queer individuals a greater sense both of individual freedom and of community’. Tim (29) is a dedicated explorer of his surroundings, reminiscent of the traditional flâneur cruising the city. He celebrates the anonymity that London grants him: ‘it’s to do with the scale of it and how many people, the sheer amount of exposure you have to other people, different sorts of people, and different sorts of spaces’. Tim verbalises a widespread identification amongst participants of the city as somewhere where many (though not all) users felt comfortable expressing affection with same-sex partners in public (though not all publics). In this sense locative media contribute a provocative digital reconfiguration of what men have been practicing for many years in an



analogue format. Apps capitalise on the urban as a way of bringing about physical encounters more often and amongst a wider range of bodies. They can be interpreted as a digital intensification or *amplification* of the queer appeal of the metropolis itself.

Thus participants' reasons for moving to London are mirrored in the reasons that users download apps: both provide a way to increase exposure and proximity to others. When Tim enthuses about the 'scale' of London's offering and the 'sheer amount of exposure' to others who are similarly identified, he is referring to the city, but his assessment folds in the abundance of matches now available on his smartphone. As well as commendably democratising queer spatial experiences in suburban or rural areas, apps actually *intensify* the offering of the existing urban context. Therefore, the intensification of queer networks offered by the city itself is enhanced in the intensification of queer networks provided by locative media. For the walker navigating through Soho, being online and visible on the locative platform invites many more opportunities to talk with other men because it adds so many more users to what even the busiest bar on the street could achieve. Consequently, apps serve to densify the city's analogue offering by introducing a digital layer that can amplify its relational network potential. This hybrid assemblage invariably impacts on more traditional routes to meeting. Perhaps the most instinctive of all queer public encounters is cruising. It is also the practice most affected by this technological amplification.

### **Cruising for queer encounters**

Cruising the streets in search of mutual recognition from other men represents a historical entrée for the queer individual to the metropolis. Whether sharing a gaze, a conversation, or sex in public, cruising has historically constituted an important practice for non-heterosexual men to form sexual networks in public spaces. Queerness has 'required the development of kinds of intimacy that bear no necessary relation to domestic space, to kinship, to the couple form, to property, or to the nation' (Berlant and Warner 1998: 558), and cruising represents a key expression of this intimacy. Traditional queer sites that were figured as such because of their suitability for cruising are losing significance in contemporary cities, and for some scholars this provokes larger questions about the diminishing spaces than can be

cohered to practice sexual difference (Turner 2003; G.Brown 2004; 2008; Dean 2009). There are concerns that the physical meetings that make iconic subcultural destinations such as Fire Island on the US Atlantic coast a kind of queer ‘heterotopia’ will dissolve over time (Doran 2014: 60).<sup>56</sup> However, interviews with locative app users show that the political impact of queer spaces enabled by cruising are not necessarily of phenomenological significance in the everyday lives of dating app users. User experiences suggest that cruising can be refigured via digital platforms, even if the physical space cohered for the practice loses its centrality as a site of encounter.

#### i) Cruising as a practice of public space

Space is not naturally “straight” but actively produced and (hetero)sexualised (Binnie 1997), and practices such as cruising can resist this production and mark certain public spaces in the city as queer. This resistance is illustrated by Francis’ account of the queer cruising that occurs at the central London theatre where he works. His building is a popular cruising spot, both in analogue terms, with men who circulate in a specific bathroom, and digitally, with bathroom meets pre-arranged via MSM locative apps. Francis recalls first realising that cruising occurred in his workplace: ‘I didn’t even realised it happened. I was just washing my hands and the door opened and there was this guy wanking in the cubicle. And I came out and was like, “oh my god, this just happened!”’

Over time, Francis has come to learn the patterns of behaviour, timing and location of cruisers. Whilst he does not participate in the practice because it could compromise his job, as someone who defines himself as queer he does celebrate the transgressive power of the act. The vicarious thrill of seeing physical cruising in the unexceptional space of a theatre bathroom exemplifies the queer celebration of cruising as something that can eroticise ‘the essential anonymity of the common and urban intimacy’ (Ricco 2016). Francis is complicit in the cruisers’ transgression, and while he abstains from the act itself, his awareness of it and his subterfuge in hiding it from colleagues allows him to count himself as part of the queer space-making practice. Francis emphasises its liberatory rather than threatening potential:

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<sup>56</sup> Presumably the heterotopia Doran has in mind is queer sex in public; Fire Island’s status as an LGBT tourist destination seems unlikely to diminish.

I get really happy when I know it's happening, because I feel like yes! Pull the private back into the public! I really appreciate the people who still do it. I mean obviously it makes people uncomfortable and whatever, but as a queer person I'm always like yes! I'm kind of glad it's still happening.

Other participants shared Francis' intrigue regarding cruising within a work environment. For Joseph, working as a freelancer for different financial corporations across the city mitigates the professional etiquette that conditions Francis' separation from the practice itself. In contrast to Francis, Joseph utilises a network of cruising zones in places as diverse as Hampstead Heath to Canary Wharf, which as we saw in Chapter 5 is also a popular site for locational scoping. The thrill for Joseph comes from the anti-professionalism that the act signifies:

There are so many guys there, it's unbelievable. And they're in suits, they look attractive, so it's a good environment, there's a lot of opportunity. Everybody's a bit bored, and everybody is a bit horny. Everyone's looking for a distraction.

The audacity of men skipping work to procure sex excites Joseph, but the tension, or hybridisation, of public and private space is also key here. As Gavin Brown (2008) points out, the *Sexual Offences Act* of 1967 signalled a critical distinction between public and private, making private spaces safer (or at least theoretically non-criminal) whilst cementing public space as a space where expression of non-heterosexuality became liable for arrest. By cruising in the malls and offices around his workplace, Joseph is risking surveillance and scrutiny, but rather than dissuading him, it motivates him: 'there's a much higher risk of being caught, because it's a public place. It's a higher risk because people are more likely to pop in, if it's a toilet or outdoors or something. That's part of the excitement'. For Joseph, this tension between public and private is as much about the *sexually transgressive format* for encounter as it is about the encounter itself. Of relevance here is Matthew Gandy's (2012: 729) argument that there exists 'an innate connection between public space and sex, which has always existed in tension with the controlling discourses of urban design'. We see that urban space itself, imbued with a range of different 'publics', holds real erotic potential for Joseph, which is why he is so attracted to the public bathrooms around his Canary Wharf workplace. This ostensibly heterosexual space is queered precisely because of the queer behaviours of bodies moving through it.

However, Joseph is concerned that cruising is increasingly mediated by locative apps. Rather than circulate in a known cruising spot, office workers now tend to make initial connections online, then arrange to meet in specific mall bathrooms for sex. Rather than the traditional pattern of communal-but-solo sexual activity, this pre-planned digital approach results in less speculative watching and group acts in favour of more serious sexual encounters: usually dyadic and more private in nature than cruising in the traditional sense. By reducing spontaneity in the encounter, queer *jouissance* is compromised. In the same way that using apps might reduce footfall in queer entertainment venues, apps now dominate the privatisation of sex in public. Joseph critiques the refiguring of the practice via technology based on its foreclosing of queer opportunity for those who are not publicly 'out'. This is an unusual point of view when we consider that users and critics alike agree that male-male dating apps are uniquely placed to facilitate, rather than foreclose, new opportunities for those who do not (or do not yet) openly self-define as gay or bisexual. Even meeting men in a physical cruising space based on an online conversation is for Joseph not constitutive of 'real' cruising because he feels that these hybridised meetings are only predicated on the fact that MSM have historically met in those spaces. What Joseph is alluding to here is actually the sense of *sociability* promulgated by traditional cruising, but fragmented by digitally engineered meetings. He reflects Larry Knopp's (2007) view that an (analogue) sociability transcends the anonymity of cruising. It seems that by removing the spontaneous fluidity of meeting and the subjective, ambiguous sexual identity of other cruisers, apps negate the sense of queerness that makes cruising distinctive.

Certainly, critics have argued that cruising is necessary to ensure that queer public spaces, which are often liminal and at the edges of public life, can persist as sanctuary for those who are sexually 'different' from the mainstream. Samuel Delany (1999) argues that the very practice of cruising remains necessary for a democratic metropolis. As Delany reasons: 'if *every* sexual encounter involves bringing someone back to your house, the general sexual activity in a city becomes anxiety-filled, class-bound, and choosy' (1999: 127, emphasis original). But Delany's embrace of cruising overlooks the possibility that for many men, it is now *this* sexual contact, rather than domestic meetings, that is 'anxiety-filled'. Much queer scholarship rather refrains

from playing devil's advocate in recognising that for the average queer subject, cruising is no longer part of everyday contemporary vernacular, and that it may not be much missed. Participants who have cruised exhibited nostalgia about its potential, yet most are still more likely to reach for their smartphone as a broker for sexual connection. Take Graham for example, who contrasts the public cruising of his past, around 'towpaths, toilets, [and] bushes' with the private, domesticated sexual encounter of his present. He has not cruised in the traditional sense for years, using instead desktop and then mobile apps, with prodigious success. Graham may ostensibly prefer the anonymity and transience of public cruising, but the convenience of what locative media now offers him outweighs the benefits of the analogue practice. The allure of new technologies is that they expedite the services they are recruited for, and cruising is not immune to this upgrading.

#### ii) Digital locative media: privatised cruising?

Male-male dating apps can be seen as a way of reframing cruising in digital terms. Social media has been shown to network with offline, embodied queer practices such as cruising (Cassidy 2013), and male-male locative media are an even more natural fit for these kinds of entanglements because they are specifically predicated on progressing social or sexual encounter between strangers. Whilst some lament the fading popularity of cruising as a form of oppositional queer culture (Delany 1999; Muñoz 2009; Schulman 2013), apps seem not to threaten the practice per se so much as refigure it digitally (Ramos 2014). But the impact of technology extends further than this, because it negates the need to physically traverse city streets with the concomitant shared glances or non-verbal invitations to physical contact, in favour of a more engineered encounter. Dean (2009) has argued that (desktop) dating sites eliminate a historically public sex culture for men who have sex with men. The digital contender is now locative apps. Cruising is now either refigured in a hybridised context, or exists separate to apps and is progressively fragmented by the affordances of locative technology.

Whilst cruising has historically been central to queer experience it has never been free of scrutiny from others. As an older participant, Phil cites cruising as the chief influence in the counterculture atmosphere of London nightlife venues from his past,

venues that he argues are now precariously positioned. Fetish nightclub Backstreet, for example, ‘hasn’t quite got dark rooms and labyrinths, but it sort of should have, and definitely people go there for sex. People don’t go there to socialise’. Phil reflects that he was not bold enough to practice cruising very efficiently himself. Still: ‘that whole sort of casualness I find a little bit sleazy as well, so I wasn’t hugely into it when I was younger and I was always frightened that I’d get beaten up’. Phil’s narrative demonstrates that whilst cruising may be communal, it is not necessarily community-oriented. In fact, queer men are especially vulnerable when cruising in public places. In some cities they even run the risk of prosecution, with Toronto’s much-criticised entrapment program aimed at ‘taking back’ public parks from ‘lewd behaviour’ through deployment of plainclothes police officers (Harris-Green 2017; see also Reason 2016). Californian police still conduct stings on public restrooms, despite a reduction in complaints about public sex precisely *because* ‘men can [now] easily find sexual partners through the Internet and dating apps such as Grindr’ (Branson-Potts and Quealy 2016 n.pag). By arranging meetings using an online platform, users can ensure that the resulting encounter is domesticated and therefore safe from interference from establishment forces, even if doing so diminishes opportunities for those who look to public space for sexual expression.

Michael Warner (2002) has been influential in the argument that cruising makes possible queer ‘counter-publics’, or alternative ways of living, and that these usually deviant-coded activities can be valuable and enriching experiences for those who practice them. Yet the counter-public that Phil and others seek is a broader sense of queer community more often realised in actual queer commercial venues. Similarly, whilst Francis may exhibit enthusiasm for the ‘art’ of cruising, he does not actually practice it himself: ‘I don’t need to go cruising to have anonymous or meaningless sexual interactions, and that public display isn’t something I really get off on. So there aren’t really many reasons for me to do it.’ His celebration of cruising is predicated on political rather than literal terms, and even this was rare amongst other young participants, who tended to imagine cruising as risky, boring and cold (indeed, its relocation to the domestic seems rational, considering the inclement climates of the UK). They were not just uninterested by the practice, some were truly puzzled by it, and most did not meaningfully ‘know’ cruising at all.

Whilst internalised homophobia from the mainstream gay community criticising those who still practice analogue cruising is not out of the question, a personal aversion to the practice is not necessarily homonormative. Considering that many participants have come of age in an environment where locative technologies can (supposedly) streamline physical encounter, it would seem illogical to pursue a more circuitous route to pleasure merely for its sexual *frisson* or its political resistance. Future queer scholars may accuse app users of compounding the collapse of public cruising, but my results show that in real-life, everyday experience participants largely expressed relief that they did not have to cruise. As Gavin Brown (2008) notes: ‘[a]lthough critical queer scholars may wag accusatory fingers at these normative, assimilationist approaches to gay life, Weeks (2007: 9) cautions that researchers should “never underestimate the importance of being ordinary”’. Many participants associated cruising with a historical representation of sexuality that, thanks to technology and advances in social integration, no longer reflected their lived experience. Further, as I argued in Chapter 5 these apps can constitute a queer space of their own because they bring MSM together. By overlaying heterosexed spaces with technology, the range of sites where queerness can be expressed is expanded to vastly exceed the more liminal spaces brokered by physical cruising.

The larger loss here seems not to be sex in public itself, although activists may lament exactly that, but the larger queer practices that cruising can cohere. Cruising is not exclusively sexual; it also encompasses an individual’s movement through public space in pursuit of shared connections with strangers, and as Samuel Delany (1999) points out, these ‘contact’ connections transcend class and background. Cruising can be as much about the unrealised encounter as it can constitute actual sexual contact (Turner 2003), and this sense of potential, rather than actual, connection is compromised by the pre-meditated functionality of locative apps. With the loss of the un-engineered shared gazed, serendipity in urban encounter is also lost. Garth Greenwell (2016: n.pag) highlights the invariable shift to snap-second online judgements in pursuit of connection as cruising declines:

The circulation of bodies in physical space allows for a greater possibility of being surprised by desire, of having an unexpected response to the presence of another. In online cruising, as in pornography, the reality of another’s body is to a very great extent erased in its reduction to an image.

As my results have shown, locative apps can act as agents for maximising exposure, but Greenwell's viewpoint prompts us to reflect that the exposure that locative technology facilitates represents a more limited imaginative bandwidth compared to the richer qualitative experience of physical circulations, with their capacity for surprise and happenstance. Clearly, anxiety about the loss of cruising spaces functions as a synecdoche for a decline in queer, out-of-place spaces more widely. The concern is not that men cannot encounter each other without cruising, because apps expedite precisely that, but the impact that this shift has on the wider collective now that users are no longer tied to the physical characteristics of a cruising space.

Yet the domestication of cruising via locative technology may not represent a straightforward loss of space. Mark Turner (2003: 122) reasons that 'if the distinction between public and private were ever to break down completely in our urban spaces [...] the cruiser would lose his radical edge'. That is in a sense exactly what has happened. However, hybridisation practices may actually answer Greenwell and Turner's desire for cruising to be understood in its complex urban context. Hybridised technology does not foreclose larger queer spatial practices, because it too can evolve digitally. The transition may engender new forms of relating because queer spaces are being resituated in a digital-physical scenario. The man walking down the street and connecting to Grindr is negotiating multiple identities (walker or cruiser) and categories (public or private; work or leisure time); even indoors cruising is possible, regardless of a user's physical presence in a meeting or at dinner. Whilst analogue cruising juxtaposes different spatial scales, showing that 'different urban worlds are separate yet coterminous' (Gandy 2012: 732), MSM apps shift technology from something that stops users attending to physically proximate environments, to hybridising and integrating the app into the user's increasingly digitised environment. Whilst the resulting encounters may no longer be exhilaratingly random nor spatially distinctive, they compensate for this via the *density* of hyperconnection that apps enable. Nevertheless, if these apps were to amplify cruising possibilities then we would expect public spaces of the city to be queerer than ever, but this is not happening: physical encounter is instead retreating into private spaces. We will consider what domestic encounters mean for *private* lives in Chapter 7, but here we turn to assessing locative technology's impact on queer public spaces.



## **Deconcentrating queer space and hybridised sociality**

One way to address this study's central question of how locative media are changing queer sociality and spaces is by considering the impact of locative media-brokered hybridisation. Recent processes of urban change seem to be leading to the deconcentration of queer neighbourhoods across a range of cities (Duncan 1996; Ruting 2008; Reynolds 2009; Mattson 2015; Smart and Whitemore 2016). Older desktop platforms for male-male sexual encounter including Gaydar and PlanetRomeo have been scrutinised for their role in this deconcentration (Rosser et al. 2008; Dean 2009; Mowlabocus 2010a), and the growing popularity of locative platforms for queer encounter in the intervening decade invites similar accusations that locative media is to blame for queer urban deconcentration. This has been posited both academically (Doran 2014; Collins and Drinkwater 2016; Gorman-Murray and Nash 2016) and in popular media (Norman 2015; Parks-Ramage 2016; Musto 2016). However, the answer may be more about how we understand queer space. For example, whilst gay entertainment venues have diminished, queer nights at mainstream nightclubs have become a viable alternative without the associated financial commitment. More ephemeral or temporally specific iterations of queer space remain in evidence in pride parades, gay vacation cruises or the queer entertainments increasingly popular at British music festivals. London's travelling drag collective *Sink the Pink*, for example, has grown in popularity since it was founded in 2008 to typify a distinctively *outré* queer zeitgeist. The appeal of these travelling assemblages may actually lie in their transient, rather than fixed, spatiality. As Chapter 4 showed, digital platforms can contribute online queer space too, albeit one contiguous on offline conditions. How might digitally hybridised sociality impact on physical queer space?

We have seen how over time certain neighbourhoods, parks or streets become established sites for queer practice or identity. The queer social opportunities in London listed by participants ranged from cabaret venues and gay bars to niche fetish nightclubs and saunas. But beyond the 'coming out' process, attitudes to these spaces were rather mixed amongst participants, with personal attachments to queer spaces, supposedly encompassing 'emotions, fun, subjectivity, intimacy and the appropriation of space' (Cattan and Vanolo 2014: 19) only ambivalently expressed.

Participants vocalised their awareness of residual disapproval in the mainstream about the role of queer venues despite London's liberalism, often voiced in opinions from heterosexual friends or family that an independent or 'ghettoised' minority culture is unnecessary. For example, Ian (27) lives in his childhood home with his parents. On the rare occasions that he tells his mother that he will be socialising in queer venues, he feels she misunderstands his affinity for this socialisation: 'my mum's response is "what do you do when you go to these places?" I'm like "mum, what do you do when you go to a normal club?"' Ian's identification with queer spaces may fall on deaf ears where his family is concerned, but concretely queer spaces have historically been important because whilst heterosexuals could unthinkingly perform their sexuality in the street, sexual minorities were only allowed to be themselves in specific spaces and places, in the terms dictated by the majority (Bristow 1989; Binnie and Skeggs 2004). Whilst critical contributions suggest something of a thawing in negative attitudes to same-sex displays of affection (Monto and Supinski 2014; Collins and Drinkwater 2016), and popular media has proclaimed the 'post-gay' city as a space where non-heterosexuality enjoys an equal public footing with heterosexuality, in this study participants' experiences were more ambiguous. For some queer individuals these venues are sites of community, whilst for others they actually encourage privatisation of the physical encounter.

Darren (32) fits the pattern of the average user, combining locative media use with regular visits to physical venues. Darren increasingly 'goes out gay' because over the years more and more of his heterosexual friends have moved out of London to the suburbs as they start families or are priced out of the city's housing. Friends and colleagues who once socialised together have fragmented, leaving him with a smaller, queerer circle of friends. Now that most of his friends are gay men, he often socialises in his local area of Vauxhall, but less so Soho. Vauxhall is an area strongly associated with male queer culture (Andersson 2011) and Darren's favoured venues include the Royal Vauxhall Tavern, Eagle Bar and fetish club Hoist. Vauxhall's popular queer status means that when Darren chooses not to go out, he can still take his pick online from the many punters frequenting local venues. Darren metaphorises this constant stream of men as 'passing traffic', aided by excellent public transport links: 'the train station's there, the bus station's there, and the clubs are there. So there's always guys going past'. Thus the urban experience that Darren practices is a circulation of

technology and transport: technology overlays Darren's physical experience in the same way that the tube transport network overlays the city. The larger hybrid infrastructure they form means that whilst Darren continues to visit physical venues (and by his own admission achieves more successful erotic connection through this form of socialisation), he can keep one foot planted in the online world to take advantage of what it can offer him when required.

Whilst Darren is happy to circulate both physical and digital platforms for encounter, Shoreditch resident Mike (38) is more pessimistic about the physical queer spaces now on offer as a result of technological and economic shifts in the city. Like Darren, Mike has found that as he has aged, his straight friends have stopped socialising in London, resulting in fewer social opportunities, a more limited range of venues, and a more exclusively gay circle of friends. Meanwhile London's gay scene has shrunk to just a few central hubs:

Every part of London had its own gay clubs and gay bars and pubs and things, but there's been a flurry of closures - well, things have been going that way for quite a long time, but I think there was a peak and the gay scene was just massive and it was probably unsustainable.

The scene may have been 'massive' and 'unsustainable', but a straightforward field of competition would have seen less favoured venues closing whilst popular competitors persisted, rather than the indiscriminate reduction in total numbers that has occurred in the intervening decade. Mike notes that as well as Soho and Vauxhall, Islington and Hackney boasted numerous small queer pubs now lost, reflecting the decline of UK pubs generally (Preece 2008) and LGBTQ pubs and bars more specifically (Campkin and Marshall 2017). Mike also attributes this fragmentation to 'gentrification' of the areas where queer venues were numerous. Echoing the entrepreneurial approach adopted by Westminster council to transform Soho over several years from a scruffy queer space to a prime tourist London destination, South London venues have closed to make way for new building developments, and East London venues including the Joiner's Arms, the George and Dragon and the Nelson's Head similarly folded in 2015 (perhaps an inevitable progression judging by Gavin Brown's 2006 study of 'post-gay' spaces in Spitalfields). Mike's struggle to consider processes of social change beyond gentrification is understandable given its

popularity as a label that is erroneously becoming referent for more complex socioeconomic shifts. It is not gentrification alone that has changed London, but the entanglement of a larger population, intense pressure on housing, and the stronger economic viability of commercial chains compared to independent commerce (Hamnett 2003) that has changed the urban landscape in question. However, Mike's personal experience of deconcentration does highlight how these urban-economic shifts disproportionately affect queer venues moored to precarious physical sites.

Yet for other participants, for whom we might have expected Soho to feature significantly, the district was often talked about only as part of their former socio-sexual development, reflecting recent research finding that changing social attitudes have made participation in the 'scene' less imperative (Visser 2013; Lea et al. 2015; Campkin and Marshall 2017). Echoing Nigel Thrift's (2006) 'place-space' of memories linked to distinctive locales, Soho was experienced retrospectively rather than somewhere users visited in the present despite its international reputation as a queer mecca. Booming tourism and lucrative real estate investment have compounded this fragmentation: the increasing sophistication of the area, combined with high rental values and regenerated infrastructure, attests to its deliberate socio-economic repositioning. Phil Hubbard's (2016: 570) shrewd assessment that 'diverse sexual cultures, practices and identities have been commodified via processes of urban investment and property speculation' is felt more keenly in this borough than anywhere else. Participants were attuned to this shift, with Rich for example expressing distain at Soho's 'Disneyfication' in the interests of tourism.

For many, the 'scene' represented by the archetypal gay village now constitutes a poor fit, reflecting wider trends in the deconcentration of gay consumption spaces in favour of mixed neighbourhoods (Gorman-Murray and Nash 2014). The perception that nightlife venues are geared to youth and are overcrowded, reducing the ability to build verbal rapport, results in many former punters prioritising their apps for forging connections. Consider those that are 'too old' or 'too young', or do not want to participate in an alcohol-oriented nightlife (or cannot afford to), or whose limited 'outness' inhibits their participation in the queer public 'scene'. For these bodies, locative media offer privatised encounter free from the scrutinising gaze of the city.

A sense of lost connection was equally present for younger participants, who argued that the physical scene cannot cater as efficiently to their networking demands as locative media can. Judging from participant responses suggesting that MSM app use begins around age 17, locative media users aged 24 and under have *not known* a real-life social/sexual environment not including these apps and their brokering function for users. Younger participants utilised apps as a way of circumventing the potential awkwardness of real-life introductions, even in Soho, a space usually coded as synonymous with queer encounter. Others, particularly those who do not identify as gay or who have only recently come out, have never explored London's gay entertainment scene and as a result they simply do not register its deconcentration. And for Owen (19), the commercialised offering of Soho compares poorly to other British queer spaces: 'I thought everything in London was there for me [...] but in reality, everywhere up North has the things I want for half the price'. The prohibitive costs of central London as referenced by Owen only partly explain participants' waning interaction with the space, but Owen's problematising of the area as a space that ostensibly caters for his identity indicates resistance to Soho's historical association as a physical site for queer expression.<sup>57</sup>

Tim extends Owen's argument by highlighting the market forces that have a stake in the economic development of the 'gay village'. As he points out:

[i]n the 90s there was a shift where gay culture gained commodity value and began to be viewed as a real market, and the tables kinda turned, developers used gay bars as a way to develop areas. So like Canal Street [in Manchester], the local council actively gave out more licenses for gay venues around Canal Street because they wanted to increase the housing market and property prices.

Tim's interpretation of Canal Street's engineered revitalisation is clearly well-informed,<sup>58</sup> and reflects wider critical study of neoliberal homonormative commodification (Bell and Binnie 2000; 2004; Binnie and Skeggs 2004; Bassi 2006; Lewis 2016). Yet intriguingly, Tim resists applying the narrative to Soho, because he feels that London's queerness resists homogenisation or straightforward

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<sup>57</sup> But see Oswin (2008) for a critical problematisation of the queer minority resistance-majority dominance narrative.

<sup>58</sup> See Quilley (1997) and Kitchin (2002) on Manchester's development as a form of queer place-marketing.

commodification. Tim argues that a tolerance for difference persists: ‘you can still find a gay culture that hasn’t been gentrified in London’. Like Mike, Tim’s interpretation of ‘gentrification’ as a socio-economic force is vague: what he seems to be saying is that London’s radical and political spaces persist even in an era of commercialisation, but gentrification is made up of more complex relations than solely commercialisation (Hamnett 2003; Butler and Robson 2003; Doan and Higgins 2011). Nevertheless, Tim’s positive interpretation of a queer culture in London untethered to corporate interests suggests a specificity to the city’s queerness that has waned elsewhere in the UK. Certainly, the growth in quasi-privatised and commercialised public spaces in the service of what Jon Binnie describes as a particularly ‘urban queer aesthetic’ (2004: 127) generates in turn creeping exclusion for those citizens who do not fit the required consumer model of young gay male professionals (see also Casey 2007). Given the restrictions imposed on ‘other’ bodies by commercial public space, a turn to locative apps seems inevitable. Commodification still regulates these platforms, but it manifests itself within a marketed environment of opportunity, and where commodification does occur, users can utilise competitor platforms offering different bodies. Even accepting the plurality of London’s queer spaces, nothing can match technology for brokering choice.

This section has argued that designated queer spaces have waned in urban contexts including London, but that technology users have adapted to this deconcentration by hybridising physical and digital routes to encounter to capitalise on the rewards of both, and amongst younger users, looking to technology to offer what queer public spaces lack. This raises question about community cohered through queer physical spaces. Its re-creation online could however offer a valuable substitution. We turn now to explore how participants conceptualised and practiced community and sociality, focusing on how locative media might support or undermine community as a collective for queer life.

### **Public space as a site for queer community**

Community is a difficult concept to categorise (Joseph 2002), and is yet more contested when we consider its position in relation to digital spaces and belonging. We can understand queer community as a group of people united by their shared

non-heterosexuality who congregate, literally or virtually, for political and/or social practices. In fact, sociality might better describe the relations in question, yet ‘community’ was the concept latched onto by participants, perhaps because they believed that a sense of queer community has shifted to more individualised and fleeting forms of encounter. This would reflect Zygmunt Bauman’s (2003: 7) argument that technology has commodified intimacy to the point that committed relationships are replaced by fleeting connection. Regardless of context, the divergent political values of ‘gay’ and ‘queer’ communities further complicate labels, because whilst gay male community has a history of distinct spaces and practices, interaction with these spaces may not always be in ‘gay’ terms: same-sex desire is not necessarily constitutive of gay cultural identity (Halperin 2012). Nor is entry to these kinds of spaces even necessarily predicated on ‘gay’ identity, as the inclusion of MSM participants in this study show.

However subjectively queer community is understood, its presence, absence, and mobility impacts on the cultural value of queer places and spaces. Whilst for some critics queer community is now conceptually compromised (see for example Doan and Higgins 2011; M. Brown 2014), for others it is vital to the future of queerness and an ongoing sense of belonging, possibly in different forms to the past (Reynolds 2009; Lewis 2016) and despite its exclusions (Hobbes 2017). Martin Holt (2011) identifies a shift from coherently gay communities within urban architecture to more tailored ‘personal communities’. Amongst participants, the concept of community was the cause of much reflection and debate. Whilst the idea of a single queer male ‘community’ seems at first unviable in a such a diverse group of men – including men who did not define themselves as gay or bisexual, and who therefore might reject conceptualisations corralling them into such a group – it proved to be a persuasive force as something desired, even where not achieved. Positive attitudes towards the concept of community came from participants’ shared belief that community infers safety and shared values, which is an affordance far from secure even in London. As Richard explains:

On a weekly basis I still get homophobic abuse on the street, but you know, that’s London, you get it everywhere, even in a very gay-friendly place. There’s a gay bar around, and all sorts of trans people around, but especially if

I'm sort've dressed up in drag for example, or holding hands with someone, I get shit shouted at me.

Richard's sobering testimony shows that even in the most diverse districts of the metropolis, queer bodies are not free from uninvited scrutiny. Because queer spaces and community have historically existed in mutually constitutive forms, there is an opportunity for technology to offer generative replacements for these physical relations that could cohere a significant model of belonging.

A consensus amongst participants of community as like-minded individuals who share something in common did not necessarily vouch for membership. Doubts were expressed about the extent to which participants themselves belonged to gay or LGBT communities, whether in 'real' life or online. This ambivalence reflects Nathaniel Lewis's (2016: 12) argument that 'gay men's social lives increasingly reveal a similar tension between desires for belonging and a disposition of detachment from the gay community'. Participants' behaviours similarly suggested waning desire for traditional configurations of community based on sexual identity. Whilst some men were part of organised gay sport clubs or social groups, others avoided even arguably 'post-gay' mainstream gatherings such as pride parades. That is not to say that the potential for community cohesion offered by queer physical venues went unrecognised by users; many recognised the importance of public space for marginalised communities in particular, reflecting a critical emphasis on the continued importance of *physical* public spaces rather than just online communities for LGBTQ subjects (Usher and Morrison 2010; Lewis 2016). As a drag queen, Francis has been impressed by specific trans- and drag-friendly weekly club nights such as *Bombshell*, arguing that the event is 'actually quite humanising [and] fulfilling, and it's nice to have someone attracted to you'. These surviving physical spaces still provide fora for community and are of significance to their users as examples of what Japonica Brown-Saracino (2015) terms 'sexual identity cultures' (see also Binnie and Skeggs 2004). But as evidence of meaningful offline community, examples like *Bombshell* were rare. This makes it all the more intriguing to consider whether traditional forms of neighbourhood community are abandoned or productively redeveloped via locative media.



## **Networked encounters in declining communities**

Understanding the extent to which online space offers a site for community is important because it provides an insight into how pervasive technological hybridisation inflects queer social and sexual life. The internet may have decentered the role of the physical urban gay community in providing social support, but if dating and hook-up apps offer tenable imaginings of community or sociality, anxieties about the ongoing deconcentration of physical queer spaces can be mitigated through hybridised substitution of traditional queer structures. This section explores participants' different understandings of online community and shows how these users support or reject locative apps as sufficiently fulfilling the criteria of community.

Understanding the parameters of *online* community is contingent upon which definition of community we use (Nieckarz 2005: 403). We can at least agree that online community provides a virtual space to replicate or expand some of the links made between like-minded humans in physical contexts. In the case of locative apps, it could even perhaps circulate these relations from virtual back to physical contexts. Whilst some critics identify support or community fostered online (Campbell 2004; Alexander and Losh 2010; Mowlabocus 2010a) others have posited the growth in online communities as detrimental to physical communities (Berry et al. 2003; Bryson et al. 2006; Dean 2009; Ghaziani 2014). Some combine the two approaches, arguing that online interactions need not weaken offline civic engagement in local activities: 'on the contrary, through Internet use, social activities become even more intense, as they connect the local realm to the global one' (Parisi 2015: 2; see also Hampton and Wellman 2003; Ognyanova et al. 2013).

Indeed, locative media does not exist in a vacuum, but folds in virtual space with physical concerns: both Grindr and Hornet invite sexual health advocacy into their virtual space (Mowlabocus et al. 2016),<sup>59</sup> advertise health clinic testing days in the vicinity of users, and have become corporate sponsors to pride parades in cities worldwide. Of course, this circulation from virtual back to physical may not be

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<sup>59</sup> Terrence Higgins Trust disseminates sexual health information on the platform, inviting users to talk with experts.

altruistic – the former initiative channels corporate social responsibility to address criticism of the implication of their product in risky sexual health behaviour, and the latter testifies to the commercial interests at stake in public queer performance, once a distinctive space of anti-capitalist political resistance. Nevertheless, these are examples of online platforms hybridising online and offline sites in the context of ‘community’, even if they do so inorganically.

Participants expressed conflicting views in considering whether locative apps constituted community. For Ali, Grindr most closely resembles community purely because so many men use it. It was the first app to connect non-heterosexual men, so commands a specific influence and status in what he dubs ‘the community’. Who this monolithic grouping includes is less clear, and Ali’s assumption that the app codes for community in a straightforward way overlooks uneven adoption by different subgroups and considerable objections from those who have *not* adopted the platform. Equally, locative apps might have trouble constituting communities because the shared membership of an online platform does not automatically unify those individuals using it in any conceptual or traditional sense.

Lenny’s approach focuses more on ideological unity. For him, the difficulty imagining apps as constituting community comes from markers for community that have existed in the past.

I just don’t think it’s a community in the way that a village church is a community [laughs] do you know what I mean though, it’s a collection of people who are all doing similar things [...] But when I think of the word community, I think of positive values, and I just don’t think that Grindr necessarily gives off too many positive values.

Lenny’s idea of community is predicated upon not just common values but positive ones, and in this sense evidences Halberstam’s (2003) critique of instinctive values of community that support traditional or even hegemonic iterations of community as typical of the ‘in’ group. Halberstam’s discomfort is directed at an idea of community that does not easily invite variation amongst members. A community may not *need* to give off positive values (the politically inflected resistance of the queer community at its 20<sup>th</sup>-century roots was clearly not a movement with consensus or comfort in mind) but perhaps that is at the crux of Lenny’s thinking of community as a positive ‘place’.

It also tells us a lot about the declining political associations of gay or queer identity in the intervening 50 years.

If we instead conceive of community as merely a network or assemblage of people with similar interests or sexual identity, then locative apps are at least able to provide the base networks that enable community to cohere. After all, unlike heteronormative iterations, 'queer articulations of community are flexible, transient and in some sense always virtual' (Mowlabocus 2010a: 11). Contrary to critical concerns that 'networking' marginalises 'contact' socialising between strangers in the building of community (Delany 1999), the diversity of MSM app users replicate the social diversity of physical spaces. As Tim reflects: 'you can see the various aspects of the gay community kind've operating all at once. When you just take a look at your screen you can see there are the drug dealers, and there are the discreet "closets", the married men'. For Tim, the scope for encounter with a staggeringly wide range of people should be welcomed as redress to an increasingly sterile physical culture: 'I like it because I don't see that subcultural activity on the streets anymore, or in bars'. Tim's reading of the app as a virtual reinterpretation of a physical gay bar supports John Campbell's (2004: 109) interpretation of online queer fora as 'virtual gay bars', which can become 'loci for communities of material consequence'. Thus whilst the physical 'scene' may be dissipating, locative platforms relocate these subcultural tribes with some success.

This brings us to considerations of more generalised sociality. The potential for sociality in locative apps is often overlooked in favour of what they can expedite sexually, not least when we consider the individualistic bent of Grindr. Recall that participants articulated a desire for community whilst mostly *not* participating in organised community structures. Nevertheless, sociality is present online and may be a way of fostering community, *contra* the concerns of those who blame mobile technology for transient intimacies (Bauman 2003; Badiou 2012). Two of the heaviest app users in the study were also those most adamant that locative platforms constituted community. Graham argues that apps offer community via shared social codes channeling online conversation: 'the app [is what] we share in common, we subscribe to that. There is an unwritten code of conduct I suppose, and the majority of people adhere to that'. This resonates with Peter Nieckarz's (2005: 409) argument

that online community requires ‘distinct values and norms that are sometimes negotiated and renegotiated among its members’, with Graham’s ongoing interaction with other users building up commonly held social codes. In this sense locative technology is positively impacting Graham’s hybridised experience, even as he works at negotiating the social codes of this online assemblage.

Equally, Joseph has used Grindr since its earliest iteration in 2009 and has been friends with some of his contacts on the platform for half a decade. His understanding of community as something practiced virtually as well as physically allows for new forms of community to cohere online. Joseph believes that any MSM app user can be considered part of the Grindr community. Yet Joseph’s actual behaviour problematises his narrative of online community. His belief that *any* app user should be thought of as part of a community brings with it the question of whether their reluctance to identify in such a way invalidates their opportunity to *be offered* this metaphorical membership. When a user asks him to delete a naked photo of them, he refuses to co-operate. As he reasons: ‘I can be reckless, I could show it to a friend and say y’know, ‘look at this guy, he’s hot, we hooked up’ or something. It can be a bit childish or insensitive or a bit wrong, but in London it’s just no risk’. Joseph qualifies his behaviour by arguing that London’s large size mitigates potential upset for the user he is taunting. Worryingly, he rationalises that his behaviour is particularly forgivable when he is sharing a photo of someone ‘in the closet’ or someone at risk of getting caught out as MSM because *they do not value the community he has defined*. He explains: ‘they only want sex. And so you kind of don’t give a shit about them as much, you care a little bit more if they are “out”’.

It is clear that Joseph harbours a desire for community, and an active interest in furthering this fraternity, but there are clear limits to who is invited to participate in the building of it. His view is that closeted men do not sufficiently contribute to this community and therefore deserve fewer rights when it comes to peer protection. This demonstrates the tension between the utility of locative apps as a way to broker connection and their rather subjectively imagined community credentials. The wish for men to more publicly inhabit their queer identities is legitimate because it would enhance the visibility of the offline queer community who would most benefit from improved social conditions, but Joseph’s punitive rationale testifies to the ease with

which users can fall foul of each other's personally held and variable social codes with potentially disastrous results. If anything, Joseph's account testifies to the need for shared social codes in locative media use that would clarify appropriate conduct between users.

As participants demonstrate, the internet tends to function only 'on the *rhetoric* of community' (Gordon and de Souza e Silva 2011: 108, emphasis added), and when it comes to locative media, communication in a general sense substitutes for an unevenly experienced community. Some users instead conceived of the apps as a network, an interpretation that suits the architecture of locative apps, with informational flows moving between both human and non-human actants. Whilst Francis is reluctant to define the apps as a community, he considers them networking tools, and concedes that they represent an important space. They cater to those who often need these alternative spaces for free expression, especially in a city losing its physical venues. As he points out, virtual space may not be the solution to a decline in physical community, but it can be flexibly co-opted: 'if you just openly critique Grindr and Tinder, you're denying queer people the autonomy to say "well actually what if I, what if we, want or need this"'. Just because you think it's not real or perpetuates negative stereotypes doesn't mean that it's not valid or useful'. Francis' opinion of the platforms is not unquestioningly positive, but he cautions against critiquing Grindr and Tinder in a way that denies users autonomy to subjectively utilise these networks. His defense of locative media recognises pertinent critiques leveled against them, whilst showing that they usefully connect individuals.

The extent to which online space can cohere queer community informs its ability to function as more than just a network of bodies. Noel Castree (2009: 167) has questioned whether rapid progress in digital technology will leave us spanning two spaces: a cyberspace in which location is irrelevant, and another embodied space of 'community and difference'. This study suggests not, because participants' experience of cyberspace is more often hybridised than online-only. But although 'heavier' users such as Joseph and Graham more commonly identified community online, participants overall rarely reported Castree's 'community and difference' in embodied *or* digital scenarios. That is not to say that users did not desire these ties, and locative media does at least involve interacting with different forms of queer

relations, even if it does not yet replace embodied connection. This sociality may not constitute community as we have traditionally known it, but as a form of communication between similarly identified individuals it has its own merit in fostering informal networks encouraging social cohesion. The focus therefore shifts to the implications of a community that is more networked and hybridised. By exploring what these hybridised public and private spaces look like in practice, I will demonstrate another way in which locative media impacts on the lived experience of queer social and sexual life.

### **Hybridisation of public and private space**

Having considered the hybridisation of digital and physical in Chapter 5, and queer urban spaces and the uneven coherence of online community in this chapter, we now consider the extent to which locative media *integrate* public and private spaces in queer everyday life. Encounters in hybrid space are relational, flexible, and always-in-production. As Hubbard et al. (2016) argue, ‘traditional divides between private and public life (and home and work) are breaking down thanks to the *layering* of sociotechnical forms of life in the city’ (2016: 569, emphasis original). There is no denying that the contemporary city is reimaged by those navigating it with an app whose central aims are to collapse distance and increase exposure to others. How do social cues address the conditions of hybridised encounters in public space?

Despite London’s scale, the geographical localism of the locative apps used meant that men unexpectedly bumped into other users with what many argued was unnerving frequency. Whilst hybridisation is integrated into locative app use, unintentional instances of private-public hybridisation can be jarring because they juxtapose the virtual and ‘real’ without warning. Ian speaks of his surprise at seeing men on the street who he has already met online: ‘you might be out somewhere in public and you see someone you recognise and you’re like, “do I know them from somewhere? Have I met them in real life? Have I seen a picture of them on Facebook?”’ The information gathered online about another user is disrupted by their embodied presence, requiring not only mental filtering to ascertain their familiarity but also a reliance on scant social codes advising how to behave in this scenario. These theoretically serendipitous but practically unwelcome meetings are

yet more awkward when they occur on a date with another app user, or whilst shopping in a discount store: or for one participant, mortifyingly, whilst waiting for their appointment at a sexual health clinic.

These hybridisations even hold a sense of the uncanny. Tim maintained an online friendship with another user for years, before unexpectedly bumping into him in central London. They exchanged greetings, noting each other's differences in height and voice from the person they had become familiar with in a virtual sense. Yet the conversation returned to the virtual sphere, without plans from either user for future meeting. Whilst users did not consider apps as a space to hide or an entity removed from daily life, the awkwardness that many articulated when seeing another user in public space shows that whilst hybridisation is usually experienced as a beneficial affordance of hyperconnectivity, it can actually prove uncomfortable when it is unintentional.

After years of required mobility for sexual minorities seeking community or queer encounter, locative technology today can productively overlay smaller towns or isolated villages with queer encounter. But for London specifically, the outcomes of hybridisation may not be welcomed as uncritically as they are in areas that were previously deprived of queer networks. For a user like Francis, who utilises locative apps whilst also relying on physical queer spaces in his career as a drag performer and actor, a difficult dichotomy results. Queer venues facilitate what Mark Turner (2003: 12) calls the 'interrelated cultural production of the city' and as these spaces close, Francis fears the community will be increasingly pushed into private territories: 'if we can't go to these places, there's no space for us to be'. Francis does concede that virtual spaces like Grindr might offer an alternative route forward, becoming in the process something more positively imagined: 'the idea that I can log on to Grindr and then find this virtual sub-community of people who are also in that venue, but are seeking similar things to me or might identify in a way that might be aligned with my identification, that is interesting.' Here again, hybridisation of public and private space overlays digital-physical hybridisation with mixed results: the deconcentration of queer venues is hastened by locative media, but locative platforms also offer a generative space of their own that is conducive to new forms of queer collectivism.

Public and private spaces are undoubtedly amalgamated by technology, but the impact on the resulting community is less certain. Given its young digital format, locative media apps have yet to coalesce common social codes amongst users, of which one code might be a more concretely defined sense of community. But as it stands, online environments replicate many of the prejudices and exclusion of physical iterations, as Chapter 2 demonstrated. Community is hard enough to foster without the added uncertainty of ambiguous online identity, diverse motivations for app use, and as Joseph's scenario evidenced, morally ambiguous behaviour fostered by the anonymity of the environment. Jason astutely shows how the perceived *shame* still tied up in the use of male-male locative media inhibits community:

What I think Grindr could actually do, why people are so passive on Grindr, why people don't give a fuck, is because it's just something that is looked down upon. You shouldn't even be on here, in the first place, even though it has the benefit of bringing together sexually active males who should or could enjoy themselves.

Therefore queer app users may be seeking online community on an individual basis but not being collectively encouraged to build something that would service that formation. Meanwhile, the sheer volume of conversations with multiple different potential matches produces a temporary intimacy that could contribute to community, if only there were not so many other potential partners simultaneously 'getting away'. The strength of apps is their immediacy, but this immediacy inhibits the formation of community in the ways that might best suit their users. Hoping for more emotionally significant relations that could be dubbed 'online community' is unlikely to develop without issue, but given the extent to which users dictate the direction of an app, more recognisable structures of sociality may develop over time based on further development and maturation of shared social codes mediating locative media platforms.

In the interim, some fear that the deconcentration of public queer space, once lost, will not be regained. Antonio was able to experience the gay districts of various European cities as a young adult, with their exuberant nightlife and embodied interactions. He concedes that in a contemporary context of ubiquitous technology, locative media offer distinct advantages but for younger men the multisensory queer



experience that he once enjoyed is lost: 'I can say that I experienced both. And I can say I know how both work, I know the rules, I know what to do.' In a hybridised queer environment, young people may become conditioned to find matches by participating in behaviours that are dictated by the social codes of software rather than lived experience.

Finally, we should remember that technology has the potential to reinvigorate, rather than neuter, public space. Whilst persuasive arguments contend that technology is disenfranchising public spaces and the ability of these spaces to host communication, intimacy and community, I would argue that we are witnessing a more complicated hybridisation here, marked not by the user's inattention to public queer offerings but by their utilisation of technology to make new hybrid spaces that blur the boundaries between public and private. Venues that were once exclusively heterosexual are now hybridised via apps, with users initially meeting in the online queer space of their MSM platform but increasingly choose a local 'straight' pub or bar for their first physical meeting. Equally, Soho's latest incarnation as a commodified simulacrum of its dissident history does not predicate against its utility for embodied queer sociality. As Simmel (1908) and Lefebvre (1974, trans. 1991) point out decades apart, the codes of public space are constituted by the interactions and relations of its inhabitants, because space is socially produced. The hybridisation of public and private space offered by apps could productively imbue more heterogeneous spaces with queer potential as identifiably queer physical spaces fades.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has explored new processual and practical insights into experiences of hybridised technology. The queer cachet once boasted by inner city districts seems to be deconcentrating, with accelerated property development in queer and creative urban quarters combining with individuals' waning identification with queer spatial identification resulting in the 'death of the gaybourhood' (Ghaziani 2014). Rather than being solely responsible for the deconcentration of queer space in the city, I have argued that locative apps compound changes wrought by larger socio-economic processes, dubbed by participants as gentrification but in reality encapsulating more complex shifting relations between consumption, space and marketisation. Non-

heterosexual men may be frequenting queer venues less because they are meeting men online, or may be meeting men online *because* they are unsuccessful in making connections in physical venues. Either way, a cycle develops whereby physical venues become progressively less likely to provide the sexual scoping that apps can offer. But we can more critically evaluate the supposed community and cultural value offered by physical nightlife. Cruising, for example, remains important today for men who are excluded from more mainstream gay environments because of their, age, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, or because they are non-gay identified. Even though the *jouissance* that cruising famously embodies may not be replicated through digital connection, apps can offer these users similar scope for sexual expression.

The success of locative apps in bringing men together undoubtedly impacts on what were previously public encounters. Mark Turner (2003: 177) amongst others expresses fear that technology risks separating queer bodies: ‘what has been lost, arguably, is the significance of the fleeting moment of reciprocal gaze’. Locative technology expedites a journey to meeting in a highly specific way, rather than enhancing the physical experience of a queer public space itself. Yet my findings suggest less of a straightforward shrinking of queer space in favour of its reinterpretation as something hybridised with digital space-making practices via locative dating apps. This hybridisation occurs not just in the meeting of digital and physical platforms but also in the shifting tectonics of sexual contact brokered in private and public space. As well as the new opportunities brokered, there are challenges to existing, in-person social codes for physical interaction. The issue for these users may be more about becoming familiar with technological hybridity as a way to balance social and sexual encounters in the contemporary city. With this in mind, the following chapter will consider how private spaces are becoming the dominant site of encounter through locative technology.

# Chapter 7

## Domesticating the public encounter: reconfigurations of queer life

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The amount of times I've been in bed, literally lonely, I get a [Grindr] message and it's kind of a relief, it doesn't matter who you're talking to, the fact that you're having a conversation.

Interview with Jason, 23

Chapter 6 explored the impact of locative media on queer life through public space, cruising and notions of queer community. It argued that locative media can progress new forms of queer public space: if not solely virtually, then via a hybridised context that sees normative public spaces overlaid with digital queer networks. It further argued that locative media, whilst not solely responsible for the deconcentration of queer physical spaces, is changing queer male socialisation within a larger context of urban economic change. This chapter argues that as queer publics are declining, male-male app users are resituating social and sexual encounters in the private home. I contend that a domestication of public encounter is occurring for the queer hyperconnected app user that fundamentally reconfigures queer life, because MSM locative media are progressing the privatisation of intimacies that might once have been more publicly practiced.

This chapter first outlines the emotions tied up in ideas of home and domesticity before showing how these emotions are imbricated in embodied practices relating to locative apps and the 'stranger'. Emotional affinity for the home as a site of refuge and free expression is widespread, but I also argue that the home need not be coded unquestioningly as a private space. Instead, in the process of inviting a stranger met online into the home, the app user is creating a temporary, hybrid public space out of their domestic quarters in which to host the stranger. Rather than public space being unequivocally threatened by private space or transitioned into it, I argue that MSM are actually reframing what were previously closed, private spaces into conditionally

intimate public spaces – more accessible configurations which are open to the incorporation of ‘strangers’ with whom users pursue embodied connection. I conceptualise domesticity in this context as a bringing-in of ‘out there’, both in terms of an integration of public elements or bodies into private space but also the integration and making-human of technology as something which we bring into the home and become intimately familiar with and utilise in new ways, including ‘netflix and chill’-style socio-sexual structures. Contrary to critical theorisations of domestication as a route to sanitised and desexualised queer culture (Zukin 1995; 2009; Bell and Binnie 2004), my research evidences domestication as a more positive opportunity for sexually and socially fulfilling privatised encounters.

The final part of this chapter conceptualises domestication in a broader sense that examines how locative media are introducing difficult new conditions into queer men’s lives that require adaptation and management. In moving physical encounter into the private space of the home, technology users must reconsider their conceptualisations of safety and risk. I will limn the more controversial facets of technological offerings, starting with ‘chemsex’ as the most acute example of a complex domesticated practice increasingly mediated by locative media, and then consider two more widely experienced issues: app addiction, and the more pervasive everyday labour of apps. Domestication allows me to package these experiences in a grouping that complements Chapter 6’s study of public space. This chapter is key to understanding how locative media impact on queer social life and queer spaces because it reveals not just how this technology encourages a domestication of queer encounter, but also the resulting behavioural impact that is folded into that space.

### **Ideas of home**

The home is a relevant site for thinking about the relationships between queer public/private spaces because so many different factors are tied up in its representation. Home has long been a space where the ‘functional and cultural dimensions of media are worked through’ (Silverstone, 1994: 176), and that now includes locative media. It is an important site of meaning and experience; for the non-heterosexual, home has long held a particular cachet (Gorman-Murray 2007). Gavin Brown (2008: 1225) understands home as a ‘multi-scalar, spatially located

emotional experience, rather than simply a building in which people live'. Non-heterosexuality is highly visible in public space (Skeggs et al 2004), but home is a space where queerness can escape scrutiny. Public gaybashing or 'genderbashing' (Namaste 1996) assaults may have declined over time, but they still occur with alarming regularity (in UK, see for example Antjoule 2016; Knight and Wilson 2016). Public space also remains implicated in multiple different micro- or macro-aggressions, from everyday discrimination and homophobic abuse or social exclusion through to physical assault or police entrapment (Andersson 2011; Browne et al. 2011). It seems unsurprising that queer locative technology users are choosing to bring strangers into their home rather than risk public scrutiny considering given that queer sex in public has historically been located via criminality.

Home is also a relational space, involving the creation of forms of dwelling and belonging (Blunt and Dowling 2006: 254). But there are also problematic queer homes: the heteronormative family home of a queer youth may represent a place of loneliness or even danger (Bell 1995). Because their burgeoning sexuality is alien, they are literally 'out of place', to borrow Tim Cresswell's term (1996). Berlant and Warner (1998: 548) argue that in political terms, the making of heterosexuality as hegemonic relies on 'practices that, though not explicitly sexual, are implicated in the hierarchies of property and propriety'. Non-heterosexuals must make a claim for this normality via their ability to aspire to home ownership and similar assimilative trappings, if they hope to earn recognition in hegemonic terms. Whether this assimilative process is as toxic as theorists contend comes down to how the queer individual perceives it, but it is clear that 'home', as something subjectively experienced, represents both a valued and often contested space for the queer subject.

For participants in this study, home functioned as a sanctuary, particularly for those who had moved from shared spaces with disapproving parents (reflecting Bell 1995) or for non-native Londoners who previously had to navigate overt queer intolerance (reflecting Blunt and Dowling's 2006 work on geographical scales of home). Because the majority of participants moved to London in their adult life rather than growing up in the city, their homes were imbued with a particular autonomy. Beyond self-defined gay and bisexual participants, home also constituted a valuable space for MSM for whom domestic encounters reduced the risk of being 'found out'. Indeed,

queer critical debates suggest that while the concept of home has an ‘affective charge and resonance’ which gives us the opportunity to consider ‘the intimacies particular to different groups in society’, it also ‘allows contemplation of the kinds of alliances increasingly required to resist neoliberalism’s impact on personal space’ (Greggs 2007: 2; see also Pilkey 2014). Conceptualising home in these flexible terms, guided by participants who displayed a complex attachment to their residence, whether rented or owned, private or shared, allows us to understand how technology is increasingly figured in the private realm. Queer intimacies have always challenged ‘straight’ narratives of intimacy in the domestic space. The question, then, is whether the previously ‘public’ nature of some of these queer intimacies loses its potential for cohering community (and indeed queer transgression) as it shifts to the private, and conversely what is generated in the resulting domestic space.

Given the emotional affect of home, participants demonstrated strong attachments to their home lives. Alex, in his late 20s, has just bought his first flat in East London, prompting him to think about ideas of home: ‘I know who the first person I had sex in it was. I know who all the people are obviously, but that feels significant to me because it’s my space’. Alex’s evident attachment to his immediate space is not reflected in his connection to the wider neighbourhood. This dichotomy testifies to the intimacy of the home in a larger geography that for Alex still lacks significance. Mike, also a homeowner, knows his neighbourhood in greater depth after several decades of residency. The geolocative function of his dating apps is sometimes a drawback because they introduce him to men who live very close by, a technomediated intimacy he would rather avoid:

[I]t’s like shitting on your own doorstep I guess. Unless there’s a proper date and it’s going to be something more meaningful, I would sort’ve like to keep the idea of where I live as slightly, you know, a place of sanctuary unsullied by anything that’s a slightly sketchy experience.

Like Alex, Mike has imbued his home with a sense of belonging (following Blunt and Dowling 2006) that is compromised, rather than enriched, by casual sexual encounter. The result is that apps locate Mike to his home more decisively than he would like, because they imply he is willing to share that space when in reality he

prefers to travel elsewhere for physical encounter. Thus his locative media practices influence, and are influenced by, how he figures 'home' emotionally.

Meanwhile for Francis, the different London neighbourhoods in which he has rented rooms have influenced his behaviour in different ways. Newly single, Francis used Grindr soon after his break-up whilst still living in Bow, east London, but he felt 'it was very much like living within the ghost of my relationship, and there was all these things from the life I had'. Thus 'home' for a user like Francis covers a greater area than just the building itself to take in the wider neighbourhood, with the memories and emotional significance attached to that sense of place. Nathaniel Lewis (2012: 1203) suggests that geographical variance shapes queer communities: for example, large cities with extensive nightlife might support more hedonistic lifestyles whereas small cities might see queer sociality more often cohered in private homes (see also Waitt and Gorman-Murray 2007; Lewis 2012). Yet Francis' narrative shows that even in a large city, and even for those who practice 'hedonistic' lifestyles (Francis' drag work, socialisation in queer nightlife spaces and drug consumption would seem to subscribe to this category), there is actually a surprising attachment to home that supports privatised sociality.

The only users who did not feel 'at home' were those whose idea of home was impinged upon by others. These narratives go against queer scholarship that visualises the private space of the home as a form of Foucauldian heterotopia, where the occupant can experience total freedom from heteronormative society (Doran 2014; see also Hetherington 2007).<sup>60</sup> Ian never accommodates men at his house because he lives with his parents in his childhood home, and his lifelong connection to his surroundings inhibit his ability to express his sexuality. Ian's idea of home suggests a more constricting force that prevents him feeling or behaving like a sexually autonomous adult. In a similar vein, Eric (65) cannot unify the disparate parts of his life into one home. He is married to a woman and has grown-up children who often come 'home' to visit. Eric cannot easily use his 'secret apps' at home because doing so would expose his bisexuality. Poignantly, Eric volunteers sympathy

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<sup>60</sup> The private home seems a less likely candidate for heterotopia than the pluralistic micropublics of a prison or swimming pool because it is so individualised, but there is no reason why the queer home cannot constitute this heterotopic 'spatial disorder' (Gandy 2012: 733), especially through its incorporation of new queer partners.

for what he dubs the ‘discrete’ community as if such actions of subterfuge are not similarly implicated in his own behaviour. As he continues to talk, his identification with this mode of living shows itself by degrees:

I feel sorry for them, I feel sorry that they [only] have that outlet, and then again I look back and think perhaps if I had been honest with myself many many many years ago, I would have lived a different life. But then you can’t look back. You think this is what I am, I would not destroy my family, I mean they’re old enough that they’ve fled the nest. But I wouldn’t do it.

Eric exhibits a complicated and conditional attachment to his existing home, and as such his vision of what his life might have been like had it been more sexually liberated clashes with the commitments he has made to family and spouse. His account highlights the complex relations that network home, locative media, family and sociocultural norms. Unable or unwilling to utilise queer public space, Eric experiences a progressive narrowing of queer opportunity that even his oblique use of locative apps cannot ameliorate.

Locative media can be seen for participants like Eric as a way of circumnavigating the more labour-intensive ways in which queer minorities have had to demand a right to public space (G.Brown 2001), but not everyone celebrates this shift. Mike verbalises a common complaint that queer men are increasingly prioritising ‘connecting with each other online and just meeting in their houses’. Not only can users surf apps from the comfort of their bedroom or living room, physical encounter brokered by the apps is itself increasingly realised in this private space too. Further, by foregrounding the home as a site not just for sexual connection but also the location of introduction and socialisation, the requirement to see and be seen in physical venues in order to meet eligible potential partners is diminished. The old trope of ‘back to mine?’ no longer works because neither party share a space from which to journey back *from*; instead, the first encounter is brokered from the ‘end’-space itself, the domestic destination. The result is that although participants referenced their home as being a highly personal, private or even sacred space, they frequently invited strangers into this space for intimate sexual partnering. To facilitate in this incorporation, users practiced a kind of ‘de-strangering’, a process that I will now investigate.



## **‘Netflix and chill’: Inviting the stranger in**

As we saw in Chapter 5, home is where much locative app use occurs, but it is also where much of the ‘action’ happens. Sex can be pursued more conveniently via a digital platform that organises intimacy into the home. The popular ‘netflix and chill’ quip refers to the popularisation of an invitation extended between casual partners to visit each others’ homes to watch television as a way of progressing to sex in a pseudo-domestic, relaxed context. Here, it functions as metaphor for the digitally mediated domestication of cruising. Of course, encounters brokered online that progress to physical meetings can occur in public space as much as they are realised in the private space of the home, but because locative dating apps introduce users to each other online, the process of familiarisation is accelerated to the extent that sexual encounter in the home can be expedited almost immediately, and often is. This process is just one example of a wider domestication of urban encounters (Zukin 2009; Koch and Latham 2013; Mandich and Cuzzocrea 2016), but it is distinctive for the questions it generates around the qualities, social or sexual, of this space. Given participants’ tangible attachment to their home space, how do they rationalise inviting the ‘stranger’ into their private space?

Locative app use indicates that familiarity is not a pre-requisite for domestication, because users invite new partners into their home whom they have only met virtually. People tend to be protective of their home space, and yet app users frequently invite strangers to access these spaces, suggesting the employment of new cognitive approaches that can rationalise the encounter. Users are reconfiguring the levels of access normally associated with the private through *de*-strangering the stranger. Public and private are, after all, relational concepts. We can understand sex at home as a new type of relation between domestic and public spheres rather than merely a retreat into private space. As Tim Dean (2009) argues in his work on cruising, two men can constitute both lovers and strangers, and there is no reason why we cannot think in similar terms of a home meeting. It shares with cruising the same erotic bond that John Paul Ricco (2016: n.pag) argues, of cruising, is ‘less structured in terms of attachment than separation, and that thus affirms that a mutual intimate experience can be had that does not require or ask for the assimilation of oneself into another’. The ambivalence Ricco paints between attachment and separation relaxes the

traditional divisions between familiarity and strangeness. Granting the erotic precedence over emotional affect similarly allows for sex with strangers based on mutual desire rather than a *necessarily* deeper connection. Compared to public spaces, the private zone of the home is not normally thought of as an entity that easily absorbs strangers, but the familiarity, whether real or imagined, brokered by locative media can often sufficiently bond strangers before meeting.

There is of course some conceptual work required in priming a stranger for entry into private space, and this is often assisted through ‘netflix and chill’ social practices that emphasise sociality as well as sexuality in the encounter. Without the social props provided by a night out in a shared physical space, there is sometimes what Liam defines as a ‘contrived and transactional’ nature to accommodating men in a home space for sexual encounter. Their unfamiliarity takes on greater significance in a private space than it might do in a larger public where others are present, so mitigating the potential awkwardness of the situation by sharing a drink, watching television together or chatting casually helps establish a connection. It is the latent *potential*, rather than unfamiliarity, tied up in the stranger figure that is persuasive for the queer app user seeking to expedite physical encounter. As Georg Simmel argued a century ago (1908, trans. Levine 1971), the stranger may be characterised not by difference but by potential: ‘to be a stranger is naturally a very positive relation; it is a specific form of interaction’ (1971: 403). The stranger is not dangerously unknown but can be viewed as an actor within a larger hybrid network: someone unfamiliar enough to channel eroticism, but known enough to justifying making private territory temporarily public. Not only do apps sketch out the broad terms of this encounter in advance, but the practice of bringing a stranger into a home space serves to personalise that encounter because the home space is not a public for just anyone. The ‘solitary domestic space of the user’ (Race 2015: 257) is made temporarily communal in the service of expediting sexual encounter, before returning to its private designation.

Those app users who seek anonymous encounter logically want to *avoid* de-strangering. Ash Amin (2008: 10) argues that familiarity between different people ‘takes time to build and comes from repetition’; clearly a one-off liaison will not coalesce total familiarity. But for some, the appeal of ‘analogue’ cruising is its

anonymity; its *jouissance* may rely precisely *on* that partner's exhilarating unfamiliarity. Users can minimise their online exchange to try and replicate this anonymity, but it is hard to achieve truly context-free erotic interaction when using technology predicated on humanising online identity. The GPS functionality underpinning these apps reveals user location, and the encouragement to populate a user's online profile with age, weight, height and ethnicity cannot help but build an identity prior to meeting. As Matty surmises, 'you can't just give a little bit of yourself, you know?' For Matty, as for others, this was actually a positive motivation for online conversation in the hopes of multiplying encounters, but it could equally be seen as a disadvantage. The fact that users tended not to see it in that light suggests that, at least for this sample, familiarity may be overtaking anonymity as an erotic driver. This supports Kane Race's (2015) suggestion that 'buddy lists' on apps invite repeat encounters with the same partners, refuting a common assumption that apps are purposed for repeat anonymous encounters with *different* partners. Clearly these apps generate affective social or emotional bonds that are poorly served by interpretations of the technology that emphasise only 'no-strings' sex.

The parallels between Simmel's stranger and the contemporary app user persist in other hybridised forms of relating. Simmel shows how the figure of the stranger often receives confidences from those he meets that would be withheld from someone more closely related. In the same way, participants tended to desire what Ali (22) describes as the perfect kind of encounter: 'something that connects and something that shares'. But this type of encounter does not preclude the intimate and yet transient bonds between the app user and those they meet. Indeed, for some users a (subjectively imagined) sense of intimacy was required to realise mutual erotic potential with a partner who was hitherto a stranger. Therefore this symbolic affordance *as realised by their role as strangers to each other* becomes logical. Here again, Simmel's stranger can be refigured as the participant in a sexual encounter: the stranger is 'freer practically and theoretically; he surveys conditions with less prejudice' (1971: 1). In the same way, those meeting for a sexual encounter are liberated by not having to know each other on any more involved footing than uncomplicated sexual intimacy.<sup>61</sup> They are able to connect sexually without becoming encumbered by what their sexual partner

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<sup>61</sup> This also resonates with psychoanalytic theorisations of 'impersonal intimacy' (Bersani and Phillips 2008).

represents and what kind of person they may be. As we saw in Chapter 5, those most successful in converting virtual conversation to embodied meet-up were generally those minimising online conversation in efforts to expedite physical encounter. The same advantage holds here: despite the labour of online self-presentation and partner searching, apps can prove highly efficient in matching two men seeking a reciprocal sexual encounter, and, if desired, maintaining those men as intimate strangers. In short, they can be erotically connected whilst emotionally separate.

There is an attraction to this intimacy model that can rival the complications of deeper emotional ties, contra the concerns of Zygmunt Bauman (2000; 2003) and others regarding the fleeting connections that dominate technologically mediated society. As Simmel (1971: 2) points out, whilst lovers ‘think that there has never been a love like theirs’, an estrangement develops at the moment when ‘this feeling of uniqueness vanishes from the relationship’. With the casual sexual partner on the other hand, this kind of emotional intimacy is not sought and thus cannot be thwarted. The temporarily constructed hybrid space of this casual encounter takes on significance as an experience in itself.<sup>62</sup> Likewise, for Simmel (1971: 3), the stranger is characterised by ‘certain measures of nearness and distance’, as is the dating app user invited to another user’s private home: they are physically proximate, and getting ever more so as they approach the house, and yet they are an unknown quantity and therefore in another sense quite ‘distant’ from the inviter. Yet this emotional distance does not inhibit physical proximity. New relations brokered by locative technologies may not be exclusively positive, but the stranger sociability demonstrated here represents one way in which locative media impact on queer life beyond simplistic categorisation as good or bad.

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<sup>62</sup> The thrill of this constricted temporality finds expression in media including *The Swimming Pool Library* (Hollinghurst 1988) and *Weekend* (Haigh 2011).

## Negotiating risk, refining desire

The previous section demonstrated how ‘de-strangering’ a new partner for admittance into the home represents one way in which privatised encounters brokered by locative media impact on queer social life. Given that locative apps represent a new technology that users are still learning to accommodate, examining the affordances and hazards of this integration is a useful way for us to build a balanced picture of contemporary queer digital-physical hybridisation. Inviting sexual partners back to the private space of home is nothing new, but doing so after only a virtual rather than physical introduction deserves consideration because virtual intimacy is *imaginatively* constructed compared to the embodiment of a physical meeting. The internet allows people to meet and make relationships with strangers rather than those with pre-existing social ties (Rosenfeld and Thomas 2012), and this should be celebrated for its potential to broaden routes to queer encounter. However as intimacy is domesticated, risk becomes domesticated too. Violence in queer publics is well documented, including the Pulse nightclub shooting in Orlando, US (2016) and the Jerusalem LGBT Pride stabbings (2005; 2015), but violence can permeate the private space of the home too, as testified by recent cases of murderers utilising Grindr in particular to groom and kill other users, most recently Stephen Port in 2015 and Stefano Brizzi in 2016. Spaces are constituted by human action (Giddens 1984), and these spaces can fail, necessitating considerations of intimacy and risk in the home.

Examination of how app users negotiate personal risk in the pursuit of desire helps us better understand how hybridised technology shapes lived experiences for the hyperconnected queer user. Given the ever-deepening involvement of digital technology in our lived experience, keeping boundaries in place for personal safety can be labour-intensive. Most participants self-policed their app-based invitations, using personal judgement to ensure safety in the home. Several took extra precautions when men visited. Take, for example, Tim’s securitisation behaviours:

If they were coming to my house I wouldn’t give them anything that they could take or that they could use against me. So I would make sure all my money is away. I would never invite someone round to my house that I hadn’t had some kind of extended chat with anyway and felt some kind of

reassurance. You have to kind of protect yourself in some kind of way, it's important.

Tim does not just consider security in a physical setting, he also highlights the way that intimacy promulgated by locative platforms belies a porous technology accessible to external stakeholders. By imagining Grindr as a public as well as private space, Tim evidences his awareness of the hybridisation inherent in bringing the 'outside' world inside that allows the user to assume intimacy when the reality may be less secure. Others described how they closed doors into certain rooms to make a more direct path to the room for the planned encounter, or hid family photos before a 'meet'. These 'fixes' to zone the home for public consumption by other men not only prevent material theft but also mitigate against the user revealing too much about themselves. By anonymising their home they are able to capitalise on their own unfamiliarity, equalising their disadvantage at the hands of the stranger who is presented with many more clues about them from their space than they are able to glean in return. Depersonalising their surroundings limits the expression of an identity represented through the home (Blunt and Dowling 2006). De-identifying the home offsets the labour of de-strangering the unfamiliar sexual partner.

Another consideration in negotiating risk comes from the *shared* home. In a city as densely populated and as expensive as London, cohabitation with friends (and often near-strangers) is common, and as a result inviting casual partners round to the home (or being invited to theirs) was influenced by considerations of housemates or flatmates, whose presence marks the home as semi-public. The emotional intimacy evidenced between users and cohabittees was often surprisingly strong, reflecting what Helen Gregg (2007) theorises as a queer politics of home – a place that does not have to conform to a traditional familial set-up. Francis, for example, treats his flatmates as a pseudo-family, and takes the logistics of shared accommodation very seriously, including traveling to, rather than accommodating, partners out of consideration for their shared space. Others spoke of strategically using the app when they knew housemates would be away for the evening, or actively seeking permission from flatmates to invite a partner over. Aaron, a resident in a shared flat, carefully considers the impact of meets on his cohabitee: '[I]t would feel like an invasion of her privacy and trust I think, just to have a stranger come along. For me it's ok, I don't

really get scared or threatened by that'. Key here is the consideration of a housemate's security in lieu of concern for the self. Users often expressed confidence about their own capacities for self-protection, but reasoned that their respective housemates should not be required to have to make such a judgement just because of their shared tenancy. This shows an awareness of the risks inherent in this kind of untested encounter.

The significance of the home for participants as private territory might equally be expected to impact on the cartographic abilities of locative media, equipped as they are with highly accurate GPS facilities. Research has shown that locative media users take locational privacy seriously (Ricker et al. 2013; Staiano et al. 2014). In particular, the 'dropped pin' feature described in Chapter 5 should generate privacy concerns given that it encourages users to release their exact geographical coordinates to strangers, but anxiety about its surveillance capacities was rare. As Graham reasons: 'they don't know who I am or where I am. The dropped pin is purely a postcode that alludes to a building but not to your front door.' Others agreed that the dense urban fabric of London makes it hard to truly pinpoint a user's location, although some noted that a suburban or rural location would provide a higher degree of accuracy and that securitisation would become more important as a result. Only Ali expresses real concern about sharing his dropped pin location:

I know some people think I might be a bit too paranoid but at the end of the day you don't really know who these people are [...] it would be an overstep to send my location to someone. If it was just my house, like I was the only one living there, then maybe ok, yes, I would consider it. But since if someone is a bit crazy or you send your number and you don't know them and they could be anybody, no: I wouldn't endanger only my life, but also my housemate's.

More typical of considerations regarding disclosure of the home via locative apps is Phil's response, which questions the implications of locational specificity of despite broadly supporting the function:

I use it to tell people where I live, and if they're gonna come to my house, they're gonna know where my house is once they've come there. I don't worry 'oh, you've got that tracked on your phone somewhere and you might share that with your friends, or it exists in a virtual world now' because once I've said my home or they've knocked on my front door, unless they've got the

worst possible sense of direction, they'll know where it is! So it doesn't really worry me. I don't know, maybe it should.

The simultaneous recognition of risk at the hands of technological sophistication and negotiation of said risk was normalised amongst users. Most neutralised their fears by reasoning that *in their experience* they had not been located at home by others non-consensually. In fact, dropping locative pins for other users is not compulsory, and an option exists to remove proximity specificity from a profile. Interestingly however, only two concerned participants had done so, evidencing the tendency for users to do whatever they can to maximise their participation in the app and be perceived as 'valid' contenders amongst users within the boundaries of the platform. To physically locate one's self is to humanise one's self; removing proximity measurements could discourage approaches from others, reducing consequent opportunities for meeting. An almost instinctive cost-benefit analysis encourages users to take this risk.

As we have seen in the way that some users anonymise their living quarters to reduce the risk of inviting a stranger into their home, risk is subjectively negotiated by the hyperconnected user seeking encounter. Research into sexual risk-taking behaviour has included online practice, particularly among adolescents (Souza and Dick 2009; Lau and Yuen 2013; Notten and Nikken 2016), but is less developed in contexts of locative media outside of health-based approaches (see for example Rice et al. 2012; Landovitz et al. 2013). The picture is one of personally-informed decision-making based on past experiences. Darren admits he has relaxed his approach to personal safety over time:

I used to be really good when I first started kind've chatting to guys on Gaydar, god, many years ago. And I'd always tell a flatmate where I was, and have a call-out time. So essentially if I hadn't rang or texted, you know I'd be like now you can start to be worried. And that stopped happening somewhere along the line, and I think it's because we, I, became quite complacent'.

Note Darren's definition of 'good' behaviour in the past and his acknowledgement of subjective risk estimation. His reference to 'we' suggests that MSM app users more widely have relaxed their cautiousness as locative technology has matured into a fixture of queer male culture. Elsewhere, users were confident that they could vet for physical encounter through online conversation, assessing another user based on gut



feeling and previous experience. Matty, for example, suggests that his intuition is reliable even when tested only virtually: 'I'm a good judge of character. So I do check them out first, speak to them a bit, see if he's a nutcase or is this guy alright, you know'. Ruo-jian utilises the scope of technology in a different way, accessing prospective partners' social media links from their app profile information to check their credentials. He reasons: 'if someone has a Facebook profile it's unlikely they're gonna like you know, want to mug you or kill or whatever. So it is about checking that they are authentic people, they're not just robots'. These strategies rely on a subjective sense of intuition combined with perceived technological literacy: the possession of a Facebook profile is not, after all, an objective moral protection. Nevertheless, these tactics remain the preferred method of judging partners for encounter, and they prove successful.

However, this online assessment can fail when it comes to physical encounter. Finkel et al. (2012: 3) point out that if computer-mediated communication progresses without an embodied 'reality check', subsequent face-to-face meetings can produce unpleasant expectancy violations, and this was borne out in the study. The fact that participants so frequently expressed disappointment about how their partners looked in reality also suggests that the partner in question has not balanced self-promotion with accurate self-presentation (Ellison et al. 2006). Aaron has experienced the gulf between online expectation and embodied reality when inviting new partners to his house. The difference in their online and 'real' looks generates for Aaron an uncomfortable pressure to continue with the sexual encounter. This (subjectively imagined) obligation to honour the sexual contract implicitly agreed to online suggests uncertainty about his autonomy in a situation lacking a shared code of conduct. He describes the uncomfortable feeling of trying and failing to get rid of a partner from his flat:

[Y]ou basically have to kind of uninvite the person, you have to say "time to leave!" But you've already invited them. So it's very awkward, that's why generally I try to avoid them coming round to my house and will much prefer to go for a beer first, when you can kind of get to suss out a person a bit more.

Unlike in public spaces, there is reduced scope for manoeuvre in a private encounter when the meeting does not progress as planned. Even aside from Finkel's expectancy

violations, participants described arriving for an encounter only to find the door locked and their calls going unanswered. This process synthesises two kinds of hybridisation: digital with physical, because a partner has made a commitment online to meet offline which they can then evade, avoid, or cancel; and public with private, because the user who has journeyed to the other's private home is now left (often literally) out in the cold, often in a residential district without public venues or even public transport infrastructure nearby to change plans. Aaron's preference to now meet men in a bar first evidences a more general uncertainty amongst users regarding appropriate social codes in an arena of interaction so new as to be almost entirely lacking in precedent. In this scenario, intimacy is not easily cohered: not because it cannot be, but because it is not a realistic reality within the given temporal limitations. Jason powerfully presents the paradox:

The scary part for me is that even after you have sex you never, they never, stop becoming a stranger, even if you're talking to them on an app. Even the intimate act of sharing that sexual experience doesn't knock that wall of 'I don't actually *know* you'.

Whilst I have argued that a process of de-strangering facilitates the admission of a stranger into the domestic privacy of the home, Jason's testimony considers the status of relations *after the act*. As he reasons, sex does not automatically constitute intimacy (reflecting the argument on page 187), and whilst technology can expedite encounter and frame that encounter in a transitory intimacy based on shared desire, another person cannot become fully 'known' in such a short space of time. In fact, as Jason figures it, their strangeness is in constant construction: they continue *becoming* a stranger in defiance of in-the-moment attempts to gain deeper connection. Jason's narrative reflects Zygmunt Bauman's (1991: 150) argument that the stranger is 'physically near while remaining spiritually remote', and for Bauman it is this remoteness that makes it difficult to reconcile sexual encounter with meaningful connection. However, that impasse only holds if we assume that sexual encounter must *be* predicated on meaningful connection. As we have seen, strategies for de-strangering generally meant that remoteness was sufficiently diminished (or overlooked) to allow mutually beneficial sexual encounter. The variable success of users in satisfactorily shifting physical encounter from public to private space was less dependent on acquaintance with the stranger than on navigating the subtly shifting

social codes underpinning privatised encounter.

As an apparatus in negotiating risk, technology has in one sense minimised the hyperconnected user's reservations, whilst in another sense amplifying the behaviours that may have been limited for their perception of risk. A particularly relevant site for negotiating these social codes via technology comes in the form of 'chemsex': the combining of sex and drugs in the home.

### **Chemsex**

As locative media have contributed to the domestication of public encounter over several years, it has become easier to participate in certain practices within this domestic space that are popularly perceived as risky. Combining drugs with sexual encounter is not new – MSM are not just considered 'early adopters' for technology use, but for drug consumption too (Measham et al. 2011) – but platforms like Grindr and Scruff have visibilised the presence of these practices in virtual queer life to such an extent that 'chemsex' is increasingly entangled with hybridised queer encounter. 3G, wifi, and smartphone apps converge to constitute a new infrastructure of the sexual encounter (Race 2015), and they mediate that encounter in new ways. As legislation and changing tastes have diminished sexual activities at gay saunas or cruising grounds, pharmacologically-enhanced intimacies have shifted to private homes. The disinhibiting effect of these drugs allows men to dismantle the barriers to socialisation and sexual confidence that so often underpin same-sex interaction.

We should be cautious about making sweeping assumptions regarding the prevalence of chemsex amongst the MSM population because *awareness* of the practice has grown so dramatically, partly based on growth in locative media. However, evidence does suggest that there has been a growth in the practice itself over the past five years, particularly in urban centres (Hull et al. 2013; Hockenhull et al. 2017; although see Stuart 2015 for difficulty in empirical recording). For example, of a large quantitative UK sample of MSM attending sexual health services (PHE 2014), 23.6% of participants reported use of three or more recreational drugs in the preceding three

months and 21.8% of participants reported chemsex specifically.<sup>63</sup> Whilst some scholars argue that popular disdain for drug use acts as a synecdoche for a larger heteronormative campaign against queer practices (see for example Race 2011; 2015), chemsex is distinctly constituted in comparison to other patterns of recreational drug use. Mowlabocus et al. (2016) argue that negative public health findings that simply align digital cruising with poor sexual health outcomes *per se* underplay other factors that need to be taken into account before positioning hook-up apps and sex sites as vectors of disease. However, they also claim that ‘chillout parties, chemsex parties, and other forms of social-sexual gatherings have become a mainstay of urban gay male culture in the United Kingdom’ (Mowlabocus et al. 2016: 4). I would argue that the role of chemsex as a ‘mainstay’ of urban gay male culture is rather exaggerated, even where the practice is concentrated in London and Brighton (Bourne et al. 2014). It is however significant that the practice is now seen as coterminous with a male contemporary urban queer experience.

Whilst the behaviours of participants in this study are not statistically representative of wider populations, many volunteered reflections on chemsex, including, for some, their own involvement in the practice. Personal experience tended to inform views on chemsex. Simeon, who rejects drugs based on his religion, expresses curiosity about what he is missing:

Sometimes you get this idea like should I do it, and get what it feels like? Because everybody’s doing [it], well I wouldn’t say everyone but a majority of people, especially when it comes to Fridays, you’ll see lots and lots and lots of kind’ve messages, “oh can you come, we are a 4, we are having group sex”.

Simeon’s perception that chemsex is not only pervasive but correlates with group sex is based on how these invitations mediate much of his online conversation. Meanwhile Liam, using dating apps after the breakdown of a long-term relationship, finds it difficult to navigate a changed environment in which drugs feature so prominently. He reflects: ‘the quantity of drugs is just completely - it’s not just teens, it’s people in their 40s, 50s, with their H&H [High & Horny]. It’s like, are you fucking serious?’ Liam recalls a hook-up with a casual partner via Grindr who had

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<sup>63</sup> Elsewhere, of a large-scale survey of 15,360 MSM, 12.5% had consumed GHB, and 16.5% of men had consumed mephedrone, including 5.3% in the past 4 weeks (Hickson et al. 2016).

come straight from a group chemsex meet. The multiple sexual partners were less concerning for Liam than the centrality of drugs to the encounter: 'I could just smell G[HB] on him, taste it on him almost'. Liam's struggle to negotiate the higher prevalence of drug-based sex after several years away from the 'scene' reflected the views of participants who had moved to London in recent years from other areas of the UK or abroad and shared their surprise at the high prevalence of drug-based practice on apps. Participants were adamant that the increasing popularity of Grindr in particular correlated with a proliferation in chemsex invitations.

Amongst those who did not practice chemsex, there was a consensus that chemsex was implicated in poor sexual health and contributed unhelpfully to media scrutiny of queer life-courses. To this end, several commented on the increasing and often pernicious media coverage attending the phenomenon. Nevertheless, whilst some vocalised their anxiety that the practice was fundamentally unsafe, chemsex does have its advocates. Ethan has attended a chemsex party in the private home of a wealthy executive met through a friend and found it a positive experience:

In some of these venues it's often people who work in sort've low-end food venues or shops and they just come to sort've wipe their weekend, whereas in this place you sort've had the feeling that everyone was healthy and intellectually engaged, and they were just doing it for fun.

Ethan's comfort seems to stem from his identification with the demographic of the session's invitees, and he is adamant that apps are the primary means to network for this kind of encounter. What is interesting here is that apps do not filter for desirability, for example the socioeconomic privilege that made Ethan feel safe when he attended a chemsex session populated by similarly identified young professionals. What is striking about the imbrication of drugs, sex and locative media is that the combination of these different contexts complicates assumptions about chemsex as a recreational drug practice. MSM apps facilitate networking of users who are offering, or interested in, chemsex parties. In the same way that apps expedite meeting 'the stranger', these technologies make communal drug consumption a more accessible and less taboo practice because online encounter is so easy. It is no longer a question of not 'knowing' the contacts who might supply drugs or the environment to take drugs together, because technology now offers precisely these relations.

This platform for the buying and selling of psychoactive drugs is regularly but ineffectually policed by locative app products, with Grindr attracting particular scrutiny in media as the primary conduit of drug consumption amongst locative platforms (Lang 2016; Parker-Karris 2016; in policy, see Thanki and Frederick 2016). Whilst app companies attempt to restrict peer advertising (as evidenced by Roth 2015), for example through strict ‘terms of conduct’,<sup>64</sup> participants nevertheless identified a high visibility of drug dealing online. Declarations of interest in drug-based encounter, or invitations to already-organised chemsex meetings, were equally common, and often coded in different abbreviations to avoid scrutiny by app moderators. Participants offered ‘chems’, ‘CS’ (chemsex), ‘play’ (drug-based play), ‘H&H’ (high and horny) and ‘slam party’ (injecting of mephedrone or methamphetamine) as examples of this coding, mirroring examples of the coded language of locative media that is decipherable to like-minded participants but ‘opaque’ to outsiders (Race 2015: 263).

The impact of chemsex went beyond sociocultural concerns. Home-based ‘chill-outs’ (drug-based group socialisation and sex) de-emphasise socialisation in queer public venues. The men who might have gone from one late-night club to another have now privatised that experience, constituting one home as a semi-public meeting place, sometimes for a whole weekend. As I discussed on page 183, the home offers a Foucauldian heterotopia for its queer inhabitants (Doran 2014). Chemsex can be seen to add a further dimension to this private-public structure: a ‘pornographic elsewhere’ (Race 2015: 267) that is gratifyingly removed from ‘normal’ life. Mike, himself a former chemsex participant, argues that in becoming ‘drug-fuelled and sex-fuelled’, the playful element intrinsic to queer encounter has been lost. As he reasons:

When you combine drugs with iPhones it’s a very toxic, compulsive mixture. Guys are, it creates a lot of addictive behaviour. You’ll trudge all the way across town to meet someone for sex and then they’re immediately looking for someone else. The whole time seems to be spent on your iPhone rather than actually shagging.

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<sup>64</sup> Grindr, for example, upholds the following conditions: ‘no photos or mentioning of firearms, weapons, drugs or drug paraphernalia’ (2016).

Mike's frustration at individualistic sociotechnical behaviours refutes Kane Race's (2015) argument that individual use of smartphones may still maintain the best interests of the sexual assemblage. Paradoxically, app use not just prior to the chemsex encounter but *throughout* complicates its ostensible facilitation of the chemsex meet itself because the apps are so often called upon to expand the party even whilst it is in progress. The result is a compulsive cycle of online scoping and recruitment for more, somehow 'better' sexual partners whilst the current arrangement stalls. Users refuted Kane Race's (2015: 268) suggestion that downtime from active sexual engagement in chemsex can give rise to 'banter' about online experiences, recruitment of new members, and meaningful sociality. Instead their experiences supported Race's admission that the time may equally be spent in tense silence whilst participants scope for new partners. Race's emphasis of the former as a 'will to sexual sociability' (2015: 268) in chemsex practices rather understates the individualistic drive for new partners so negatively experienced by Mike and others. As someone with a self-described addictive personality, Mike's rapid involvement in the 'scene' was perhaps unsurprising, but he lost control of his boundaries to an alarming extent:

Drugs started off as something to enhance the sex, and then I was finding that it was becoming the be-all and end-all, and I was meeting guys who were just interested in doing drugs, and it was becoming really- I was also starting to turn into one of those people, it was just kind of getting a bit hardcore.

Mike's experience reflects evidence supporting the idea that some men participate in unintentional or unwanted sex as a direct result of chemsex (Bonnell et al. 2010; Bourne et al. 2015). Certainly, a proportion of men participating in chemsex perceive negative consequences from the practice (Bourne et al. 2015), reflecting Hegazi et al. (2015). Significantly, Mike has recently stopped using Grindr because he feels the app has become a facilitator to the chemsex scene. His decision demonstrates one way in which chemsex participants develop strategies for when they perceive their drug use as problematic, such as avoiding social settings associated with chemsex (Bourne et al 2015: 1174). As in any addiction, the spectre of relapse looms large. The danger lies not necessarily in drug use itself, nor even the compromised sexual health practices of those under the influence, but of the paucity of established social codes underpinning chemsex meets in an era of pervasive technological connection. As Mike points out:

if something does happen to you in one of these things, is anyone else in a good state to actually help you, do they give a shit? Because you don't know them or their judgement is warped because they're high [...] They've gotta deal with you, so they'll just kick you out. Or you might be lucky and they'll try and help you out, but you don't know. You're putting yourself in the hands of strangers.

In a technological context of individualisation, meeting men online for chemsex offline carries a particular risk because responsibility for 'strangers' is already low, and may be exacerbated by the effects of drugs, meaning that help is not available from others in the encounter if needed. Drugs are effectively consumed alone despite their shared environment. Thus the private home – even one's own – is not a space of safety but one of risk. As fellow participant Tim argues, the privatisation of queer subculture generates its own concerns: '[it's] being driven indoors, but I do worry that that puts people's health at risk. Even if it means that people are taking drugs more, or those drugs aren't being regulated the same way'. Apps parallel larger processes of privatisation, so the two practices reinforce each other in prioritising private over public forms of relating. However, unlike nightclubs, the private home is not equipped with security guards, first aiders or even passersby who could intervene in an emergency.

These issues show just how much is at stake in the technological mediation of chemsex. In many ways, locative apps are no different from a succession of technologies that have been co-opted to facilitate drug use: desktop platforms, chat sites, the 'dark web' and SMS messaging have networked interested parties in the past. But the proximity brokered by locative media means that drug consumption networks and socialisation in the context of chemsex are more readily accessible. Joseph, a sometime-drug user, argues that the addictive nature of locative media, combined with the ease of procuring drugs transforms apps into a potent environment for chemsex: 'they go together. I don't think the chem [sic] scene would survive without Grindr because you wouldn't have the means to organise a chillout'. In identifying their symbiosis, Joseph shows how this kind of encounter is made *less* visible to external parties because meetings are engineered privately online in one-to-one conversation and more often realised in the home than in public. Indeed, the analysis of chemsex practices in this chapter prompts discussion of a more quotidian issue amongst app users, of a daily digital labour that invites technological addiction.



## **The digital labour of app use**

The time and effort expended in digital technology and social media use has been conceived in Marxist terms as ‘digital labour’ (Fuchs 2015; see also Scholz 2012; Richardson 2016). But beyond the more clear-cut instances of work-based labour, quasi-social relations can constitute an informal human labour in seemingly benign technological processes. Locative media dating is an ostensibly pleasurable pastime, but there is work involved in this recreation. Wasted labour should not come into the equation for a technology predicated on efficiency. I argue that being human in a digital environment, even one oriented specifically to helping the user, can be deceptively labour-intensive for the hyperconnected user and that this can encourage compulsive app use and even app addiction, particularly in the private space of home.

Deeper technological involvement is a condition of the pervasive hybridity offered by locative media. The algorithmic software of dating apps is presumed to help the user condense the work of meeting partners by offering access to more people, more quickly. However, Lovink (2011) argues that social network activity invites information overload and Best and Delmege (2012) show that online dating in particular offers the user so many choices and so much information that a ‘shopping culture’ of dating emerges, exhausting the user. This argument was reflected in my study, with time spent on apps tending to increase rather than decrease as a result of efforts to filter unmanageably large amounts of data in partner searching. The apps’ emphasis on meeting disguises a more procedural labour, which goes beyond conversation to involvement on the platforms themselves in the interests of securing introductions.

Participants employed different techniques to try and reduce their labour. These included enacting age or ethnicity filters within the app to refine matches displayed, and sending out batched messages to multiple users to condense time spent on individual approaches. But these time-saving tricks generate their own labour, requiring yet more time on the platform they were intended to minimise. Some users consciously regulated their use of apps at home, rationalising the space as conducive for self-imposed limits to appropriate use. The potential to surf apps is endless, so portions of time are allocated to the activity: as Darren reflects, ‘if it’s getting to an

hour then no, I should be switching them off'. It is revealing that the evident labour of app use experienced by participants diverges from the fulfilment ostensibly offered in the marketing and consumption of these platforms.

There is something more-than-human about the way that these locative apps draw users in to engaging with the platform. The drive for 'continuous connectivity' (Wilson 2014: 535)<sup>65</sup> only strengthens the reality that smartphones are 'devices that, despite their relatively recent prominence, many feel they cannot exist without'. As Toby argues, the ubiquitous technology in question proffers an apparently effortless form of consumption: 'what the app does is it makes sex even more available to us and just kind've everywhere and anywhere and any time.' This invitation to constant use is compounded by the fact that in a city as large as London, there will always be men online. Graham metaphorises this constant connectivity as a 'switch permanently on, 24 hours a day'. In such a scenario, the pressure to be part of the offering can become all-consuming. The fact that app use is so skewed to home use means that, if permitted, it dominates private space as an irresistible individualised practice. The endless wandering figured in this online flâneurie may not find fruitful encounter, but neither will the flâneur be interrupted from their reverie by a friend or colleague who could helpfully interrupt. The absence of external distractions invites ever-longer online engagement.

Privatised locative media involvement without others co-present to mitigate for compulsive use makes it the responsibility of the user to try and regulate their own hyperconnection. There are parallels to be drawn here from the etymology of domestication as the process of taming a wild animal. The 'domestication' of locative media shares a conceptual struggle to corral a wild or unregulated entity, but judging by user experiences, success in this domestication is unevenly experienced. If domestication can be quantified via self-regulated use, some participants did develop effective tactics. Consider Darren's strategies for disengaging from the platforms: 'I've got to the point where if I'm having a particularly down day or something, I stay away from them because it's never a good thing to do, it's never good to go down that rabbit hole'. Similarly, Francis astutely understands his app use as a

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<sup>65</sup> Note the subtle difference from Gordon and de Souza's (2011) 'constant' connectivity.

hybridisation of digital and physical that requires active stewardship to prevent addiction:

Each app you have is another platform from which you distance yourself from the real, physical, engaged world you inhabit. And I guess, I don't really use either of them that much but the platforms I have, I guess for me- that's me confirming my desire to disassociate from the real world, which isn't something I necessarily want to do.

Others shared this sentiment that maintaining more than several 'chosen' apps would constitute an unfeasible commitment to too many online platforms. *Contra* Ahn and Jung's research suggesting that smartphone users underestimate their usage (2016), participants generally accurately reflected the extent of their use, even where it was routinised and thus might be less immediately apparent. We might expect habituated use into daily life to be harder to quantify, but many users were conscious of even these 'check-in' behaviours. However, beyond the labour involved in navigating and negotiating locative media, and the struggle to domesticate the ubiquitous platforms, some users' behaviours constituted an almost pathological addiction.

### **App addiction**

Addiction refers to repetitive acts with lack of control that precipitate personal and social problems (Marlatt et al 1988). Chemsex may figure for many as an extreme form of addiction, but the compulsivity of dating apps and their role as a vehicle for validation of the user in the face of boredom, loneliness, frustration or low self-esteem means that users often find themselves reliant on the apps for boosting self-esteem. Excessive technology use is increasingly regarded as a type of addictive behaviour; as Young and Abreu (2010) show, technological addiction is a complex combination of different contributing factors, not least because it is so pervasive in our contemporary technologically-mediated society. Smartphones are the form of technology most embedded into daily life, and thus the most prone to inviting addiction (Salehan & Negahban (2013). Lookout (2012), Billieux (2012) and Wallace (2014) all investigate smartphone addiction. Yet as Ahn and Jung point out there is little research into addiction from *users'* perspective, which is why this project's focus on lived experience from the voices of participants themselves is timely.

Ahn and Jung (2016: 1237) point out that ‘digital natives’ (that is, younger users who have grown up technologically proficient) may have different understandings of excessive use than ‘digital immigrants’ (Prensky 2001), who are older users, and often relative newcomers to the platform. In this study, however, users almost uniformly described their own use as excessive. Participants repeatedly ‘confessed’ that they were spending large amounts of time online, disproportionate to the physical encounters that resulted, and they described similar cycles of app use, deletion, and reinstallation. Ethan identifies the reward-based attraction inherent in the platforms: ‘it definitely draws on the same neural pleasure signals, which always makes you want to go back to it’. Whilst he has pinpointed what is so appealing about the product, he has not managed to curb his participation despite recognising its addictive qualities. The result is that he has to ‘constantly check it, check it, check it’. Likewise Graham has used Grindr since its release in 2009, and has repeatedly banned himself from using it, resulting in repulsion towards the apps even whilst his use escalates. As he admits of apps: ‘I have distaste for them, because they have that effect on my life. It feeds an addiction’. His almost constant use causes him, by his own admission, ‘a flux of guilt and shame’ that prompts him to delete the app, before later reinstalling it: ‘as if it’s a fresh page, as if I’ve changed: although nothing’s changed’. Graham’s struggle to detach from the almost drug-like erotic potential of these apps illustrates how in reality the platform can act as a dichotomous force that simultaneously attracts and repels its user.

Grindr encourages users to minimise time spent online by ‘turning Grindr off and being there in-person with that guy you were chatting with’ (Grindr 2013), but online activity is required to progress precisely these meetings. The eternal potentiality of what the apps might offer *this time* compounds this addictive quality, encouraging the user to re-enter the hybridised platform even as they recognise their own reservations. Cristovo uses the app throughout the day, and is acutely aware of his ongoing compulsion: ‘it’s silly because I use it because I’m bored, I’m doing nothing. I’m just like an addict’. Matty differentiates between the lure of the apps and the variance in physical encounter they offer, noting that ‘I can’t help going on there. I’m not a sex addict but I’m addicted to this bullshit’. It is the lure of physical connection promulgated by the apps, rather than any guaranteed connection itself, that keeps him returning to the online space. Jason is equally aware of problematic usage

patterns: 'you change platforms, just to take your mind off 'oh I'm on Grindr too much' [...] You check your Facebook, check your Instagram, but then you still end up on Grindr when you're done'. This endless cycle mirrors the rather mixed critical picture of the advantages and challenges of new technologies for everyday queer life (Brubaker 2014; Drouin et. al 2016). Users simultaneously relish the opportunities offered by novel locative media whilst experiencing the negative repercussions of their self-commodification at the hands of technological addiction. The result is a tension between the generative potential of pervasive technology and ambivalence towards the implications of being so plugged-in for the app user.

Addictive app use tended to increase when participants were bored or lonely, and several participants felt their addiction was seriously problematic. Joseph's use is so intense that as well as seriously self-defining as 'addicted' at multiple points in interview, he views the apps as 'dangerous' because they generate a snowball effect of intensifying use over time. He admits: 'it takes from your life, it takes parts of your life: your socialising, studying, going out, your career'. He continues: 'no matter who you've got you want the next hit. I say hit, I mean the next new person'. This metaphorisation of app use through a drug-like 'hit' is significant. Like others, Joseph clearly understands his predicament, but where others self-regulate their use by leaving their phone at home when they go to work or forcing themselves to disconnect from 3G and wifi when socialising with friends to stop themselves returning to the platforms, Joseph employs more drastic 'hacks' to circumnavigate his addiction, including installing an electronic time lock limiting his own phone access, and removing his SIM card. Sometimes he even hides his smartphone from himself and replaces it with an old Nokia handset without internet capability, consciously reversing the technological affordances that contemporary smartphones offer.

In a real-life scenario that may feature loneliness or isolation (far from uncommon, even for those with strong social and familial networks) these apps provide a route to dense networks of communication and often, positive affirmation. But they do so in terms that become unhelpfully self-governing. Liam exemplifies someone for whom the apps provide a valued role whilst also inviting compulsive use:

I don't really have an addictive personality I don't think, but I find it fills a loneliness gap sometimes. And that's why chats are sometimes, chat with no direction is sometimes ok. I think I can be at a certain point where by a Sunday, if I haven't really chatted to many people, I mean friends and family I've chatted to, it can be a bit like refresh-refresh-refresh in terms of wanting interaction. Because also I don't really go out on the scene very much, so it's one avenue. And it can just become a certain level of dependence on engaging with people via that medium, rather than going out and meeting people.

The utility of apps in offering a socialisation of sorts is evident, but the quality of this communication is highly variable. Liam's compulsive use suggests that apps offer a simulacrum of queer sociality that is insufficient for the embodied needs an app is being recruited to address. These findings tie in with a wider evaluation of poor mental health amongst sexual minorities, especially in terms of depression and anxiety (Meyer 2003; Bybee et al. 2009; Hickson et al. 2016), and in relation to chemsex and risky sexual behaviour (Pachankis et al. 2016). Schwalbe and Wolkomir (2002) argue that non-heterosexual men experience particular difficulty at expressing emotions, and in an era of technological hybridisation, it seems unlikely that users' capacities for emotional articulacy will necessarily improve. Journalistic interventions in queer male mental health crises as detailed in the introduction of this project (Hobbs 2017) suggest that locative media, for all their technological affordances and efficiencies, are compounding socio-cultural hegemonies that inhibit healthy expression of sex and sexuality, even in the global North and even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. App addiction represents one of the more extreme findings of an ongoing privatisation of queer social life, but it demonstrates the fundamental impact of locative media on the technomediated body that is still catching up when it comes to the social codes required for useful hybridised interaction.

## **Conclusion**

As the space of 'out there' has shifted to the domestic 'in here', so have queer male social and sexual practices. This chapter has shown how increasing domestication of the queer public encounter into the private space of the home has been mediated by changes not just in community and physical space-making practices but also technological networking and its privatised territory. We cannot ignore that participants prioritise the private space of the home rather than the public space of

the city as their preferred space for encounter, and that these encounters can cohere a 'netflix and chill'-mediated sociality that refutes the casual encounter more often assumed by critics. Established queer practices are evidently being influenced by the ongoing adoption of new locative technologies by queer users. These queer platforms influence ideas of home, the role of the stranger, and calculations of personal risk and erotic reward, and do so in a cultural context that has not yet cohered shared social codes for app-mediated encounter.

In considering the privatisation of the queer encounter, this chapter has also widened interpretations of domesticity to take in more controversial conceptions including drug-based socialisation in the home and app addiction. Some participants in this study participated in a circulation of drugs, MSM locative platforms and private homes that cohere chemsex practices. They also grappled with the daily labour of app use, which for some went as far as to constitute technological addiction. Both phenomena highlight the ambiguities of locative media as a form of ubiquitous technology that can ostensibly offer the user all that they want or need for queer encounter.

# Chapter 8

## Conclusion: Technologies of today and tomorrow

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It's always there ruining things, I think, because when you're going out and meeting people you know that there's a good chance they're gonna be looking elsewhere all the time. Not going out as much as they should be because they don't have to, and stuff like that. So it's always eroding in the background for me.

Interview with Joseph, 45.

This thesis concludes, as it began, with a quotation. Joseph laments the way that technology expedites queer encounter to the detriment of spontaneous embodied interaction, yet *he himself is a heavy app user*. His reflection sums up the dichotomous attraction-repulsion dynamic towards locative media experienced by so many participants in this study.

This thesis has tracked and identified the impact of popular locative media apps on queer space and queer social life, not least via increasingly common domestication practices for physical meeting. An examination of the digital-physical hybridisation brokered by the apps has illuminated some of the risks and rewards for users seeking social and sexual connection in contemporary London. This final chapter draws together the themes of my research to evaluate the complex relationship between queer locative media and its hyperconnected users. I then discuss the empirical, conceptual and methodological contributions of the study, demonstrating the value of this project in a contemporary technological landscape of burgeoning locative media use, before suggesting opportunities for future research, including applied policy initiatives.



## Revisiting the research questions

I have addressed my original research aim by arguing that MSM locative media technologies *significantly* **impact on queer social life and queer spaces**. Through four empirical chapters I have demonstrated the different forms this impact takes.

By gathering extensive qualitative data from in-depth interviews, this project has explored how locative media platforms impact queer male culture, and in so doing conceptualised how technological connectivity informs the thinking and behaviours of humans participating in hybridised technological assemblages. In exploring the impact of locative media on queer social life and queer *spatial* practices this thesis has illuminated some of the less-examined facets of hybridised experience: the gamification of apps, the pain of ‘timewasters’, and the self-surveillance involved in appearing constantly available to maximise the ratio of encounter. Improved connectivity means there is rarely a time when a user finds themselves unplugged, and this generates its own phenomenological impact.

This thesis has demonstrated how users of popular locative apps such as Grindr and Tinder facilitate encounters through and with the city in spatial and self-reflective terms, across the age spectrum (indeed, older men are able to situate their use of contemporary locative platforms within a longer history of queer technological adoption). It has addressed this through consideration of the subjective social positioning of different apps as tools for dating, relationships, or more casual sexual ‘hook-ups’ in urban space. It has also teased out some of the assumptions which had somewhat collapsed a nuanced understanding of locative media, by questioning not the (self)presentation of app users but the idea of being a ‘type’ of app user. This is a common trope in popular media typical of cultural tendencies to categorise dating and sexual behaviour into known categories for comprehension, whether monogamous, promiscuous, or variations thereof. For men in this study, app use (and indeed concomitant dating and sexual behaviours) were nuanced and context-dependent, with diverse rationale for users’ flexible use and the different gratifications offered by different apps. Different apps offered different attractions at different

times. As such, ‘ways of using’ apps rather than user ‘type’ offers a more generative model for analysis.

Whilst acknowledging that hybridisation is now an established element of contemporary digital technologies, this thesis finds that the growth of popular GPS-enabled dating and hook-up apps engenders a distinctive ‘locative turn’ within larger processes of hybridisation. This pervasive technological involvement for the ‘hyperconnected user’ (as constituted by the MSM app user integrating their use into their daily routines) generates both positive and rather more ambivalent ‘real-life’ impacts for the user: for example, the welcome overlaying of heteronormative space with a queer network of potential matches, tempered for some users by the unforeseen labour of app use within daily life. It has also investigated the historical queer practice of cruising in a hybridised context, finding that locative platforms refigure cruising in more appealing privatised formats for users, whilst compounding in larger processes of deconcentration for historically ‘queer’ public urban spaces.

The thesis has also examined how locative media users parse different physical environments via ‘locative scoping’ and ‘dropped pin’ practices in search of desirable matches in significant urban locales, and demonstrated more generally how users conceptualise their apps as tools for relational and locational mapping in the service of sexual and/or social encounter. Further, this thesis finds that these hybridised, locative technology-brokered encounters are deeply tied into contemporary debates surrounding public and private spaces, and cultural discourses surrounding perceived risks and rewards of pervasive technological involvement. The ever-increasing popularity of MSM locative media is contributing to larger urban-economic shifts that impact on how queer public spaces are practiced and utilised. At the same time, apps are domesticating queer socialisation into the private space of home, generating in the process new considerations of the ‘stranger’, security, and privatised practices of recreational drug use. MSM locative media use significantly impacts on how users perceive and negotiate risks and rewards in their technologically-brokered encounters, whether experiencing the gratifying pleasure of a perfectly-matched hook-up with a fellow app user, or reflecting on the risks of physical encounter with partners who are intimately acquainted online but physically unknown.

As my final empirical chapter demonstrated, the invitation to compulsive or addicted use integrated into this technology illustrates how digital tools that should facilitate the enriched experience of the hyperconnected user can involve labour of their own. The ‘grid’ of available partners offers a seemingly infinite range of men, but how users actually capitalise on this is vastly more subjective. Locative media should expedite the work of partner-seeking, but in reality these platforms can entail time-consuming self-surveillance as well as work involved in scoping matches, filtering the online ‘pool’, and progressing online interaction to embodied meeting. Encounters are laboriously planned, often delayed, and when granted, sometimes disappointing. These men constitute technically attuned bodies, and yet they express ambivalence about their technological integration and this, too, is telling. Those participating in locative media-enabled hybridisation embrace its potential whilst simultaneously grappling with some of its less obvious complications. This suggests that a remediation of technology in terms of its *human* impact is of critical importance in how we understand and evaluate technological hybridisation.

### **Locative media: help, hindrance, or both?**

One complication of living in a ‘global city’ (Massey 2007) such as London is that while its size makes meeting other men easy, it can make longer-term relationships more difficult. As participant Toby reflects: ‘there’s this culture of the next best thing and it’s very easy to not work hard on a relationship, and just let it go and move onto the next one, because there *is* always a next one’. In this ‘always-on’ environment (Turkle 2011), locative dating apps offer the hyperconnected user an appealing apparatus for coupling (even if they tend to code connection as a form of consumption). The increasing hybridisation of digital and physical spaces within MSM locative apps is important precisely *because* the result of the two planes of experience is so impactful. These platforms offer not just a commodification of partner searching but much more: for men seeking men, these apps are a portal into a world of queer possibility, where Mr. Right (or Mr. Right Now) is within reach thanks to a networked assemblage of bodies and technologies.

Therefore, the often-asked ‘ultimate’ question of whether locative media change sexual behaviour almost misses the point. Different people inhabit their sexuality in

different ways, and apps do not seem to impact existing sexuality so much as provide different landscapes and relations in which to *practice* that sexuality. This is where locative media most powerfully offers its resources, opening up new social and sexual possibilities as well as more oblique queer networks to the user. Even the encounters left unexplored enrich the scope of sexual possibility via their potentiality. Across these scenarios, technological involvement *broadens* the sexual offering, facilitating new kinds of encounters with different people, but it is not necessarily the case that these encounters are more casual or less safe so much as more *variegated*. In short, the relations that technology enables (and also restricts) increase the *scope* of sexuality, mapping and encounter.

What does change is visibility for the queer public that remains. The heterosexual majority tends not to harbour objections to queer bodies in public as long as they do not ‘flaunt’ it by displaying their sexual difference (Valentine 1993), but some users fear that the invisibilising processes exercised within MSM apps reduce opportunities not just for serendipitous queer encounter at street level but for heteronormative society to be challenged by seeing *difference* in public space. These platforms open up new privatised spaces for encounter, but resistance to hegemonic conditioning cannot happen if queer intimacy is wholly privatised into the home. As Tim argues:

I worry that if people aren’t being queer in public what the long-term implications are in terms of gay politics and gay rights. So you know if people aren’t seeing drag queens, aren’t seeing gay couples in the street, more subversive activities or more illicit activities, out at night or in clubs then people will become less accepting of it because it’s not going to be normalised.

Tim’s fears prompt some difficult questions. Can queer male culture – indeed, any queer culture – survive sociotechnical assemblages that scatter its members across virtual and physical domains? Do male-male locative apps foreclose physical queer publics even as they open up new routes to encounter?

An interesting tension exists here between critical discourse and lived experience. Society is constituted via a network of interactions between people (Simmel 1908), but there is nothing that dictates that these interactions must be public. Whilst queer entertainment venues have historically colonised physical queer space, society can

(and in various ways already does) utilise different, perhaps private, networks of interaction. Consider the ‘anonymous’ user behind a locative app profile who can now experience connection without having to publicly embody their queer identity. If we accept Simmel’s definition of society as a network of interactions between people, we do not *necessarily* need these interactions to also be public. Socio-sexual networks as realised by queer locative media may not exist as organically or porously as they have historically in public space, and this may have serious consequences in terms of a format for interaction that encourages fulfilling encounters and forms of belonging that welcome new people in. But they nevertheless offer their own attractions, and regardless are now ubiquitous. The issue becomes whether these modes of relating can constitute queer community or sociality in a new generative guise, or foreground the individualistic bent of locative social networks to the extent that users treat their online peers like disposable commodities as Zygmunt Bauman (2003) so anxiously predicted. This thesis argues that the answer may combine elements of both. There is therefore a clear need for, and value in, ongoing conversations about digital app use and how it is integrated into lived experiences.

Either way, whilst the value of locative media lies in its status as a technological facilitator, the results of this study shows that this outcome is not always certain. For every problem that a locative app like Grindr solves, it seems to create another. It fosters new connections that rely on a singular motivation to meet that may not match temporally, spatially or emotionally to the hyperconnected user aimlessly surfing the platform. It domesticates the public encounter in order to expedite meeting for physical connection but in doing so it contributes to waning queer socialisation in valuable public spaces. Hybridisation offers an informational enhancement for the mobile user, but only if this denser assemblage is sought in the first place. Moreover, running counter to the welcome socialisation marketed by these locative apps is an inward pressure on participants to be always searching, always networking, and always available in order to maximise opportunities for the (imagined) perfect match.

Indeed, for all the liberatory promise of these locative media platforms as a new way of parsing the city and more generatively connecting with its inhabitants, there is much still to be improved. The ambivalence felt towards apps by users despite their

continuing use indicates that membership does not necessarily assume popularity. As for their supposed efficiency, whilst these platforms expedite the process of meeting men by filtering many more people for desirable characteristics than would be possible in person, participants pointed out that the potential offered by the apps was often mitigated by unsatisfying real-life encounters. More dramatically, the individualising tendencies of apps seems to have influenced the way that users interact with each other and perceive each other *not just online but offline too*. Mike sums up the shared feeling: ‘I think that the way the guys treat each other on these apps isn’t always that great you know, it’s quite brutal’. Because locative media now dominate queer male culture, it is not as easy as outsiders may think to disconnect from the more problematic sociotechnical relations mediated by the platforms.

Users’ ongoing participation in app-brokered encounter speaks to a larger capitulation to the technological zeitgeist, despite reluctance to engage in its more transactional elements. There are however many who are absent from these cohering networks altogether, whether through choice, economic position or digital literacy. Locative media may broker new spaces for queer encounter for the hyperconnected user, but what avenues remain for those unable or unwilling to participate in these networks, especially as pervasive technology develops yet more intuitive integrations into corporeal experience? The conditions of hybridity are so distinctive that those unable to capitalise on technomediated socialisation face the real risk of being left behind. If locative media dominates the ‘scene’, then those who remain unplugged remain unconnected.

### **Contributions of this research**

This thesis demonstrates that locative media do more than encourage a ‘new layer of virtual sites superimposed over geographic spaces’ (Kitchin 1998: 403); they offer new forms of relating, with all the risks and rewards that brings, whilst being mediated by a lived reality subject to the slippages of human nature. But notwithstanding its novel sophistication, locative media can only offer so much. Its limitations are apparent precisely *because* the hyperconnected user wants so much more from it: a sexual partner, a life partner, a friend, a group of peers with whom to socialise, or a combination of the above, all from one place (and occasionally from a

single match). If locative media can allay loneliness, something disproportionately endured by queer minorities (Valentine and Skelton 2003; Gorman-Murray 2009), it should be welcomed. But it might also be wise not to adopt these technologies uncritically. Not everyone will want to share their lives, bodies and personal information in the format dictated by these locative platforms, and nor should they *have* to accept them as the go-to cure for loneliness. As users argued in Chapter 5, these apps can compound negative emotions rather than assuage them. Chapters 4 and 7 demonstrated that the endless potentiality of the ‘next’ encounter keeps the user searching for the perfect match, foreclosing connection with users already cached. These platforms are not context-free or objective apparatus by any means: the onus is on the user to develop capacities of critical evaluation and self-awareness to monitor their own behaviours. My empirical results evidence some participants doing exactly this, examining their own habituated use to assess the labour they are practicing and evaluating its justification.

I have also highlighted that whilst the existing research focus on digital self-presentation in queer male culture is valuable – it exposes a problematic valorisation of a certain type of body that is young, Caucasian and masculine, and highlights internet-mediated power relations (Brickell 2011) – the critical field is enriched by empirical analyses such as this project that focus on behaviours, emotions and environment. Throughout the project I have paid attention to real-life contexts, developing an applied queer approach that addresses lived experience, even when that experience is assimilative and quotidian rather than radical or resistant. Additionally, rather than overlook the everyday in favour of more momentous life events, I have embraced the routine minutiae that constitute lived experience for queer users navigating technological hybridisation. The increasing mobility of digital technologies means that now more than ever they have a capacity to be intimately involved in our lives (Lupton 2011), and the results of this thesis testify to the sheer range of that involvement.

This research contributes an attention to the real-world context in which participants operate. As a society we place enormous expectations on technologies to offer us what we need for entertainment, socialisation, sexual fulfilment and romantic matching, and our desires are answered (and to an extent, shaped) by what these

technologies promise us. MSM locative apps are in circulation at a time when internet usage is moving from static to mobile consumption, and they are located within a cultural debate which highlights popular anxieties about interpersonal and social disconnect, often blamed on digital social networking (Turkle 2011; Burkeman 2016; Sullivan 2016). This combination of ubiquitous (but not universal) connection and perceived social dissociation makes studying locative media highly relevant, not just for its academic impacts but applicable policy outcomes and public engagement too. The research I have conducted is relevant not just for the users in question but in thinking about a range of technological mediations. The impact of this thesis goes beyond considerations of locative media specifically to consider future technologies, including pervasive technology, virtual reality and the Internet of Things<sup>66</sup>. Technologies and concomitant digital networks will inevitably shift in form and function, but this study transcends specific platforms to inform us about larger practices of hybridisation, sexual encounter and sociality.

Learning more about lived experiences of locative media can also guide how we think about, integrate, and mediate new pervasive technologies, not just in terms of relationships and social and sexual encounter, but in any number of scenarios in which humans rely on, and are habituated to, mobile technology. This thesis has answered calls for more research into the relationship between online activities and implications for everyday life (Wakeford 2002; Silverstone 2005) as well as the hybridised spaces of work and play (Gordon and de Souza e Silva 2011) and embodied, humanistic experiences of pervasive digital technology (Rose 2016). This thesis has contributed a new understanding of how locative platforms reconfigure the city through a spatio-temporal network that involves not just established queer spaces but a more scattered and disparate network of different, connected places and other users. My research emphasises the architecture of social media as increasingly predicated on converting virtual communication to physical encounter, which brings with it a plethora of new embodied scenarios for the user in question.

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<sup>66</sup> Internet of Things refers to a connected environment where communication between humans, objects, apps and devices is made possible across the internet, combining physical and virtual worlds (Greengard 2015).



This project has also contributed to debates in sexuality and space research regarding queer public spaces, by showing how locative media increasingly assist in the domestication of queer male encounter. I have argued that queer spatial deconcentration is primarily attributable to economic conditions in urban real estate in large cities, and is unlikely to reverse. As this shift progresses, app use looks likely to proliferate. Using empirical evidence in Chapter 7, this thesis argues that a significant change is being wrought in how queer male sexuality is practiced in space, through domestication processes that privatise queer social and sexual encounters into technology users' homes. The brighter prospect for consideration here is that whilst there may be a decline in the 'gayborhood' (Ghaziani 2014) as a traditional and (semi)organic community, new forms of production of queer space are being brokered through technology, and the natural site for these encounters tends to be the home because it is more often comfortable and safe. These hybrid spaces challenge traditional queer assumptions of public space as the location for the serendipitous encounter with the stranger by unsettling both the category of 'serendipitous encounter' and 'the stranger' by situating both categories as socially constructed, and refigured precisely *via* their manoeuvre into private space. This impacts on conceptualisations of queer encounter in space. Regardless of whether hybridised domestication results at the hands of hegemony or personal preference, it seems likely that new domestic configurations of queer life cohere and bring with them tenable forms of intimacy. The domestication process laid out in this thesis, and the concomitant issues of social-sexual encounter, security and risk practices tied up in this phenomenon, present a new and significant empirical contribution to queer scholarship, critical studies of sexuality, and cultural geographies, and one that substantially progresses understanding of queer space and place.

New technologies develop all the time, and as researchers we are 'nowhere near understanding the full scope of their uses and meanings' (Tiidenberg 2015: 1576), but this thesis has utilised the experiences of users to consider some of the issues most likely to develop in the near future. Given the average user's participation in a highly networked assemblage of technology, people and place, connection is becoming something of a requirement. Participant Pranesh, an IT manager, argues that technology is actually 'ahead' of the way users are reacting to it, and as I have argued in regard to absent online social codes, it is clear that users are still catching up to

technological affordances. One of these affordances is the facilitation of queerness through anonymity granted by technology. The more concerning demographic here may be the *un*-connected users, whose social or economic precarity mean that they do not have private spaces of their own, nor the means to join the stampede to digitally-mediated lifestyles. However, as locative technology matures and diversifies, so may the conditions of its use, further democratising access.

Alongside conceptual and empirical contributions, this project offers methodological and practical contributions. As Chapter 3 illustrated, the issue of intimacy and sensitive disclosure in the field can be a thorny one; nevertheless, I believe that in this project participants and I worked together to create a generative pseudo-intimate environment for interview, at least insofar as any research can strive for an equal dynamic (Rose 1997; Creswell 2007). The coproduction of the interview environment proved central to the honest, uninhibited disclosure of participant narratives. This project has demonstrated the importance of being an active listener, and the value of offering a 'blank canvas' of sorts upon which the respondent can tell their truth however, and in any format, that they should so wish (after Passerini 1989). The wide-ranging nature of interviews, and unusual dynamic of a temporary private space within a demonstrably urban public space, helped to generate rich data that testifies to self-reflective and humanistic positionality in fostering interviewer-respondent rapport within qualitative research.

Public engagement is a valuable consideration of any research, and the practical orientation of my project invites workshop activities with a range of technology users. In terms of dissemination, this work makes a commitment first and foremost to distributing findings to its participants. Many of the men I interview expressed a keen wish to read work published from the thesis, and found the process of reading the first publication from the project in *Gender, Place, Culture* (2017) interesting, posing a range of follow-up questions. Several participants also attended a presentation I delivered at the *Soho Space* public conference hosted by UCL: UrbanLabs in 2016, and they shared their excitement about being part of an academic project for the first time via my presentation. This heartening feedback has encouraged me to plan a 'key findings' information booklet for participants outlining some of the central empirical

contributions of my work as a way of demonstrating how their time was worthwhile in contributing new knowledge to the fields of technology and queer geographies.

### **Directions for future study**

Locative platforms such as Grindr and Tinder bring with them new ways of thinking about encounters, space, and sex. Given the invitation to constant connectivity that this thesis has evidenced as central to the humanistic integration of these apps, it comes as no surprise that they are branching into lifestyle, fashion and travel offerings (Parks-Ramage 2016). Taking cues from Facebook or Foursquare, these platforms may soon be able to supply users with tailored local experiences far beyond matchmaking. Grindr has even hired its first ‘resident poet’ (Wallis 2016), which, combined with the political advocacy work recently showcased by Hornet (2017) signal a shift in engagement at odds with the platforms’ earlier iterations as more simplistic tools to progress queer encounter. These developments may also be a way of staking a claim to legitimacy in mainstream culture: despite the rapid popularisation of imitative heterosexual apps, and growing awareness of the MSM platforms that pioneered the genre, the sexualised reputation of the apps still mark them as somehow liminal. Yet the findings of this thesis, especially in terms of humanistic engagement with technology, emphasise the need for scholarship regarding how pervasive technology makes itself ‘indispensable’ as a lifestyle tool.

Given the rich qualitative data offered by in-depth interviews, one way in which this research could be extended would be through follow-up interviews with the original participants three or five years on from the initial project to explore how their technology use has changed over time. Not only would this capture some of the changing qualities of urban space, tracking London’s ongoing socioeconomic shifts as experienced by its residents, but it would help provide a longitudinal picture of queer technology use that takes in new developments including peer-sourced software, virtual reality, or further erosion in the boundaries between commercial pornography and user-generated content, something that I predict will shift significantly in the future. It would also offer a valuable insight into co-option: as locative dating apps are increasingly adapted for mainstream heterosexuality, what new avenues for digitally-mediated encounter might open up for queer users? Given that the slippages

of digital-physical hybridisation are most apparent at the point of physical introduction, with encounters often failing to match the subjectivities of each party, in future the ability of virtual reality to render online interaction ‘3D’ might helpfully detail the qualities of users, generating a more nuanced picture of potential partners.

This project has contributed a valuable qualitative perspective to some of the foremost issues in contemporary sex and sexuality, but large-scale quantitative sampling could prove helpful in extending the themes unpacked in this project relating to sexual practice and chemsex in particular, given growing concern amongst health professionals about the social and clinical impacts of the practice (*pace* critical public health approaches detailing the practices in more-than-clinical terms, for example Race 2015; Ahmed et al. 2016). Researchers are starting to scrutinise the relations between locative media and chemsex practices (see for example Jaspal 2016), and in-app quantitative surveys would ascertain a usefully wide-ranging measure of the extent of this seemingly digitally-influenced practice. Alternatively, triangulating different qualitative and quantitative techniques would provide a useful densification of data to build a richer research picture that would capture a yet wider range of queer technomediated experiences. It would also allow me to reconcile what people say about their behaviours with how they behave in the field, strengthening the substantiveness of ethnographic research (Leszczynski 2017).

This thesis is particularly salient to future research in locative technology and sexuality and space studies, including considerations of the educative role (or absence thereof) of locative platforms for their users. This is especially interesting in relation to younger users. The role of the internet as an information resource for both hetero- and non-heterosexual youth, particularly in regard to sexual practice and family planning is an area deserving of more attention.<sup>67</sup> This thesis has highlighted a striking variation in adoption of apps as resources or sites of community across the participant group, influenced not necessarily by age or experience so much as wider investment in technology as part of everyday life. In other words, app users who are more hyperconnected tend to disproportionately seek information, support and sociality on the apps. MSM locative media platforms including Hornet and Scruff

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<sup>67</sup> It is the focus of my postdoctoral research at London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine (LSHTM).

seem to be distancing themselves from the overt sexualisation that characterises market leader Grindr in favour of more holistic, lifestyle-oriented content (Shadel 2017), and conceptualising this shift as a mechanism for deeper user involvement – including new routes to monetisation – raises its own questions about who decides how queer community (or broader sociality) is formed and maintained. Beyond the confines of this thesis, my results demonstrate the need for future research into MSM sexual health resource seeking online.

In addition to academic contributions, this thesis has developed debates that are relevant to practical policy application. Research has demonstrated the efficacy of MSM apps in tracking sexual health amongst users (Landovitz et al 2013; Goedel and Duncan 2016). Mowlabocus et al. (2016) show how locative platforms allow health educators to access wide cohorts, and Grindr has been utilised as a way of distributing at-home HIV testing kits (Huang 2016). However, these initiatives tend to be collaborations with academic and health groups rather than interventions from apps themselves, which raises the question of what responsibility the platforms should bear in sexual health promotion. This is critically important when we consider that MSM continue to be one of the highest risk groups for HIV in the UK and globally (PHE 2015; Sewell et al. 2016) and that within this group, MSM are less likely to access tailored health care in ‘real’ life but are more likely to be present on locative platforms. Locative products are making steps independent of collaborators towards direct social responsibility interventions; Hornet for example has developed a “Know Your Status” campaign, where HIV status and the date of users’ most recent test is featured on profiles. Apps could invite disclosure from users of sexual sensation seeking and sexual behaviour histories to inform targeted health promotion advice. Individuals with a higher propensity to seek sexual sensations may have more frequent sexual encounters (as per Goedel 2015) and might benefit from invitations to sexual health testing via their app. However, as participant views on privacy in my own study illustrated, this kind of targeted profiling brings its own ethical considerations. MSM health promotion via social media has demonstrated the unease with which users treat online disclosure (Witzel et al. 2016).

Finally, my study has shown that the social codes navigating hybridised app use are yet to catch up with the technology itself, suggesting that proactive involvement in

public health promotion from within the platform itself could positively influence health promotion on the apps. Digital media has been suggested as a good way to communicate sexual health information to young people in particular, because they use the internet so much (Bailey et al 2015; Witzel et al. 2016), and yet little research has directly assessed the age at which an individual begins to use these apps, and their associated sexual behaviours (Goedel and Duncan 2015).<sup>68</sup> It is possible that the access provided by apps to other nearby MSM may lead to younger sexual debut, which has been associated with adverse emotional and psychological impact and greater drug use (Outlaw et al. 2011). The specific experiences of younger men in my research suggest that applied policy would benefit from further study on youth users.

As locative technology matures, accompanying social codes may galvanise into mutually recognisable modes for practicing locative media, but in the interim one accessible form of public engagement resulting from this would be a ‘guide for newcomers’ or ‘code of conduct’ to locative MSM products that would help in navigating some of the issues encountered for inexperienced newcomers to the platforms. One complication of such a guide would be deciding on who dictates what appropriate online conduct should look like, given that, as my empirical results demonstrate, users hold wildly disparate expectations of locative technology. Yet a practical ‘self-help’ guide could assist those unfamiliar with the social structuring of the platforms, as well as presenting app developers at Grindr, Tinder and elsewhere with a provocation to consider their social responsibilities to an ever-expanding user base. As pervasive locative technologies become increasingly incorporated into lived experience, the social considerations of technological integration will become more important than ever.

The underlying disorientation that often accompanied participants’ use of MSM locative media in this study is understandable given the speed and sophistication with which digital devices now corral the environment for sexualised consumption. On the other hand, my empirical results have also shown that users are *variously* equipped with capacities for managing their app use productively. This variability in technological integration amongst users is key. Participants displayed a range of

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<sup>68</sup> Or, conversely, what use amongst older MSM looks like.

experiences of locative media, from those efficiently self-regulating their use to others seemingly at the mercy of their technological involvement. Given this context, we should consider that it takes time to adapt to online norms, and more time still to adapt to fast-moving *hybridised* technological assemblages. This adaptive process applies beyond dating or hook-up apps to an individual's wider digital landscape. The social codes that participants found so lacking in their online and even offline conversation need to coalesce further before they can adequately reflect the technological relations in question. But, as demonstrated by the rapid proliferation of a kind of media 'literacy' over recent years in relation to SMS, Facebook and Twitter, these social codes are not impossible, and nor are they unimportant. They provide a roadmap that domesticates technology into a manageable human realm. This thesis has offered a significant and timely contribution to our understanding of how these relationships between humans, as well as between humans and technologies, function both now and into the future.

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## Appendix 1: Participant recruitment poster

# Men: Use dating/hook-up apps?

I'd like to hear more about how you use them



I invite you to participate in a study with Queen Mary, University of London about how **Grindr and other apps** affect your everyday life in London.

- Looking for MSM (men who have sex with men, including gay & bisexual men) aged 18+ who live in London
- 1-2 hour confidential interview.
- Interview can be arranged at times and locations to suit you
- Your time could help research into technology and sexuality.

Approved by Queen Mary University of London Research Ethics Committee (QMERC2015/28).

To volunteer or for further information, please contact Sam Miles at [s.miles@qmul.ac.uk](mailto:s.miles@qmul.ac.uk)

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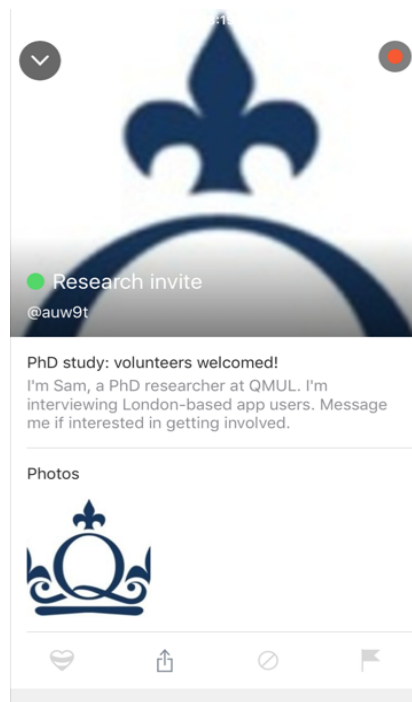
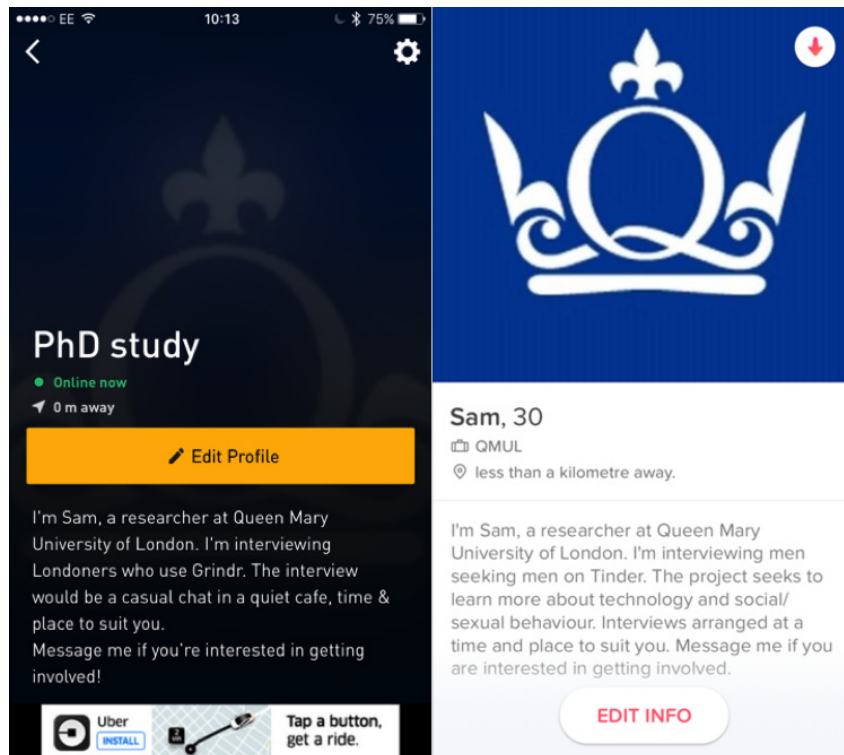
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## Appendix 2: Locative app recruitment profiles



## **Appendix 3: Participant information sheet**



### **PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET**

#### **Research study ‘Sex(uality) & the City: understanding the impact of locative media on urban queer geographies’**

We invite you to be part of this research project, if you would like to. You should only agree to take part if you want to; it is entirely up to you. If you choose not to take part there won't be any disadvantages for you and you will hear no more about it.

Please read the following information carefully before you decide to take part. This will tell you why the research is being done and what you will be asked to do if you take part. Please ask if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. If you decide to take part, you will be asked to sign the attached form to say that you agree. You are still free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason.

#### **Who am I?**

My name is Sam Miles and I am a PhD researcher in the department of Geography at Queen Mary, University of London. I am interested in learning more about digital technology and the ways in which it is used by men who have sex with men (including but not limited to gay and bisexual men).

#### **What are the aims of the study?**

This study aims to find out more about how ‘locative media’ – by that I mean GPS or location-based mobile phone apps, like Grindr or Tinder – affect the way that people think about their daily life.

Some of the things I'd like to learn more about are how these apps affect the ways you think about London, the places you visit, and the way you meet other men, including for social or sexual activities. These ideas are important because they will inform the ways in which we think about technology, sexuality, and living in cities.

#### **What happens if I decide to take part?**

I will interview you for one to two hours in a location of your choice, to talk with you about what you think of the apps Grindr and Tinder and how you use them.

If you agree, I would like to record our discussion. You do not have to answer all of the questions and you may stop the interview at any time, and withdraw your recorded information at any time. You will not have to give a reason for withdrawing.

If you wish, I will send you a copy of the transcript from the interview. You have the right to delete or change any portions of the transcript you do not want included in the study.

If you wish, I will also send you a copy of findings that emerge from this project, including a summary of results or a full copy of the completed project.

Whilst I cannot guarantee there will be a direct benefit to you from participating in this study, by participating you will contribute to valuable research looking into the way that people use digital technology, as well as research into how men who have sex with men meet others for social and/or sexual encounter.

Previous participants have also found telling their stories to a researcher an interesting and rewarding experience, and I hope you will too.

### **Anonymity and Confidentiality**

All information I gather will only be used for the purpose of my PhD project. Information I gather may be published in academic journals or presented at conferences, but your data will be anonymous, and your personal details will never be shared.

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a consent form.

### **Further information**

If you would like to know more about the study, contact Sam Miles on 07742 495968, or at [s.miles@qmul.ac.uk](mailto:s.miles@qmul.ac.uk).

If you have any questions or concerns about the manner in which the study is conducted please, in the first instance, contact the researcher responsible for the study. If this is unsuccessful, or not appropriate, please contact the Secretary at the Queen Mary Ethics of Research Committee, Room W117, Queen's Building, Mile End Campus, Mile End Road, London E1 4NS.

## Appendix 4: Participant consent form



### CONSENT FORM

Please complete this form after you have read the Participant Information Sheet and/or listened to an explanation about the research.

#### **Title of Study:**

Sex(uality) & the City: understanding the impact of locative media on urban queer geographies

**Approved by the Queen Mary Ethics of Research Committee on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of June 2015, Ref: QMERC2015/28.**

Thank you for considering taking part in this research. The person organising the research must explain the project to you before you agree to take part. If you have any questions arising from the Participant Information Sheet or explanation already given to you, please ask the researcher before you decide whether to join in. You will be given a copy of this Consent Form to keep and refer to at any time.

- I understand that if I decide at any other time during the research that I no longer wish to participate in this project, I can notify the researchers involved and be withdrawn from it immediately.
- I consent to the processing of my personal information for the purposes of this research study. I understand that such information will be treated as strictly confidential and handled in accordance with the provisions of the Data Protection Act 1998.
- I have read and I understand the participant information sheet for volunteers in this study investigating locative media app use.
- I have talked about this study with the researcher. I am happy with the answers I have been given.
- I know that until the 3<sup>rd</sup> June 2017 I can withdraw my interview recording.
- I know that my name will not be used in any report of the interview and that anything I talk about will be reported in such a way that I cannot be recognised.
- I have had time to think about whether to take part.
- I know who to contact if I have any questions about the study.
- I understand that my data will be kept for seven years for the purpose of record-keeping.

- Yes / No I agree to have this interview recorded. I know the recording will be cared for confidentially by the researcher.
- Yes /No I want to be sent a copy of the transcript of this interview, and know that I have the right to take out or change parts of the text.
- Yes / No I want to be sent a short written copy of the overall results when they come out.
- Yes /No I would like to be sent a copy of any academic publications based on this study.
- Yes / No I consent to my information in this study being used for studies in the future.

**Participant's Statement:**

I \_\_\_\_\_ agree that the research project named above has been explained to me to my satisfaction and I agree to take part in the study. I have read both the notes written above and the Participant Information Sheet about the project, and understand what the research study involves.

**Signed:**

**Date:**

**Investigator's Statement:**

I, Samuel Miles, confirm that I have carefully explained the nature, demands and any foreseeable risks (where applicable) of the proposed research to the volunteer.

**Signed:**

**Date:** 27.01.2016

## Appendix 5: Participant interview schedule

Interview Theme	Example Questions
Introduction	<p>About the study:            Study outline            Any questions?</p>
About You	<p>Can you tell me a bit about yourself?            When did you move to London?            Where do you live in London?            How long have you lived there?            Do you live with other people?            Do you work? What is your job?            What do you like to do in your spare time?            How did you find out about the study?</p>
Locative media	<p>Tell me about the apps you use on your phone            Frequency: how often, for how long; how long has the participant owned the app; have there been variations in usage across time.</p>
Hybridised use	<p>Do any of your friends use apps? Do you discuss apps?            Would you say you like the ___ app?            If so, why? If not, why not?            Would you say ___ app is/is not a part of your everyday life?            Why/why not?            Do you use apps for social meeting, or hook-ups? Or both?            Do you use the map 'pin' function?            Has using ___ app has changed the places you visit in London? How?            Do you visit 'gay' venues in London? Which ones? How often?            Has using ___ app changed the amount you go, or which you go to?            Tell me about the parts of London you are visiting, and whether using ___ app affects where you go to.            Tell me how you feel about apps.</p>

### Prompts, Probes and Follow Ups:

- Can you give me another example of that?
- Does that happen all the time?
- How does this compare with your experience elsewhere?
- Tell me more...
- I'm not sure I understand, could you explain a bit further for me?
- Would you be happy to tell me more about that?

## Appendix 6: Signposting support sheet



### Contact information for organisations offering support

#### CITIZEN'S ADVICE BUREAU

**Phone:** 03444 111 444

**Website:** <https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk>

#### GMFA: THE GAY MEN'S HEALTH CHARITY

**Phone:** 020 7738 6872

**Address:** 11 Ebenezer Street London N1 7NP

**Email:** [aboutgmfa@gmfa.org.uk](mailto:aboutgmfa@gmfa.org.uk)

**Website:** [www.gmfa.org.uk](http://www.gmfa.org.uk)

#### LONDON FRIEND: LGBT HEALTH AND WELL-BEING ORGANISATION

**Phone:** +44 (0)20 7833 1674

**Address:** 86 Caledonian Road, London N1 9DN

**Email:** [office@londonfriend.org.uk](mailto:office@londonfriend.org.uk)

**Website:** [www.londonfriend.org.uk](http://www.londonfriend.org.uk)

#### LONDON LESBIAN AND GAY ADVICE SWITCHBOARD

**Phone:** 0300 330 0630

**Website:** <http://www.llgs.org.uk/about.html>

#### PACE

**Phone:** 020 7700 1323

**Address:** PACE, 54-56 Euston Street, London NW1 2ES

**Email:** [info@pacehealth.org.uk](mailto:info@pacehealth.org.uk)

**Website:** <http://www.pacehealth.org.uk/about-us/>

#### SAMARITANS

**Phone:** 116 123

**Website:** [www.samaritans.org](http://www.samaritans.org)

**Email:** [jo@samaritans.org](mailto:jo@samaritans.org)

#### TERRANCE HIGGINS TRUST

**Phone:** 0808 802 1221

**Address:** 314-320 Gray's Inn Road, London WC1X 8DP

**Email:** [info@tht.org.uk](mailto:info@tht.org.uk)

**Website:** [www.tht.org.uk](http://www.tht.org.uk)



## Appendix 7: Interview transcript extract

Interview in public café, central London, October 2015.

I: Interviewer

P: Participant

...I: And what are your thoughts about sexual hook-ups that occur with drugs? Tell me a bit more about your experience.

Participant: Well, they do say it heightens the pleasure, which I don't believe that, because the only thing that can heighten the pleasure is to engage with someone that I like, and that for me is out of pleasure. I don't think... I do drink sometimes, like I do get drunk. But drinking wine or vodka or beer will not make me like someone less or more. For me, I know exactly what I want. If I like something, even if I'm sober or not, I'll stick to what I like. So the whole thing of doing drugs I think is just a bit- at the end of the day, those things that they're doing, they don't last very well. At the end of the day you become your own you, and then everything will be clear, and then looking for the same thing again, in the end I think it's not a good thing, because it's under the control of drugs. So it's kind of not really a good thing, especially for health.

I: OK. And tell me, some people identify as gay, or bisexual, or they don't identify as anything at all; what do you identify yourself as?

P: As someone who likes men...so I wouldn't, in other words, because sometimes you don't really need to put labels onto people. If I say I like men you will make up your own conclusion what it means. So I don't need to say gay, I can say men, this is what I like. The rest is up to you to conclude because yeah, again this kind of leads into a stereotyping of prejudice, 'cause some people they get really scared when someone says the word gay. Because gay kind of like threatens them. So just to say I like men, or I like only men, this is what I would say is the right way to say things in order to be, in order to stay neutral in society. Gay is just, everyone knows what is gay. Just say "I like men", or "I don't like men", or "I only date guys". That's enough.

I: And so for you, it's about who you date rather than a part of who you are.

P: As part of my sexuality, yeah. 'Cause my situation is – if you say you like men, you probably know for sure, well: he's homosexual, he's gay. I don't need to put that in the opening, like yeah, I'm gay [laughs].

I: Right. And how long have you been attracted to men?

P: Oh god, as far back as I can remember, as long as I lived [laughs] because the first thing what I did uh, was we, back home in Tanzania we had like play, and we had, you know the hide & seek game? You hide and someone has to search to, to, discover you from your hide-outs. And if he manages to discover them all he is the winner. Or the last person, you give them a few minutes, if they don't find them in a few minutes then the last person hiding is the winner. To make it short: I used to hide with men. It usually used to go that you mixed everyone, like you meet a girl, but for me, I would always choose to hide with men. So when you hide with men, you are in that, in a little area, you are very compacted together, tight to each other, holding each other. I would pretend that I liked the hiding, but obviously I was enjoying something else there. So it was really cool. So I used to like that game, Hide & seek. I used to remind people, "hey guys remember we're playing hide and seek tonight!" [laughs]

I: And was that sexual contact or kind've before that?

P: For me, it was like – I dunno, it felt all right, it felt good to be with men. I don't know why. I never had sex. Well, I started to have sex when I was like... because anyway, it was hard to be gay where I come from. Really really hard. I mean if they find about you, they probably might you know, tell your parents and your parents might decide to do something really crazy, might even kill you or poison your food or something and you die. So it's a really bad thing. So you have to hide it with all your power and energy just to make sure you're safe and yeah. So um, yeah it wasn't sexual, it wasn't sexual, but it was just the feeling. You feel energized, you feel happy, and excited, to be in male company. It just feels...right. So that's when I knew, well I didn't know what gay was but I felt I was not as normal as other people. When I realised I was growing up, in my, I think at my O-levels I realised something was definitely wrong because I had like a few siblings who were dating girls and would bring them home and everything. But for me, I didn't have that. I thought like...I used to see girls as just friends, never attracted to them sexually, and yeah so I never had a girlfriend or anything like that. At that time when I realised, oh god this is, people start to talk about these things and it starts to be mainstream in the media, I felt a bit worried, yeah.

I: So thinking about sexual contact, that was something that you did more when you came to London?

P: Yeah yeah yeah, I did have, I think my first proper proper sex was when I first arrived in Europe, but London was where I went to Soho, the gay bar, and I saw a guy and he winked at me and I winked at him back, and we decided to do it properly in a nice way, [where] you don't have to hide from anyone, you are holding hands in the street, and that was a powerful moment where I said you know what, this is me now. And start to shine.

I: Right, and how old were you then?

P: I was twenty-five. Twenty-five, twenty four, yeah.

I: And so the years that you've lived in London, you've used some of these apps, and some of them you like and some of them you don't like. And when you're thinking about when you use these apps on a daily basis, thinking really simply: what time of day do you go on Grindr or Tinder?

P: Um, let's say in the evenings, like 10pm when I finished everything. But it varies, sometimes you're free during the day, and yeah you just want to see who's there. Like I say, my sister is not living here, I was in a relationship but I broke up, so I'm single again and in the market, so sometimes – it depends, it varies. When you're free and you want to do it, but you're busy, you don't want to.

I: Sure, and when did you become single, quite recently?

P: Yeah, quite recently, 2015 I think.

I: And how long was your relationship?

P: Almost 5 years.

I: Ok.

P: Yeah, it was quite a long time [laughs].

I: And in your relationship did either of you use apps or have an open relationship?

P: I never used apps in my relationship. I was very happy. Very happy until something happened, which wasn't within my power to stop it, fall out of love, someone falling out of love, and so yeah. Sometime you try, and then it doesn't work, and you think yeah. You know what I mean, you know when it comes to a relationship and things get complicated and complicated, so...

I: And so being single using it, you use it in the evenings. And where do you use it, at home or at work, or out and about?

P: Most of the time when I'm at home, or chilling out in the restaurant and I've got my cup of tea and trying to write my essays and things.

I: The restaurant where you work?

P: No, in a café. I like to be in my own company, put it that way. So sometimes when you're reading you get bored and want to talk to people, so you get up Tinder, Grindr, and see what's around [laughs].

I: Right, right. And the people who you're talking to, are they local to where you are or are they local to your home?

P: It depends really. Some people, they're not local – because in London actually, London as a whole, I know London's massive, it's huge – but to me, London is local, so if someone lives in zone 6 and you find them attractive, I mean why not, go for it. Because it's hard to have like proper, proper, sex. Like I said, I'm not like a hook-up kind of guy. I always like to be with someone where we can have conversation, we can talk, and we can have conversation and things, so I don't – to me, I don't care about the distance, because I'm not after [a] hook-up. But I believe some people are only after [a] hook-up, they prefer someone just to be around the corner, so they can over to relieve themselves. For me, I'm more into long-term kind of thing. Because I treasure, I treasure – this is a gift for me, this is a gift from God, it's a gift. So I don't want to, I don't want to throw it away just like that. I don't want to throw it away. Because to me, I think it's a gift, so...

I: Right, right. That's really interesting.

P: It is, it is. I feel happy all the time and I'm excited.

I: And you said it's a gift from God; do you practice religion?

P: I, well I...my background, my family's Muslim so we, I'm not gonna lie, we did have like some sort of um, religious background. My parents are very strict Muslims and everything, so um. We did have some, so that's what I'm saying, it was quite dangerous for me to come out to someone who doesn't even know what gay means, you know.

I: Mm. And do your parents know?

P: No no no, they don't. well, they kind of do, but...yeah, again, it's a long story. They kind of do. There's a lot of threats around it, I don't wanna get into that for now.

I: Ok, sure, no worries. Ok, and thinking about when you talk to people, lots of people who I interview say when they talk to people, the conversion rate to a meet-up is very low.

P: Yeah, I find that to be true...I think I know why. Because you are in the area where you can find everyone attractive, and then if you're lucky probably someone is lucky, is getting a lot of messages, and you're texting to someone who is talking to hundreds of other people.