

GEOSOCIAL DATING APPS AND THE ROMANTIC LIVES OF YOUNG GAY AND  
BISEXUAL MEN

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## ABSTRACT

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This study explores the role of geosocial dating apps in the romantic lives of young gay and bisexual men. Technology is rapidly changing the way individuals seek romantic and sexual partners. Due to social stigma surrounding homosexuality, virtual mediums have been popular among the LGBT community since their inception. Young gay and bisexual men are among the most likely to use virtual dating mediums. Ten one-on-one, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with participants ranging in age from twenty-three to twenty-nine years old. Using a quasi-inductive, grounded theory approach, transcripts of the interviews were analyzed and coded for relevant themes. Erving Goffman's theories on the presentation of self, stigma, and the interaction order, combined with the conceptualization of dating apps as partner markets, provided the theoretical framework for data analysis and discussion. Findings suggest that geosocial dating apps offer users a mixed bag of benefits and challenges. Men are able to interact with one another while retaining control over the release of identifying information. However, the ability to withhold or mask personal details about themselves can also create interactional challenges and impediments to relationship formation and retention.

**KEY WORDS:** LGBT, Online dating, Dating apps, Young gay and bisexual men, Goffman, Thesis, Sam Houston State University, Graduate School, Texas.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

The human desire for love and companionship is a universal phenomenon. Civil society is held together by our basic need for connectivity with one another. Perhaps the most vivid illustration of our need for companionship is in the coupling process. In our culture, many of us will search high and low for a suitable someone to partner with and tie our fate to and theirs to ours. In *Obergefell v. Hodges*, Justice Anthony Kennedy (2015) described the benefits of marriage:

Marriage responds to the universal fear that a lonely person might call out only to find no one there. It offers the hope of companionship and understanding and assurance that while both still live there will be someone to care for the other. (pg. 14)

Kennedy was, of course, laying out the legal rationale for the establishment of a constitutional right to marriage regardless of sexual orientation. It was a thrilling day for LGBT families, individuals, and advocates. The atmosphere was euphoric; a pinnacle had been reached. The ruling granted “equal dignity” to LGBT families—providing long-awaited legitimization. No doubt, it was a monumental achievement.

While LGBT families may have been granted “equal dignity in the eyes of the law” (Kennedy 2015:28), it did not eliminate strong anti-gay biases that exists throughout the country. The legitimacy of same-sex romance is often still called into question. Sadly, these negative stereotypes and the overall stigmatization of homosexuality can have a detrimental effect on the mental health of LGBT youth (Berghe et al. 2010). It is thus important to understand how this vulnerable group experience dating and romance in a society that is designed around the assumption of heterosexuality. Specifically, this research focuses on the dating experiences of young gay and bisexual men.

Technology has always been a popular tool for dating and romance among young gay and bisexual men (Grove et al. 2014; McKie, Milhausen and Lachowsky 2017). In today's society, where over twenty percent of heterosexual couples and almost seventy-percent of same-sex couples meet first online (Rosenfeld and Thomas 2012), it seems appropriate to focus on the new dating landscape of virtual venues that employ Global Positioning System (GPS) technology to connect users with one another. Smartphones, ubiquitous as they now are, have given rise to geosocial dating applications (apps) as a widely-used dating resource for young gay and bisexual men (Goedel and Duncan 2015; McKie et al. 2017). Apps such as Grindr and Jack'd have attracted millions of gay and bisexual male users worldwide. These smartphone dating applications place a world of possibilities in the hands of each user that is available to them any time it is convenient.

This paper explores the role of geosocial dating applications in the romantic lives of young gay and bisexual men. Chapter one provides the necessary background information that contextualizes the research project. This review of the literature is divided into six sections: Online Dating, Dating Apps, Identity and Presentation of Self, Stigma and Romance for Sexual Minorities, Gender and Masculinity, and Relationship Development. Each section gives a detailed explication of a concept that is relevant to the research topic and useful to the data analysis. The literature review is followed by a detailed outline of the theoretical framework which consists of four major conceptual components: Dating Apps as Markets, The Interaction Order, Presentation of Self, and Stigma. These concepts provide a concrete framework that will guide the data analysis and the discussion that follows.

The method of data collection consisted of ten semi-structured, one-on-one interviews with young gay and bisexual men ranging in age from twenty-three to twenty-nine years old. These interviews have been transcribed, coded, and analyzed for emerging themes and concepts using a grounded theory approach (Charmaz 2006). The four conceptual components of the theoretical framework are the result of this process.

Chapter three consists of two main sections: Analysis of Data and the Discussion and Conclusion. The data analysis is subdivided by the four primary research questions that will form the focus of inquiry. The data presented offers a glimpse into the dating world of young gay and bisexual men in the era of GPS powered smartphone applications. Interview responses of these ten young men demonstrate how stigma impacts the range of options available to them for meeting one another in a safe environment and how dating apps have helped to fill that gap. They also show how certain aspects of stigma are still prevalent even within the apps and how individuals manage stigma through their presentation of self. Additionally, respondents revealed unique and significant challenges to communication posed by virtual venues such as geosocial dating apps. Participants described personal methods of minimizing these challenges to ensure smooth and successful interactions.

The data presents a nuanced picture of the impact of geosocial dating apps on the romantic lives of gay and bisexual men. Dating apps are empowering for these young men in some ways and operate as inhibitors to relationship development in others. The analysis explores how the sexualization of these spaces can impact their ability to facilitate long-term relationship formation. It also contrasts this with the ability of some

participants to form satisfying long-term relationships with individuals met through a dating app.

The findings of this research help to shed light on how young gay and bisexual men utilize geosocial dating apps to manage societal stigma and create a viable, if not imperfect, dating market for themselves. They also demonstrate the continued relevance of Goffman's (1959; 1963; 1983) theories on the presentation of self, stigma, and the interaction order. These classic sociological works continue to offer a solid framework from which to understand the theoretical implications of everyday interpersonal interactions.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### ONLINE DATING

Societal norms regarding dating, courtship, and marriage have changed dramatically over the past century (Coontz 2005). Arguably, one of the most significant factors that has helped to reshape couple formation is the internet (Rosenfeld and Thomas 2012). The internet has broadened the realm of possibilities beyond the traditional avenues of tightknit social networks, allowing individuals the opportunity to meet prospective partners that cross social, religious, racial, and geographic boundaries. Research has found that outside of the internet all other manners of meeting partners, including families, churches, and neighborhoods, have fallen into decline as internet dating has risen in popularity (Rosenfeld and Thomas 2012). Sites such as Match.com, Eharmony.com, and OKCupid.com—among others—have acquired millions of users worldwide since their inception in the mid- to late-1990s, as more and more singles have turned to the internet in their search for a significant other (Couch and Liamputtong 2007; Hardey 2008; Rosenfeld and Thomas 2012; Tong, Hancock and Slatcher 2016). Internet dating once carried the stigma of being a last resort for desperate people that couldn't find dates on their own. However, these stereotypes have been rendered moot by the near ubiquity of internet-mediated dating experiences (Lawson and Leck 2006; Rosenfeld and Thomas 2012).

Individuals have turned to the internet in their search for romantic partners for various reasons. For some, communicating with others on the internet has provided an escape from loneliness and depression, while for others the internet offers a buffer against

the sting of in-person rejection and a boosted sense of confidence when approaching a romantic interest (Droge and Voirol 2011; Lawson and Leck 2006). In any case, the internet has granted individuals from a variety of backgrounds and life circumstances the resources to reach out and interact with others that would have been previously unavailable to them. Furthermore, anyone can do these things at their convenience from the privacy of their own home.

Greater perceived control over one's dating life provided by the internet has been identified by users of online dating sites as a primary benefit (Couch and Liamputtong 2007). Individuals use the control granted to them as a tool for maximizing outcomes and managing risks. Virtual mediums provide individuals immense levels of control over how they present themselves physically and biographically, who they interact with, and who they may eventually decide to meet in person, while also providing vastly greater choices than what was ever available before (Barraket and Henry-Waring 2008; Couch and Liamputtong 2007; Gibbs, Ellison and Heino 2006; Gibbs, Ellison and Lai 2011; Hardey 2008; Lawson and Leck 2006; Rosenfeld and Thomas 2012; Tong et al. 2016).

## DATING APPS

More recently, smartphones have further transformed nearly every aspect of life, from travel, to purchases, to instant news reports—and dating. Online dating no longer requires one to be at home in front of a computer, as smartphone dating applications, such as Tinder and Grindr, have mobilized the dating process, creating virtual spaces layered on top of geographical space (Blackwell and Birnholtz 2015; Duguay 2017). Although dating app interfaces vary, geosocial dating apps, by definition, use location services to determine the approximate distance of users from one another. The most

popular app among gay and bisexual men, Grindr, displays individuals that are near in proximity on a screen packed with several profile pictures. (Goedel and Duncan 2015; Jaspal 2017). Depending on the density of local users, distances can range from just a few feet to several miles.

These dating apps have created a new social reality for everyone, but they have been especially transformative for gay and bisexual men. Finding dates or sexual encounters can be as easy as opening the app to see who is close by (Blackwell and Birnholtz 2015; Licoppe, Riviere and Morel 2016; McKie et al. 2017; Stempfhuber and Liegl 2016). Whereas internet dating broke geographical barriers, geosocial dating applications have built upon this accomplishment by streamlining “time, ease, and proximity” (Quiroz 2013: 184). These technological advances have made the pool of potential romantic and sexual partners even wider and more accessible (Blackwell and Birnholtz 2015; Brubaker, Ananny and Crawford 2016; Jaspal 2017; Licoppe et al. 2016; McKie et al. 2017; Stempfhuber and Liegl 2016).

Dating apps such as Grindr grant gay and bisexual men, who have historically held very little control over their dating and sex lives (Connell 1992; Coston and Kimmel 2012; Grove et al. 2014; Lever et al. 2008), complete control when constructing their identity and relaying their desires to others (Jaspal 2017). The platform design of some of the most popular apps, such as Grindr, offer users a blank canvass on which to create their presentation of self with relatively few restrictions. While empowering, this ability also allows for a higher degree of inauthentic self-presentations and deception which can impede relationship development and frustrate users (Jaspal 2017). Other dating apps, some of which are not specific to gay and bisexual men such as Tinder, have addressed

concerns of authenticity by incorporating structural constraints into their design that greatly reduce the ability to construct fake or deceptive profiles (Duguay 2017). These platforms, for instance, might require users to identify by their real name and/or use clear and identifying photos. Such designs, however, may not be suitable for vulnerable communities like gay and bisexual men who often need varying degrees of anonymity.

## IDENTITY AND PRESENTATION OF SELF

Dating online has been a welcome breakthrough to many, but has not come without its own challenges. While communicating with sympathetic others online has been able to help ease the pain of loneliness for some (Lawson and Leck 2006), others have at times become the victim of monetary and emotional scams perpetrated by individuals they met through online forums such as dating sites (Buchanan and Whitty 2014). The most common challenge, however, identified by online daters in a large body of research is that of trustworthiness and authenticity (Couch and Liamputtong 2007; Droge and Voirol 2011; Ellison, Hancock and Toma 2011; Gibbs et al. 2011; Hardey 2002; Lawson and Leck 2006; McKie et al. 2017; Schmitz 2014; Tong et al. 2016). The accuracy of a person's presentation to others on virtual dating forums depends on that individual's honesty in regards to themselves and others. According to Giddens (1991: 53), "Self-identity is not a distinctive trait.... It is the self as reflexively understood by the person in terms of her or his biography." When given the opportunity to present one's own interpretation of self prior to face-to-face interaction, there is always the possibility that this presentation will not align with what others see when in-person contact is made (Droge and Voirol 2011; Schmitz 2014).

Verifying the accuracy of another user's self-presentation in a virtual environment can be difficult, if not, at times, impossible. A certain level of skepticism and even distrust between individuals in online settings becomes inevitable. Giddens (1991) notes that, "The presumption of generalized trust... concerns future anticipations as well as current interpretive understandings." Users of online dating sites interpret the profiles of one another with the understanding that individuals have a general tendency to, at least slightly, misrepresent themselves in order to present their most attractive self. Because of this, they approach interactions with other users with a certain level of skepticism in deciding who they might want to eventually meet in person (Lawson and Leck 2006).

Presentations that occur on online dating forums fit neatly into Goffman's (1959) theory of dramaturgy. According to Goffman, individuals construct "front stage" performances to deliver before various audiences that enhance the positive attributes of their persona that they wish to display. At the same time, they downplay any negative attributes by keeping less attractive aspects of their selves relegated to a "back stage" that is hidden from the view of others. These performances are necessary for the smooth flow of everyday interactions. In this way, a doctor doesn't reveal her or his inner doubts with a patient, a professor projects confidence when speaking to students, and we are all (hopefully) sure to groom properly each morning before presenting ourselves to the outside world. The goal in each case is to deliver a credible performance that is in return believed by the target audience.

Geosocial dating apps can be logically conceived of as functioning simultaneously as a front and back stage for gay and bisexual men. As Goffman (1959: 126) observed, "there are many regions which function at one time and in one sense as a

front region and at another time and another sense as a back region.” It is front stage in the sense that users enact performances for one another in an attempt to be viewed as attractive and desirable. It is the back stage in the sense that it is a place where gay and bisexual men can—to some degree—let down their guard and be themselves; a place where they can flirt and mingle with other gay men without the fear of negative and homophobic reactions.

The degree to which individuals present themselves authentically online largely determines the viability of developing offline, real-life relationships (Couch and Liamputtong 2007; Hardey 2002; Lawson and Leck 2006; Schmitz 2014). Research has found greater amounts of self-disclosure to be a strong predictor of an online dater’s strategic success (Gibbs et al. 2006). Other studies, however, have found that while the internet encourages greater amounts of self-disclosure by lowering inhibitions, there are other factors that can impede successful offline interactions (Droge and Voirol 2011). Consequently, the transition from online to offline is rarely smooth. Users often expect others to embellish when interacting online. Even still, research has still found the tendency among users to “idealize” the features of those with whom they interact. Users tend to project their own desires and fantasies by using their imagination to fill in gaps of knowledge, exaggerating positive aspects of the other person’s self-presentation, and minimizing or ignoring negative aspects. This creates high expectations that naturally result in disappointment upon meeting face-to-face (Droge and Voirol 2011). Lawson and Leck (2006: 200) note that, “Daters create and invest in a persona while knowing that it may eventually be destroyed.” In response, online daters develop mechanisms to safeguard against disappointing face-to-face meetings through rationalizing techniques

such as making attempts to control their imaginations and emotions (Droge and Voirol 2011).

Schmitz (2014: 15) conceptualizes dating websites as “online dating markets” where daters alter their presentation of self out of necessity in order to “optimize their profiles according to their expectations of the desires of the other market participants.” Viewed through the lens of rationalization and commodification, misrepresentation is not only accepted, but normalized (Barraket and Henry-Waring 2008; Best and Delmege 2012; Droge and Voirol 2011). Daters come to expect some amount of falsification to the point that “few seem to give much thought to what usually could be dismissed as a makeover of one’s persona” (Lawson and Leck 2006: 200). Indeed, if individual online daters are commodities in a vast market operating on a rationalistic basis, it makes sense to present one’s self in the most competitive manner possible.

Not surprisingly, online daters view their self-presentations as authentic and honest but often distrust those with whom they interact (Couch and Liamputtong 2007; Gibbs et al. 2006). When deciding how to construct their self-presentations, individuals draw from a range of past, present, and future selves to present the most positive version of themselves (Ellison et al. 2011). In doing so, users rationalize small discrepancies while eschewing larger ones, so that embellishing one’s height by an inch might be acceptable but not by five inches. Online daters employ a wide array of tools to cope with the high potential for deception (Lawson and Leck 2006). These range from relying on their intuition as “good bull-shit readers” (Couch and Liamputtong 2007: 289) to structuring their own profiles in such a way as to filter out potential cons (Best and Delmege 2012).

## STIGMA AND ROMANCE FOR SEXUAL MINORITIES

This study relies heavily on Goffman's (1963) conceptualization of stigma to analyze the intersection of homophobia, romantic pursuits, and dating apps in the lives of young gay and bisexual men. Goffman (1963: 3) defines stigma as "an attribute that is deeply discrediting" and describes stigmatized individuals as possessing a "spoiled identity." According to him, stigmatized individuals are viewed by society as "not quite human," and therefore face "varieties of discrimination [that] reduce life chances" (Goffman 1963: 5). Because of this, individuals bearing stigma are forced to take steps to mitigate negative social implications.

Goffman outlines three broadly defined strategies employed by the stigmatized to counteract any potentially negative social consequences. The first of these is "minstrelization." Individuals using this approach seek to "act out before the normals the full dance of bad qualities imputed to his kind, thereby consolidating a life situation into a clownish role" (Goffman 1963: 110). These individuals embrace their status as abnormal, deflect attention from their "defect", and exaggerate their differences so as to invite mocking laughter. Jack, the flamboyant gay character from the hit NBC sitcom "Will and Grace" would be a prime example (IMBD 2017). Jack is portrayed as dull-headed, naively chipper, and prone to gaffes—not a character to be taken seriously. Minstrelization seeks to minimize commonality and exaggerate differences to the point of "clownishness" due to the overwhelming power of the dominant group.

The second strategy is "normification." Individuals using this approach seek to normalize themselves to the society that has labeled them irreparably defective. "Without making a secret of their stigma [they are] very careful to show that in spite of

appearances they are very sane, very generous, very sober, very masculine.” (Goffman 1963: 110-111) As an example, one might refer to the recent debate concerning same-sex marriage in which normification was a central rhetorical theme. In this case, gay and lesbian couples made the case that their families deserved the same recognition as those of opposite-sex couples. The court’s majority accepted their argument, granting them “equal dignity in the eyes of the law” (Kennedy 2015: 28; Liptak 2015). LGBT families presented themselves to the rest of society as just being boring normals that, as one individual put it, “have a house with a white picket fence, a dog, and two cats. It’s pretty damn domestic” (Crawley and Broad 2004: 50). Normification seeks to minimize differences and emphasize commonality.

The third strategy is “militancy.” Through militancy, individuals not only embrace their “spoiled identity,” but find inherent value in the distinctive characteristics of their group “to the extent of favoring a secessionist ideology” (Goffman 1963: 113). Militancy often involves an “ultimate political objective” that seeks to “remove stigma from the differentness” (Goffman 1963: 114). Those taking this approach may seek to turn the tables by declaring their group or ideology to be superior to those that place the stigma on them. Racial supremacy groups such as the Nation of Islam are a fitting illustration (SPLC). A somewhat milder example would be the rejection of marriage by some in the LGBT community in the name of a superior ideology of love and sexuality (Barker 2013; Martin 2010). Militancy emphasizes differences and eschews commonalities by flipping the dominant social script and declaring the stigmatized group to be superior to the “normals.” While Goffman outlines these as three distinct categories

of action, they are not mutually exclusive categories. It is entirely possible for individuals to use any or all tactics to varying degrees.

Alternatively, in the LGBT community, an individual may seek to simply hide their stigma and “pass” as a heterosexual through strategic displays of heteronormative masculinity (Goffman 1963; Zimmerman 1987). Since sexual orientation is not an overtly visible trait, “passing” is a common strategy that gay and bisexual men have often used. Goffman (1963) suggests that individuals with a “secret differentness” will find themselves in three different types of social scenarios throughout the course of any given day: (1) There are forbidden places in which expulsion is the penalty for being found out (e.g. church); (2) There are civil places in which politeness is routine, but full acceptance is still tacitly denied (e.g. Government office); (3) And there are “back places” where stigmatized individuals are grouped together, whether voluntary or involuntarily (e.g. gay bars/clubs). In the third scenario, an individual “will be able to be at ease among his fellows” (Goffman 1963: 81). In this context, the concepts of “back stage” (Goffman 1959) and “back places” (Goffman 1963) serve much the same purpose.

It has never been fully acceptable in American society for gay and bisexual men to show affection or even be seen together publicly as a couple—much less to make an advance towards a stranger that they find attractive (Lever et al. 2008). As a result, gay and bisexual men have often been forced to hide their identity except in certain back places, such as gay bars and clubs that provide at least some measure of safety (Grove et al. 2014). Doing otherwise has often carried the risk of inviting social stigma and even violence (Barrios and Lundquist 2010; Lever et al. 2008). Gay-specific and gay-friendly venues have traditionally been the safest choice for those in the gay community looking

to meet romantic and sexual partners. Bars, clubs, and bathhouses have functioned as safe back places for gay and bisexual men to meet and socialize (Grove et al. 2014; Lever et al. 2008).

Along with accessibility, the internet has brought a level of anonymity long desired by many in the gay community concerned with being targets of discriminatory behavior. Considering the social stigma that still surrounds same-sex relationships, increased anonymity has been especially beneficial for those who have yet to identify as LGBT but desire same-sex relationships or are simply curious to explore their sexuality (Jaspal 2017). The internet has broadened the scope and anonymity of the traditional physical back spaces for gay and bisexual men. It has done so by allowing individuals the ability to pursue a wider pool of potential dating partners in closer proximity than would otherwise be logistically possible (Grove et al. 2014).

Understanding the concept of stigma is crucial to understanding the role that the internet has played and continues to play in the lives of sexual minorities (Grove et al. 2014). The ability afforded by the internet to expand one's search for a partner beyond geographic, social, and familial boundaries has been one of the primary benefits of online dating (Rosenfeld and Thomas 2012). Given these liberating benefits, it should come as no surprise that LGBT individuals are more likely to use the internet to search for dating partners than their straight counterparts (Grove et al. 2014; Rosenfeld and Thomas 2012).

## GENDER AND MASCULINITY

Integral to the presentation of self for men are the expectations and demands of displaying appropriate indicators of hegemonic masculine characteristics. Hegemonic masculinity can be conceptualized as “the currently most honored way of being a man”

(Connell and Messerschmidt 2005: 832). For example, individuals and characters such as John Wayne, James Bond, and the cartoon character Popeye are historical American figures that embody dominant masculine ideals such as toughness, strength, and sexual prowess. Research has shown, however, that popular conceptions of gender and masculinity vary by time, space, and culture, and that individual men can use multiple definitions of masculinity to fit the needs of different social contexts (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Zimmerman 1987). Masculinity might mean something different for the religious fundamentalist than it does for the secular movie star. In spite of wide variations in definition, Connell and Messerschmidt (2005: 846) identify the core ingredients of hegemonic masculinity as “cultural consent, discursive centrality, institutionalization, and marginalization or de-legitimation of alternatives.” Since hegemony is not likely to be fully embodied in any one person, it is better thought of as an ideal type (Ritzer and Goodman 2004). It also requires the consent of the wider culture for legitimation. Should individuals cease to socialize their children into gendered categories, the future of our current binary system of gender would be called into question. Conversely, consent necessitates the de-legitimation of alternative expressions of masculinity. For gay and bisexual men, exclusion is automatic. They are marginalized as illegitimate because they represent a “penetrated” (Pascoe 2005) or “subordinated” (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005) masculinity.

As stigmatized individuals that are often denied the full benefits and privileges of masculinity (Coston and Kimmel 2012), gay and bisexual men are keenly aware of their gender presentations (Schrock and Shwalbe 2009) This is particularly true on platforms such as dating apps where presenting an attractive self is key to success. Specifically,

“straight acting” masculine presentations are valued as desirable and attractive, while displays of effeminacy are shunned (Miller 2015). Research has shown that since gay and bisexual men must make extra efforts to be recognized as legitimately masculine, they have at times adopted hypermasculine presentations. These might consist of efforts to develop strong, muscular bodies or to demonstrate sexual prowess (Coston and Kimmel 2012; Miller 2015). Interestingly, research has found that individuals on geosocial dating apps displaying faceless profile pictures (torso only) are more likely to describe themselves as masculine and state their preference for masculine qualities in a potential partner (Miller 2015). Miller (2015: 654) posits that this may be due to “internalized homophobia, a lack of identification with a gay or bisexual identity, and/or other psychological constructs.”

As a method of stigma management, stigmatized individuals will sometimes internalize the caricaturized images of their group (Pyke 2004; Pyke 2010). By doing so, they are able to align themselves with the mainstream of society and distance themselves from harmful stereotypes. They do so, however, at the expense of the other members of their group. This method of stigma management reinforces negative stereotypes in a particularly effective manner since their words may carry extra weight to outsiders. The mainstream of society is able to cite a group member’s testimony as evidence that the stigmatized group really is everything the stereotypes portray.

There is a certain irony surrounding the devaluation of femininity in the gay and bisexual male community since it is sexism that lays the ideological foundation for homophobic stigmatization (Pascoe 2005; Schilt and Westbrook 2009; Zimmerman 1987). Strategic displays of hegemonic masculine ideals are intended to offset

homophobic stigma by reclaiming a legitimized masculinity. While this may be a successful strategy in the short run, over the long-term, it serves to recreate and sanctify the ideological weaponry used for the very oppression they seek to escape. So instead of rejecting the gender ideology that sustains their stigmatization, many gay and bisexual men still use culturally dominant definitions of masculinity to police their own gender presentations of themselves and that of others, and to set the standards for attractiveness and desirability (Connell 1992; Coston and Kimmel 2012; Miller 2015; Schrock and Shwalbe 2009). In this way, many gay and bisexual men do not challenge existing gender norms, but rather reinforce them through their acquiescence and subsequent enforcement (Pascoe 2005). The policing of one another's masculinity by gay and bisexual men is an amazing display of the defining power of hegemonic masculinity. The cultural consent to hegemonic masculinity does indeed run deep. Connell (1992: 748) concludes bluntly that "there is no open challenge to the gender order here."

## RELATIONSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Increased ease of access to discreet sexual encounters provides opportunities for gay and bisexual men to explore their sexuality, but can also pose challenges to relationship formation (Brubaker et al. 2016; McKie et al. 2017; Stempfhuber and Liegl 2016). A common complaint leveled by gay and bisexual men against certain dating app platforms is that they create a hypersexual culture which leads to a perceived lack of opportunities to form meaningful emotional attachments (Brubaker et al. 2016; Jaspal 2017). Indeed, research has found that gay and bisexual men who use geosocial dating apps commonly report using the apps to find partners for casual sex (Blackwell and Birnholtz 2015; Jaspal 2017; Licoppe et al. 2016; Stempfhuber and Liegl 2016).

Correspondingly, other research has found gay college men to engage in more anonymous hookups than their heterosexual counterparts, while also expressing a stronger desire for relationship formation (Barrios and Lundquist 2010). Unfortunately, social stigma around homosexuality and the risk of social derision—and even physical—violence often stifle relationship opportunities for gay and bisexual men by reducing face-to-face meetings to discreet encounters. Fear of social stigma has the effect of shrinking the pool of potential long-term partners to those willing to accept the potential consequences (Barrios and Lundquist 2010; Jaspal 2017; Lever et al. 2008).

Dating apps such as Grindr grant gay and bisexual men an immense amount of control by offering a platform that is malleable to multiple needs and desires ranging from simple friendship to long-term relationships—and sexual encounters (Licoppe et al. 2016). Ironically, it is this intersection of potential intents that can operate as an impediment to long-term relationship formation. The sexualization of these virtual spaces often has the effect of overshadowing long-term relational intentions in favor of detached sexual encounters (Brubaker et al. 2016).

## **RESEARCH GOALS AND QUESTIONS**

This study examines how young gay and bisexual men experience geosocial dating apps by using a unique four-pronged theoretical approach (outlined in greater detail below). Goffman's iterations of the presentation of self (1959), stigma (1963), and the interaction order (1983) are combined with the conceptualization of geosocial dating apps as partner markets (Schmitz 2014) to take a detailed look of how dating apps impact the romantic lives of these young men. The research questions that will guide the data analysis are as follows:

1. How do young gay and bisexual men perceive geosocial dating apps as an alternative to public venues?
2. How does stigma impact the interactions of young gay and bisexual men on geosocial dating apps?
3. What interactional challenges do dating apps pose to young gay and bisexual men?
4. Do young gay and bisexual men find geosocial dating apps to be useful tools for building satisfying relationships?

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **DATING APPS AS MARKETS**

For the purpose of this research, geosocial dating apps are conceptualized as dating markets (Schmitz 2014). Markets imply competition. Max Weber (as cited in Schmitz 2014: 12) defines a market as “exist[ing] wherever there is competition, even if only unilateral, for opportunities of exchange among a plurality of potential parties.” Geosocial dating apps are virtual spaces that have the exclusive focus of bringing individuals together for romantic and sexual purposes. The concept of a “partner market” dispersed throughout the social happenings of everyday life is not new to sociological inquiry (Droge and Voirol 2011; Schmitz 2014). What makes virtual venues like geosocial dating apps different is that they condense the market by giving it structure. The market is no longer diffused throughout everyday life, but is conveniently found in one place that individuals can go to for that specific purpose. As users scroll through profiles, individuals are displayed on a screen as commodities complete with pictures and descriptions.

Profiles are constructed in such a way to present the most attractive and desirable self possible. The self, in other words, becomes a commodity that must carefully structure its presentation to outperform the competition. The unique aspect of virtual dating markets for gay and bisexual men is that all users can be thought of simultaneously as competition and potential partners. Consequently, standards of physical attractiveness often become homogenized to reflect hegemonic masculine ideals (Connell 1992; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Coston and Kimmel 2012; Schrock and Shwalbe 2009). Individuals who do not fit the prevailing standard of attractiveness many times feel rejected and may go to specialty venues (or markets) that value their body type (Brubaker et al. 2016; Jaspal 2017; McKie et al. 2017).

The fierce competition found in the dating markets of geosocial dating apps can create incentive for deceptive presentations (Droge and Voirol 2011; Gibbs et al. 2006; Schmitz 2014). Perhaps not surprisingly, research has found that individuals who exhibit more concern for how they are perceived by others tend to be less honest in their self-presentations and create idealized personas of themselves (Gibbs et al. 2006). Schmitz (2014: 15) observes that “the great potential, and indeed necessity, for inauthentic self-presentation becomes one of many rational strategies used in online dating,” and that individuals craft their presentations based upon the expectations of what other users desire “so as not to suffer any competitive disadvantage.” Combined with competitive incentive, users are presented with a ready-made platform that has no measures in place to prevent rampant deception. Ultimately, however, the desire to eventually meet someone in person gives individuals motivation to temper the amount of embellishment and deception in their presentations (Ellison et al. 2011; Hardey 2002).

In this study, interpersonal interactions within these virtual markets will be analyzed using Goffman's concepts of the interaction order (1983), the presentation of self (1959), and stigma (1963). This three-pronged approach is intended to capture the overlapping dynamics of stigmatization and the interactional challenges posed by the loosely regulated platforms of most geosocial dating apps.

## THE INTERACTION ORDER

Although online dating in general, and dating apps in particular, have created a seemingly endless array of new possibilities in the dating lives of marginalized groups, including gay and bisexual men (Blackwell and Birnholtz 2015; Grove et al. 2014; Rosenfeld and Thomas 2012), these virtual intermediaries have also created new challenges to communication and relationship development (Brubaker et al. 2016; Duguay 2017). The ability to easily craft fantastical (and dishonest) self-presentations inserts a heightened level of skepticism into most, if not all, interactions. This is a common but critical issue for users to work through since the purpose of online dating platforms is to operate as a filter, allowing users to screen potential dates for compatibility before committing to meet in person (Best and Delmege 2012). Online daters in general seek to leverage the control afforded to them in this virtual arena to minimize potential risks (Couch and Liamputtong 2007). This ability is especially pertinent to gay and bisexual men as they seek new tools to mitigate issues of stigma and safety. Using dating apps allows them to exert control over a process in which they have historically had very little power: namely, dating and romance (Grove et al. 2014; Lever et al. 2008).

By layering geographical and virtual space (Blackwell and Birnholtz 2015), geosocial dating apps are changing the rules on when and how gay and bisexual men can interact with potential romantic interests (Hardey 2008). Grindr, for instance, “aggregates individuals across geographic spaces in ways that conflate and combine socially defined places; [altering] the relationship between place, presence, and the visibility of behavior” (Blackwell and Birnholtz 2015: 1131). Opening the Grindr app places an individual in a secondary social reality constrained only by proximity, not physical or social boundaries.

Virtual spaces created by geosocial dating apps challenge traditional sociological perspectives on interpersonal interactions. This is because traditional theoretical perspectives such as Simmel’s theory of symbolic interaction and its subsequent variants assume face-to-face interactions (Ritzer and Goodman 2004). Goffman’s (1983) classic conceptualization of “the interaction order” depends on two types of identifiers that are “critical to interaction life”:

The characterization that one individual can make of another by virtue of being able directly to observe and hear that other is organized around two fundamental forms of identification: the categoric kind involving placing that other in one or more social categories, and the individual kind, whereby the subject under observation is locked to a uniquely distinguishing identity through appearance, tone of voice, mention of name or other person-differentiating device. (pg. 4)

According to Goffman, these identifiers are necessary for meaningful conversation and smooth face-to-face interactions. It is a natural process for individuals to attempt to orient themselves to one another in terms of social and personal identification. While doing this, individuals might analyze one another by such characteristics as age, gender, race, social status, physical attractiveness etc. Whether rightly or wrongly, one may choose to structure an encounter with someone of great wealth and high social status differently from an individual of little wealth and lower status.

## PRESENTATION OF SELF

A key difference between the traditional terms of the interaction order and communication that occurs on geosocial dating apps is that these exchanges are wholly virtual. They are fundamentally different from interactions in the physical world, in that one's presentation of self in the virtual world is not restricted by the natural constraints of a face-to-face meeting. The platform design of the most popular dating app, Grindr, grants users a virtual blank canvas on which to craft a desirable presentation of self (Blackwell and Birnholtz 2015). This creates almost unlimited possibilities that allow for near complete manipulation of the categoric and individual identifiers.

Technically, categoric types of identification are not dependent on in-person encounters and can be made using information supplied by that individual's description of themselves. For instance, inferences about an individual's social status are gleaned from knowing someone's career and income. However, coming to these conclusions means relying on information that are supplied by the individual in question. Due to the lack of physical, in-person indicators, online daters are forced to engage in intentional exercises of trust-building. Activities such as mutual self-disclosure and exchanging messages using emoticons and colloquial expressions help to achieve this goal and allow meaningful interactions to occur (Droge and Voirol 2011; Lawson and Leck 2006).

Central to Goffman's (1959) theory of the presentation of self is that the an individual's performance must be credible to the surrounding audience. The performer and the audience must both be convinced of the same reality. Otherwise, the performer may be exposed as a fraud or an imposter and risk great embarrassment. Enacting believable performances is essential to the smooth flow of everyday interactions. Without

the delivery of authentic and credible performances, a breakdown in communication is inevitable. Trust-building exercises on virtual venues help to make each user's performance believable to one another so that productive communication can occur.

## STIGMA

The concept of stigma as conceptualized by Goffman (1963) constitutes the fourth component of the theoretical framework. However, its role in the analysis and discussion of the data is somewhat more complex than that of the other three. This is because stigma operates as a background assumption in the context of same-sex relationships. Therefore, while the analysis contains a specific section dedicated to the impact of stigma, it should be understood that stigma is not and cannot be removed from the rest of the conversation. Its impact on individual interactions has a direct effect on the overall experience of users which in turn influences which venues they might choose for meeting potential partners. Thus, the assumption of stigma and its continuous impact on the dating experiences of these young men runs throughout each section.

Since interactions on geosocial dating apps cut across social as well as geographic boundaries (Blackwell and Birnholtz 2015), individuals from a wide variety of life experiences and backgrounds are certain to come in contact with one another. These individuals are likely to be at different comfort levels regarding their sexuality, with some publicly identifying as gay or bisexual and others simply looking to satisfy curiosity about their sexual orientation. The implication is that some individuals may have no problem at all identifying themselves with pictures and descriptions, while others may, for various reasons, have a greater concern about social stigma and might experience

more hesitancy in displaying identifying information (Gibbs et al. 2011; Jaspal 2017; Miller 2015).

Information control is one of the primary tools identified by Goffman for managing stigma: “To display or not to display; to tell or not to tell; to let on or not to let on; to lie or not to lie” (Goffman 1963: 42). The platform design of apps like Grindr accommodate this need for gay and bisexual men. Individuals are allowed to determine what and how much information to include in their profile and whether to include a picture. If a picture is included, they decide what kind of picture to use: Face? Torso? Face and torso? (Miller 2015).

Although dating apps for gay and bisexual men are intended to function as the safe back places that Goffman (1963) speaks of, men that do not identify publicly as gay or bisexual may still fear being identified and outed (Blackwell and Birnholtz 2015). The lax restrictions on some of the most popular apps like Grindr make it possible for anyone to lurk without anyone knowing. This being the case, men that are not public with their sexuality risk being outed if they display identifying photos or information on their profiles. As Goffman (1963: 82) states, stigmatized individuals “run the risk of being easily discredited should a normal person known from elsewhere enter the [back] place.” To prevent this, these men rely on the information control that dating apps provide, selectively disclosing themselves to whom they feel comfortable (Blackwell and Birnholtz 2015). They are, in essence, stuck between two worlds in which they must be careful even while seeking reprieve from hiding their stigma or risk public exposure of their secret. The design of many dating apps assist them in preventing this disclosure.

Other reasons individuals might opt to conceal their identity on dating apps include the fear of being labeled as “slutty” by individuals that might know them from outside of the app (Blackwell and Birnholtz 2015; Jaspal 2017; McKie et al. 2017; Miller 2015). To minimize the perception of looking for casual sex, some men choose to reveal their identity selectively to others when using dating apps. In short, stigmatizing forces from within the stigmatized group itself may provide users with incentives to partially or fully conceal their identity and may create an environment that impedes successful and satisfying communication.

Having the ability to control what, if any, personally identifying information a potential romantic interest can see is especially important to individuals who have historically faced the very real possibility of unpleasant—if not violent—reactions in public (Lever et al. 2008). Although this capability is not exclusive to geosocial dating apps, the combination of proximity and online visibility creates a unique social situation in which gay and bisexual men have complete control over how much information they reveal to romantic interests who are close to them (Blackwell and Birnholtz 2015). Liberating as this is, research (Hardey 2008; Hardey 2002; Lawson and Leck 2006) has found that online dating venues are not exempt from the traditional theories of presentation of self and interaction (Giddens 1991; Goffman 1959; Goffman 1963; Goffman 1983). Online daters must navigate the challenges described above to ensure successful interactions and—eventually—in-person meetings.

## METHODS AND DATA COLLECTION

The population for this study was young gay and bisexual men. The age range was limited to gay and bisexual men between ages 18 and 29. Young gay and bisexual men were the focus of this study since they are more likely to use technology to find romantic and sexual partners and are at greater risk for contracting STIs than their older counterparts (Goedel and Duncan 2015; McKie et al. 2017). It is thus especially important to understand the dating habits of this vulnerable demographic in a rapidly changing technological landscape. Participants were obtained through snowball sampling. To begin the snowball, individuals from the researcher's own contact list served as the initial participants. To avoid collecting names and phone numbers, participants passed my contact information along to other individuals that might be willing to participate. Thus, individuals that contacted me regarding this research were doing so out of their willingness to participate, making the refusal rate zero. Data collection was conducted in a mid-size southern city that is socially, politically, and religiously conservative. The conservative nature of the region has particular salience to the concept of stigma and how gay and bisexual men might experience issues related to dating and relationship formation (Blackwell and Birnholtz 2015).

The method of data collection was in-depth semi-structured one-on-one interviews. In-depth interviews allow researchers to obtain a more complex understanding of social processes by allowing the individuals involved to explain the phenomenon under consideration using their own words. In doing so, multiple perspectives come together to tell a multifaceted sociological story. Rubin and Rubin

(2005: 4) note that “observing life from separate yet overlapping angles makes the researcher more hesitant to leap to conclusions and encourages more nuanced analysis.”

Ten interviews were conducted that ranged in length from 10 to 38 minutes. Average interview length was approximately 20 minutes. Participant age ranged from 23 to 29 years old. Of the ten participants, seven were currently in a relationship. Two were in a relationship with one another after initially meeting through a dating app. Participants were asked open-ended questions that allowed them to give as much or as little information as they desired. As seen from interview duration times, there was wide variety in the amount of information interviewees opted to disclose. All interviews were recorded with the permission of the participants and transcribed using NHC’s ExpressScribe software. Transcripts were frequently analyzed for new themes and concepts that might inform the formulation of new lines of inquiry at the next interview.

The procedures for this study were approved by the Institutional Review Board of Sam Houston State University. At no point during the data collection process were names or any other identifying information collected. Pseudonyms have been used in lieu of names in all transcripts and throughout the discussion of the data. To further ensure the confidentiality of participants’ identities, a Certificate of Confidentiality was obtained from the National Institute of Health. This provides an added layer of security by shielding any documents and information related to this research from being subject to subpoena. Participants gave their informed consent after having the purpose and parameters of the study, the risks and benefits, as well as their right to withdraw from the study at any point in the process explained to them prior to conducting interviews.

To achieve the stated goals of this study, a quasi-inductive, grounded approach was used to guide data analysis. Berg and Lune (2012: 358) describe a grounded approach as one in which “the analysis starts with the patterns discernable in the text, which are subsequently explained by the application or development of a theoretical framework.” While research often begins with a concrete theoretical perspective and ends with the testing of carefully formulated hypotheses, inductive research is the exact opposite in that the data collected subsequently shapes the development of a theoretical framework. Theory is, thus, not *a priori* but rather the result of a grounded perspective (Charmaz 2006; Maxwell 2013). Concepts and themes were thus developed from the stories told by these men in their own words. These concepts and themes ultimately coalesced into the theoretical framework that will guide the discussion of the data.

### CHAPTER III

#### ANALYSIS OF DATA

#### HOW DO YOUNG GAY AND BISEXUAL MEN PERCEIVE GEOSOCIAL DATING APPS AS AN ALTERNATIVE TO PUBLIC VENUES?

As discussed in Chapter 1, from its inception internet dating has been especially popular among the LGBT community due to the risks that are inherent in a public display of same-sex desire or attraction (Grove et al. 2014; Lever et al. 2008). Users of online dating forums more broadly, and particularly sexual minorities (Rosenfeld and Thomas 2012), have long reported using the control afforded to them by virtual dating mediums to maximize their outcomes and manage issues of safety and stigma (Barraket and Henry-Waring 2008; Blackwell and Birnholtz 2015; Couch and Liamputtong 2007; Couch, Liamputtong and Pitts 2011; Grove et al. 2014; Jaspal 2017; Lawson and Leck 2006; Lever et al. 2008; Tong et al. 2016). Most dating apps for gay and bisexual men are designed to give users complete control over what personal information they share when constructing their online identity. They also allow users to be more selective in seeking romantic partners by expanding the pool of nearby visible prospects. As can be seen from participant responses as well as academic research (Blackwell and Birnholtz 2015; Jaspal 2017; McKie et al. 2017; Stempfhuber and Liegl 2016), gay and bisexual men use these tools to enhance their dating experiences and expand beyond traditional public settings such as bars and clubs.

Overall, most participant responses from the interviews conducted in this study suggest that dating apps provide gay men with a positive, albeit imperfect, virtual alternative to public settings. “I firmly believe that dating apps are better than going to a

bar. And it's safer. People I meet on dating apps are generally more honest than people I meet in a bar," said Dakota, a 25-year-old queer trans man, before going on to note that his fiancé had once been "roofied" (drugged) in a gay bar. Alex appreciated the fact that with dating apps he could weed out the "crazies" in a non-confrontational manner by "just choosing to not communicate any further." The depersonalized nature of dating apps allows him to ward off unwanted advances without fearing how that person might react:

If you're in-person, you're going to get a raw reaction if you tell someone, "Hey this isn't going to work. I really like you, but I don't think we are compatible." In that moment, you never know what that person's going to do. They can kind of flip out on you, they can take it nice, they can take it however they're going to take it depending on the maturity level. But, I think coming to the online dating sites just allows people to be more selective.

Dating apps provide a buffer against uncomfortable interactions, granting users the control to remove themselves from awkward situations.

Additionally, some participants found dating apps to be helpful for overcoming initial shyness and social anxiety: "The apps are a nice gateway. It helps you build up a little bit of confidence when you meet someone. Kind of talk to them a little bit and get to know them," says James before adding the caveat, "Or what you can over an app."

Similarly, Shane notes that, "It gets hard to find people in public and actually develop a connection with somebody. I'm a shy guy so it would already be hard for me to approach guys in public already. I think that's where the app comes into play. For people like me."

Dakota found communicating through online dating forums, including geosocial dating apps, to be helpful practice for face-to-face interactions. Having the ability to interact with romantic prospects on virtual forums in his young adult days helped him to acquire social competencies that have stayed with him. He said that dating apps help "build the

ability to learn to flirt without being face-to-face. I think I learned from that. I wouldn't be as nearly as charming as I am now if it wasn't for dating sites."

Often times, social and familial constraints inhibit the development of a support system for many individuals in the LGBT community. Since the dawn of the internet age, virtual mediums have proven to be a popular tool for those in the gay community seeking to develop a supportive social network (Grove et al. 2014). Likewise, dating apps can also be helpful in this pursuit. Jason, a 23-year-old gay man, described how dating apps helped him network with other gay men as a young adult:

I didn't really know that many gay people, and I was too young to go out to the bars. So, I didn't really have a good way to network in any way shape or form. It's a lot easier to talk to people online than in-person, I feel like, a lot of times. It's a lot easier to make that first step through the privacy of your own home, on your phone, or whatever, as opposed to the bar trying to pick someone up.

Additionally, dating apps allow individuals to develop their social networks and have synchronous interactions with nearby romantic interests on a time-frame that works for them. As Dakota explained:

On a dating site, you can sit there and all the night owls can all talk to all the night owls. And, so, the people who work eighty hours in a week are still able to have interaction and flirting and resources that they can build—even if not building an actual relationship.

The ability to discreetly develop a supportive social network of local individuals and hone one's social skills in the process seems to be a direct and tangible benefit of geosocial dating apps.

Not everyone, however, found dating apps to be helpful alternatives to public venues. To several participants, the format and process of sifting through potential partners and marketing one's self to others is cold and dehumanizing. By necessity, individuals using geosocial dating apps seek to present a competitively desirable and

attractive self to others. In effect, daters become commodities and the process of choosing becomes correspondingly rationalistic and consumeristic. Consequently, first impressions are crucial to success. The penalty for failing to deliver a desirable presentation can be immediate rejection. Jeremy, a 26-year-old gay man currently in a relationship found it difficult to avoid using economic metaphors when describing the exchange of identifying information—specifically, pictures:

I want to say it's like a 100% for-profit when profit's not the right term to use. You've got to be able to give them what they want before they'll even consider doing anything for you. Mostly pertaining to pictures like "if you want to see what I look like you gotta show me first." And if it doesn't work: instant block or instant cut of communication.

Other users such as Brice, a 29-year-old gay man currently in a relationship, described similar experiences:

If you send them so many pictures and they like the pictures and then you send them one bad picture, they will stop talking, period. If it's just a picture they don't like or if it's a picture that doesn't look exactly like your look in the other pictures - if you have a different haircut or something because you have multiple pictures - if it's not what they like, they will stop talking.

Chatting with individuals on dating apps can be akin to checking out the features of a product. As information about a product (individual) is requested and received via text chat, undesirable features can lead to an immediate rejection as the shopper moves on to browse more options.

The perceived detachment of virtual spaces from physical reality contributes to the marketization of dating apps. According to Schmitz (2014: 14), "the detachment from everyday social structures of interaction so characteristic of online dating does not simply affect each single interaction, but all subsequent interactions as well." The likelihood of being forced to interact with an individual in the future is quite low on virtual venues such as dating apps as opposed to public social settings. As such, it is of little

consequence to ignore or outright reject the advances of another user. From this perspective, it is easy to see how profiles can be evaluated as competing products that consumers casually pass over if they do not fit their interests. Some participants described a cold and transactional process that seems ill suited for relationship formation. Jeremy went so far as to call dating apps “one of the worst things ever invented.” Furthermore, even though Alex found turning away unwanted advances to be less anxiety-inducing on dating apps, he too lamented the impersonal nature of the overall process: “It’s too manufactured to me.” He prefers meeting individuals face-to-face because he finds that online interactions “take away a lot of the value you get from actually meeting someone first hand and them getting a raw version of you from the get-go.” Even still, some have found success. Brice met his current boyfriend of one year, Shane, 27, through Grindr—an occurrence that he sees as an anomaly. Shane is “a lot different than most guys,” he says.

Even though the impersonal nature of dating apps can invite individuals to dole out rejection with impunity, the flip side seems to be that it can also make receiving rejection less painful. According to James, a 24-year-old gay man:

On an app if they don’t like you then they can block you or just not respond and it doesn’t matter. Where in-person, in-person rejection’s a little more difficult to deal with I guess than online. Because if they don’t like you, then you can just swipe to the next one.<sup>1</sup>

Similarly, Jason noted that, “It’s easier to get rejected online, if that makes sense.” As users internalize the commodification of themselves and fellow daters, rejection becomes an impersonal experience that is easier to endure. Users learn to employ a rationalistic

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<sup>1</sup> “Swiping” is a feature of some apps in which users swipe their finger across the screen to move from one profile to another.

thought process when interpreting interactions with one another, blunting the emotional impact of rejection. The sheer volume of choices can make the giving or receiving of rejection a relatively inconsequential event.

In summary, most—but not all—participants expressed a preference for public venues where they can meet individuals and have face-to-face interaction. Recognizing that this is not always a possibility, dating apps were seen as a viable, if flawed, alternative. A few, however, did prefer dating apps and even found them to be helpful in building skills for future in-person interactions.

#### HOW DOES STIGMA IMPACT THE INTERACTIONS OF YOUNG GAY AND BISEXUAL MEN ON GEOSOCIAL DATING APPS?

Through the years, gay and bisexual men have found respite from social stigma in back spaces (Goffman 1963) such as bars, clubs, dating sites, and dating apps (Grove et al. 2014; Lever et al. 2008; Rosenfeld and Thomas 2012). Goffman (1963:81) describes the back places as ones where stigmatized individuals “need not try to conceal their stigma,” because they are in “the company of those with the same or a similar stigma.” Those bearing stigma can “be at ease” in these spaces and will often “discover that acquaintances he thought were not of his own kind really are.” Participants often recounted stories of how online dating venues, including those created by dating apps, offered them a space where they felt safe to explore issues related to their sexuality, and to make connections with similar others. When asked about his initial impression of dating apps, Jason described having apprehensions due to his upbringing in a conservative Christian environment:

I was raised in a very conservative Christian home. Everything was so new I thought I'd never step out of my comfort zone—but, eventually, I did. I wanted to meet people. I didn't really know that many gay people, and I was too young to go out to the bars. So, I didn't really have a good way to network in any way shape or form.

Dating apps provided Jason with a safe space to meet others like himself. It was an appealing alternative since bars were off-limits to him at the time. Trey, 27 and gay, similarly valued the opportunity created by dating apps for less stigmatizing interactions. As he explained, the apps functioned as a kind of “outlet where people could explore, be themselves, not be judged. It's a bit easier for people to come out because there's other people they can talk to, relate to, converse with.” In similar fashion, Goffman (1959: 112) states of the backstage, “the performer can relax... drop his front, forgo speaking his lines, and step out of character.” For some men, dating apps may be the only venue in which they are not required to feign heterosexuality. In essence, spaces such as dating apps that are specifically marketed to gay and bisexual men function as the backstage from their daily performance of heterosexuality.

The ability to openly communicate on dating apps without fear can have a therapeutic effect for young gay and bisexual men. Alex has personally taken the opportunity to mentor individuals he met through dating apps that “were younger and just needed a person to talk to.” For Kevin, who is publicly out as gay, dating apps have allowed him to expand his prospects by connecting him with local guys that are not public with their sexuality:

Some of them are in the closet and don't get to put their face on there. So, a lot of guys overlook them. I don't because they could be some really hot guys. Just because of work they can't put their face on there. I have friends who work for Christian colleges and stuff; they're on Grindr, have faceless profiles. If the college finds out, they'll fire them.

Dating apps help to connect men in an array of life circumstances with one another looking to find moral support as well as romantic and sexual partners.

Back places, as Goffman (1963) conceived of them, have traditionally been thought of as physical spaces where stigmatized individuals would be corporally present. Dating apps, however, operate as portable virtual back places that individuals can discreetly enter and exit at any time and avoid unwanted detection with minimal effort. This allows men that are in the closet to interact with other gay and bisexual men. Because the platform design of most dating apps allows users to control the flow of identifying information, they can reveal only what they feel comfortable revealing. For the men in Kevin's story, not displaying a picture of their face is necessary for maintaining their jobs lest they be discovered and outed.

While Kevin enjoys the fact that he can interact with men that would otherwise be invisible to him, not everyone felt the same way. Jeremy found the lack of identifying profile pictures on dating apps to be off-putting: "If there were any pictures, it was just torso pictures, nothing identifying." To him, this was one of the frustrations of the market-driven nature of dating app culture. As he put it, "Everyone's selfish on the dating apps. Like I said earlier, you've got to show me what you look like before I'll show you what I look like. That's just not something I'm interested in."

Even though social stigma around homosexuality may drive individuals to seek out virtual mediums, the effects of stigma are not left behind once one enters the backstage place of dating apps. Gay and bisexual men have long been stigmatized as being effeminate and not adequately masculine (Connell 1992; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Coston and Kimmel 2012; Schilt and Westbrook 2009; Schrock

and Shwalbe 2009; Zimmerman 1987). The stigma of effeminacy and the expectations of masculinity are still very much so present in gay enclaves. Here, even amongst other gay and bisexual men, individuals find that they still must work to craft a sufficiently masculine self-presentation (Connell 1992; Payne 2007). After all, their performances are being judged by other men. Dakota appreciated the fact that using dating apps have allowed him to practice flirting and experiment with his (masculine) presentation of self:

It was an educating and enlightening experience as someone who didn't know themselves very well. I was like "Hey here's a cute picture of me where I look as masculine as I possibly can. What do you guys think?"

He noted in his introductory remarks that he has "become very hetero-presenting over the past few years." Not only does he make sure to project masculinity; he seeks individuals that present masculine selves as well. He made his preference for masculinity and his distaste for effeminacy clear while recounting the story of an individual he had seen on a dating app that he found attractive:

There was an older guy, had long gorgeous hair, neck muscles that made him look like a jar but at the same time was all arms and I was just like "Mmmm." Then I met him for the first time at a gay bar and he's says "Hiiii" (uses high pitch voice) and I was like "Oh! Oh no! You're like REAL gay. Like real effeminate."

Within gay culture, men have longed embraced hegemonic masculinity norms as a means of normification (Goffman 1963). Coston and Kimmel (2012: 106) note that, "Gay men who conform to hegemonic masculine norms secure their position in the power hierarchy by adopting the heterosexual masculine role and subordinating both women and effeminate gay men." To be clear, Dakota gave no indication that his goal is to oppress women or effeminate men. His statements, however, are a vivid reminder of how hegemonic masculine norms have been internalized by many in the gay community.

Dating apps can be an important tool of stigma management for gay and bisexual men who, for whatever reason, are unable to be public about their sexuality. While in these spaces, they are free from societal expectations to give a convincing heterosexual performance. They may even discover that there are more individuals like them than first thought. Protection from social stigma only goes so far, however. They soon discover that the norms of hegemonic masculinity are still in full force and must be adhered to if they hope to have much success attracting others.

#### WHAT INTERACTIONAL CHALLENGES DO GEOSOCIAL DATING APPS POSE TO YOUNG GAY AND BISEXUAL MEN?

As described by participants, interactions on dating apps are shaped by an amalgamation of intents, attractions, and desires. Participants discussed using dating apps for various reasons from finding dates to seeking long-term relationships, treating loneliness, networking, as well as finding sex partners. According to Alex, it is not uncommon to even see profiles shared by couples who are looking to connect with others, “I have seen some couples have their own profile together with things like ‘looking for friends, new in town.’” The nonrestrictive nature of most dating apps allows for these intents, attractions, and desires to move fluidly in and out of exchanges with one another. Users are left to interpret one another’s intentions in order to find an appropriate match.

Determining someone’s true motives on dating apps is not always easy as there is plenty of room for dishonesty. Participants, such as Brice, sometimes found this to be a major point of frustration. He felt as if individuals were deceitful at times when expressing their intents:

Brice: Some will say, “Oh, I’m just looking for friends.” I’ve had people say they were looking for friends and I was just looking for a quickie at the time. And if you say the right thing, I promise anything is possible.

Interviewer: So, do you think “looking for friends” is code for looking for a hookup?

Brice: It’s code for come over and hang out. Let’s see if I like you or not. If I like you, then we’re going to fool around. If I don’t, then you knew what it was from the beginning. It’s code for “hey come over and let’s hang out for at least one time.” And, yeah, if there’s anything at all there it normally happens the first time. And, from Grindr? Yeah, you’re definitely going to be fooling around the first time on Grindr.

To ease this tension, individuals sometimes use certain apps for different purposes. James describes his use of various dating apps in this way:

If I just want to talk to someone on a more serious note and want to get to know someone a little better, Tinder is my go-to. If I want an immediate gratification, I use Grindr. Grindr’s my favorite because it’s ever changing, there’s always new people.

Dakota breaks down the demographics of different dating apps and his preferences like this:

I did Tinder which is more hetero. I did Plenty-O-Fish which is super lesbian. I did OK Cupid and then I was on Scruff and I was on Growler. Growler was really cool because it’s an older generation of gay men. It’s mostly the bear community<sup>2</sup>. Scruff was probably my favorite and OK Cupid—I like OK Cupid because it’s so queer. I liked Scruff because I could generally find a good amount of very pretty men on there.

Given the difficulty identifying the intentions of other users, participants sometimes moved between different apps that had varying foci to meet their goals and desires.

One of the greatest challenges to communication identified by participants is the unfettered ability to manipulate the presentation of one’s self. According to Goffman

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<sup>2</sup> Self-identified “bears” in the gay community typically embrace a broader range of body types, valuing a natural body form over the predominant ideal of smooth and skinny. They often hold a definition of masculinity that combines traditional indicators of hegemonic masculinity with less traditional aspects such as nurturing (Manley, Levitt and Mosher 2007).

(1983: 4), the ability to identify a fellow conversant categorically (e.g. social status) and individually (e.g. gender) is “critical for [the] interaction life” of a community. These identifiers are given off by an individual’s physical attributes as well as their presentation of self. Of course, Goffman had in mind physical, face-to-face interactions since the internet had not yet come about. Geosocial dating apps “co-situate” virtual and physical spaces, complicating interactional norms (Blackwell and Birnholtz 2015). The inability to be certain of an individual’s identity and gauge with some sort of accuracy what their intentions might be based upon the interactional necessities identified by Goffman (1983) has created a deficit of trust in the dating world of the participants. d Kevin recounted an incident where he was misled by an individual using an old picture, “I drove about 30 minutes for a guy who used a picture from twenty-five years and several pounds ago, when he had six pack abs.”

Using fake or misleading pictures was not the only, or even most prominent, form of deception according to Kevin. For the most part, Kevin felt like fake or misleading pictures were not as bothersome as individuals simply misrepresenting their personality and/or intentions. He says deception occurs a lot: “Like, not picture-wise, but personality-wise and stuff. I’ve met some people that I’m just like, ‘You are nothing like you described yourself.’” Alex expressed similar concerns: “Nobody’s really who they say they are. They’re inserting that cushion to kind of appeal to a broader audience. And, that just kind of ruined it for me.” However, instead of blaming the individuals that misrepresent themselves, Alex seemed to place the blame, at least partly, on the dating app interface, stating that, “It allows for you to be dishonest. It allows you to push what you want to push forward.”

It is a common tendency, indeed even a necessary one, to conceal and alter facts about one's self during face-to-face interactions to ensure the facilitation of smooth exchanges and to minimize awkwardness and offense (Goffman 1983). The design of many dating apps such as Grindr offers users a tempting opportunity to conceal and alter any fact about themselves. In traditional settings, the tendency to disguise undesirable traits and exaggerate favorable ones is limited by natural constraints. It would be impossible to convince an individual that one is six feet tall when they can physically see that they are much shorter. Virtual environments, however, are free of these limitations, making lying and concealing more tempting and less risky in the short run, but creating a dilemma in the long-term should one desire to eventually meet in person. The greater degree to which one has embellished or concealed relevant information about themselves, the greater the risk there is in meeting face-to-face. Shane, a 27-year-old gay man, recounted an online and telephone relationship he had been involved in for some time with an individual that had created a fake online identity:

Every time it was time to meet up, he would create some excuse like, "It's my birthday, I'm going to Disney World, my family surprised me"—something like that—"My brother came in from out of the country, from fighting over seas." Once you start talking to somebody, you develop a connection even if you haven't met them. You do develop feelings for them, and it hurts when it comes down to finding out that they're not who they really said they were.

When asked if he would have pursued a relationship with this individual had he known his real identity, Shane replied that, "He wasn't my type, to be honest. He's not somebody I would've went for just based on looks. But personality-wise? Yeah." The ability to operate in anonymity and explore romantic relationships without risking social stigmatization is one of the primary benefits of dating apps—but it can also be a key limitation to relationship development.

Complete identity deception is, of course, the greatest possible consequence of a lack of verifiable identifiers. However, it is symptomatic of a broader and more common challenge for users of geosocial dating apps— establishing trust between interactants. Even though Jeremy did not find outright deception to be a major problem in his experience, he did describe having to apply an extra layer of skepticism and caution when interacting with other men on geosocial dating apps: “I was always very skeptical when I was on there. I was always super cautious.”

Absent the traditional indicators of identity and trust-worthiness found in face-to-face interactions, users rely on other means, such as intuition, to gauge one another’s authenticity and avoid risky situations. When communicating online, Kevin relied on gut instinct for warning signs that an individual might have nefarious intentions:

If something in your gut tells you they’ve said something alarming on Grindr, and something in their profile says red alert, don’t go to their house. You don’t know these people. So, if something says red flag, let it be a red flag. Don’t say, “Well, I’ll just go anyway.” My gut has always worked for me.

Dakota’s practice was to invite individuals that he was interested in getting to know further to video chat with him:

I would build up to like, “Oh, it’s easier for me to talk on Skype. You should download it on your phone.” And then I would just video chat with them and say, “Oh, my hands are busy,” or something like that.

Trey’s protocol was to always meet dates in a public place after getting to know them extensively through text and phone calls:

I would always start out texting someone or messaging them and then if it goes further sending them my number, texting—and then maybe several, several phone calls after that we could meet. I have met with a couple of people, but in a public place. And it’s usually within two to three months after I’ve gotten to know them. I don’t just run out and meet somebody.

For these men, dating apps gave them a sense of added safety because they let them screen out and avoid in-person contact with men who gave off threatening vibes.

Clearly, Goffman's (1959; 1983) conceptualization of the presentation of self and the interaction order is still relevant for interactions on geosocial dating apps (Hardey 2008). The absence of the identifiers Goffman labeled as necessary for smooth interaction causes app users to employ other means of verification and trust building until or unless they might meet in person. Overall, participants expressed varying amounts of concern. They would not meet someone until they had communicated for an extended period of time. Jeremy, on the other hand, didn't describe any steps taken in advance. His only safety measure was to make sure to inform his best friend of his plans. The most effective means of verification mentioned by participants was video chat. Either way, until individuals are able to identify one another categorically and individually, a heavy dose of skepticism dominates communication between users.

#### DO YOUNG GAY AND BISEXUAL MEN FIND GEOSOCIAL DATING APPS TO BE USEFUL TOOLS FOR BUILDING SATISFYING RELATIONSHIPS?

Participants were not at a loss for words when addressing the suitability of dating apps for relationship formation. Overall, there was a notable consensus on the matter. Assessments were generally negative but were often couched in qualifiers noting the possibility of exceptions. Most were still willing to use dating apps to seek out relationship partners. Indeed, some of them had formed past or present relationships with individuals they had met through dating apps. The two participants currently in a relationship with one another, Brice and Shane, met through Grindr. The primary obstacle to relationship formation on geosocial dating apps identified by participants is

the easy access to casual sexual encounters that is provided through the layering of geographical and virtual space (Blackwell and Birnholtz 2015). The intersection of “time, ease, and proximity” (Quiroz 2013: 184) seems to have a sexualizing effect on the culture of most dating apps. When asked if dating apps were helpful for relationship formation James replied,

So, I would say no because people that are on a dating app are a lot of times people that are not from here. If they are from here you know they are in a relationship already. If they are single—I mean I don’t want to give everyone that uses them a bad rap because I’m not a bad person—but a lot of the dating apps are more for immediate gratification. Yes, you can meet someone on there that wants something more but most often that’s not the case. You get the half-naked torso. Somebody that just wants to have no-strings-attached, relations and doesn’t really want anything else. But, I can’t say that for everyone. I’ve met some very nice quality people on Grindr. I dated someone from Grindr for a long time.

James feels like the emphasis on sex is a generational phenomenon:

My age group is not necessarily the type of people that want to be in a relationship. They’re more so a hookup generation. Not a lot of people really want to meet someone that’s quality for more than just a hookup. I mean I want to say that probably 8 out of 10 people that I’ve met are—don’t want to say shady—but the majority of people that you meet on there aren’t giving you everything about themselves.

Interestingly, however, when I asked James if he would consider using dating apps to find a relationship he replied, “Absolutely.” This seemingly contradictory response was common among respondents.

Hunter, a 27-year-old partnered gay man, says that he avoids using dating apps when he’s single due to the sexualization of most dating apps. He also didn’t think highly of the quality of people on most dating apps, colorfully referring to them as “sluts and whores that want to just be ruined.” He concluded that:

Me personally, I don’t see a long-term relationship coming out of dating apps. I mean most people just like to go on there and hook-up and meet and things like that. I just don’t prefer to even use them.

While Hunter's language may seem hyperbolic, Alex and Kevin's descriptions of interactions with individuals who were unusually blunt about their sexual desires illustrate his point:

I mean they pretty much would message you out of the blue and say "Hey, you wanna fuck?" And you're just kind of taken aback by it and just like "Well hi. How are you? Nice to meet you too." And then in other cases they just send you pics of their private areas. (Alex)

If someone messages me on Grindr and I say "hey" back, that automatically tells them I wants to fuck. I'm like "that's not how this works. Don't start sending me dick pics right after I say hey back." I don't want to see that. I didn't ask for it. (Kevin)

The ability to remain anonymous on most dating apps provides individuals the opportunity to behave in ways that they would likely never imagine in a public setting. Schmitz (2014: 14) notes that "the detachment from everyday social structures of interaction does not simply affect each single interaction, but all subsequent interactions as well" since these individuals are unlikely to come in contact again in the future, relieving "online dating users of the necessity of considering the long-term" social consequences. For some of my study participants, this dynamic manifests in sometimes crude, hypersexualized interactions between users.

Additionally, even though several participants had met long-term relationship partners from dating apps, most remained skeptical of the intentions of a majority of other people on the apps. Brice, for example, met his current boyfriend through Grindr but, like James, feels that most people use dating apps for casual sex. He also feels as if people are often deceitful in this matter, masking their true intentions of finding a one-night stand with talk of looking for a relationship:

I mean they get on there to basically just hookup, not to actually date somebody. It doesn't seem like it's a dating site. It's just a screw and go kind of thing. There's a lot of people on Grindr that said they were interested in a

relationship but that is not the truth at all. At all. Like if you were into somebody and they say they want a relationship. You guys could be friends. You could text back and forth, but it'll never move past that. Most people, I would say, on Grindr, are deceitful because they know what they want. They obviously know what they want, because if you send them so many pictures and they like the pictures, and then you send them one bad picture, they will stop talking. Period.

Brice's boyfriend, Shane, similarly described dating apps several times as really being "hookup apps":

You always hear about Grindr as not being a dating app as much of a hookup app. Some people say guys just use it for sex instead of actually dating. People are pretty much right on what it is. It's not really something you want to use for relationships. I would describe it as more of a hookup app. But I would say it's not impossible to meet somebody through that app (Grindr).

Dakota's assessment was a bit more nuanced. When asked what he thought most people on dating apps are looking for, he responded,

I would say sixty/forty: 40% hookups, 60% looking for a relationship. The general ones that are hookup sites are like Grindr, Scruff, Growler and Tinder and stuff like that. But the percentage of people on those sites looking for a relationship don't talk. The people that do talk are looking for a hookup and I know cuz I was one of them. I was looking for a hookup. Never was I actively searching for a relationship. It was kind of an "If I find it, it happens" thing. Now, Ok Cupid for the heterosexual community was a hookup site; but for the queer community, it was a very honest dating site.

While participants related different experiences in regard to relationship formation from dating apps, there was a general agreement that dating apps often function as facilitators of casual sex.

Some described dating apps as being essentially hookup devices that are ill-suited for relationship formation and unnecessary in more populous settings. Asked about how dating apps have impacted his dating life, Kevin bluntly responded that:

I can have sex whenever I want. That's about it. Nobody's serious in finding a relationship. No matter how long they tell you on these apps or how long their "about me" section is about looking for love, they're not. They're looking to get off and they're looking to get out of there.

When asked how often he went on dates with individuals he met through his dating app of choice, Grindr, Kevin deadpanned:

Dating and hooking up are two totally different things. I date maybe once every ten years. I fuck a lot. We call it “fresh meat” where I live. It’s usually the guys that come from out of town to visit; they’re the ones I usually go for. Because I’ve seen the same five people over and over. They’ve all either fucked each other or they’re dating each other.

He went on to explain that he really wouldn’t find dating apps necessary if he lived in a more populated area where he could socialize with other gay men—as he once did.

“When I was there, I met people just going out to the bars, volunteering, that kind of stuff.” He recommended that his younger counterparts do the same as an alternative to bars and dating apps: “Volunteer. Do something that involves people that don’t have alcohol in their system. Do whatever you can. Gay nursing homes. Whatever.”

Some men feel as if dating apps are somewhat of a double-edged sword. Jason, for instance, thinks they are beneficial for finding relationship partners; but he doesn’t think they are helpful for keeping them together:

I would say they are another tool in facilitating relationships. With that being said, they can also be the downfall of said relationships as well. Because it’s just that much easier to get right back on when things start getting rough or whatever or if you want to start cheating. It’s just that you already had that tendency to want to get on there and you get in that habit. So that can be hard to break sometimes.

Alex expressed similar concerns about the danger that dating apps may pose to existing relationships due to being so easily accessible. As he put it, “I’ve seen a lot of relationships go awry from Grindr. I’ve seen relationships be ruined because one boyfriend didn’t know the other boyfriend was still on it or something like that.” It appears that the benefits of using dating apps to search for relationship partners are often offset by the challenges they pose to the continuation of existing relationships.

In summary, participants were, in general, not enthusiastic about the potential for relationship formation on dating apps—often referring to them as hookup apps instead. The sexualized culture of dating apps was described as the most significant obstacle to finding long-term romantic partners. Even still, most did not outright reject dating apps as a tool for seeking romantic partners. Notably, two participants that are currently in a relationship had met through Grindr, providing evidence that dating apps can facilitate the formation of satisfying relationships despite the hyper-sexualized culture. My study, suggests, however, that their experiences may be the exception to the rule.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

It is clear that geosocial dating apps have—for good or ill—revolutionized the dating lives of the participants. All participants reported using dating apps either currently or previously when single; a few were partnered and had met their partner through a dating app; and only two stated that they do not use dating apps anymore at all. Prior research on geosocial dating apps such as Grindr has suggested that because of these apps, there may no longer be “a continued need for gay bars and other spaces” (Blackwell et al. 2014: 1132). Findings here suggest that this is not the case. While geosocial dating apps are incredibly popular among young gay and bisexual men (Goedel and Duncan 2015; McKie et al. 2017), most participants still expressed a preference for meeting potential romantic partners in-person rather than through a virtual medium.

The most common, and near universal, complaint leveled by participants against dating apps was that the culture of most apps has become so sexualized that they operate as an impediment to long-term relationship formation. Every participant that expressed overall negative views of dating apps lamented a hypersexualized culture and the

resulting difficulties of finding long-term relationship partners. Participants that expressed overall positive feelings towards dating apps described using them primarily for casual sex. It appears that dating apps, at least the most popular ones, do function largely as hookup apps and that individuals not there for that purpose might not have an enjoyable experience. This is consistent with the findings of other research on dating apps for gay and bisexual men (Blackwell and Birnholtz 2015; Brubaker et al. 2016; Jaspal 2017; Licoppe et al. 2016; McKie et al. 2017). The most often cited cause for the heavy emphasis on sex was increased ease of access provided by geolocation services. As one study observed of Grindr, “It weaves together physical appearance and proximity into availability” (Licoppe et al. 2016: 2549). Proximity thus becomes eroticized. Even when other users expressed a desire for a relationship and not just sex, participants that were actively seeking a long-term relationship remained skeptical of their true intentions. Some, such as Brice and Dakota, were aware of the potential for this type of deception because of their own personal experiences looking for one-night stands. It was often assumed that no matter what an individual said, they were truly only interested in a hookup. Although most participants had a negative assessment of the ability of dating apps to facilitate the development of satisfying relationships, many still reported having met past or current partners through a dating app.

It seems as if dating apps offer an improved—albeit imperfect—backstage place (Goffman 1963) for young gay and bisexual men to meet and interact. They are improved in the sense that men in all stages of the coming out process can access this space without the fear of being spotted by outsiders. They are somewhat flawed, however, in that gay and bisexual men are not fully able to “be at ease among [their] fellows” (Goffman

1963:81). This is because dating apps are structured as partner markets (Schmitz 2014) that require users to put on competitive front stage performances for one another (Goffman 1959). The majority of participants described a heavy emphasis on physical appearance that creates immense pressure to present oneself as photogenically as possible. It is unlikely, however, that any venue that has as its purpose the creation of a partner *market* for gay and bisexual men would be able to improve much on this matter. The inherent competition found in a market removes the expectation of privacy described by Goffman (1963) that is to be found in back places. In such a competitive setting, gay and bisexual men are not completely able to let down their guard, and interact, free from the oppressive expectations of others.

Another challenge presented by virtual mediums such as dating apps concerns interactional norms and the establishment of trust. Participants described varying degrees of skepticism regarding the authenticity and accuracy of other users' self-presentations. Several participants recounted instances in which the individual they met in person did not match, physically or otherwise, the person that was presented to them online. A deficit of trust thus permeates the interactions between individual users. Goffman (1959: 17) observed that

When an individual plays a part he implicitly requests his observers to take seriously the impression that is fostered before them. They are asked to believe that the character they see actually possesses the attributes he appears to possess, that the task he performs will have the consequences that are implicitly claimed for it, and that, in general, matters are what they appear to be.

Lacking the essential identifiers delineated by Goffman in his later work (1983), participants reported rarely being able to place such certainty in the self-presentation of others. Of note, however, is the fact that this was not, in of itself, a deal-breaker for any

of the participants. For most, it was just a problem that had to be worked around. Virtual technology has always been a popular dating resource in the LGBT community, especially among young gay and bisexual men, and is likely to continue to be so in spite of the interactional challenges (Grove et al. 2014; McKie et al. 2017). This is particularly true considering that much greater challenges (e.g. violence) might exist for gay and bisexual men in some public spaces (Lever et al. 2008).

While dating apps have created some challenges to the traditional norms of interaction and trust building, they also provide opportunities for individuals to build up courage, practice flirting, and work on their presentation of self. Indeed, my study suggests that although geosocial dating apps make deception easy, they also give a marginalized minority a means of managing stigma. Individuals that are not public with their sexuality are able to interact with other gay men without having to display an identifying picture or name. Young men that are new to the dating scene and possibly even in need of help coming to terms with their sexuality are able to find support using these apps. In fact, Alex and Trey reported mentoring younger individuals needing such guidance that they met through dating apps. The same functions that help individuals manage stigma through information control (Goffman 1963) also allow for users to be creative with their presentation of self. This could be an important tool for self-discovery and growth as sexual minority young adults. In this context, dating apps serve as the ultimate back place for young gay and bisexual men. Here they are able to let down their guard, be themselves, and even find others to interact with that might have wisdom to offer. These things are possible any time they have a private moment without having to walk into a public space or even leave the house.

It should be noted that these men would not be so reliant on discreet venues such as dating apps were it not for the societal stigmatization of homosexuality. It is difficult to understate the foundational role of stigma in the dating experiences of young gay and bisexual men. Without stigma, there would be no need for things like faceless or blank profiles that sometimes frustrate interactants. Indeed, absent stigma, it seems quite likely that several of the interviewees would not use dating apps at all. Obviously, virtual venues such as dating apps are not unique to gay and bisexual men. However, because of social stigma, these kinds of venues are and have always been more popular with this group (McKie et al. 2017; Rosenfeld and Thomas 2012).

The purpose of this paper was not to weigh the costs and benefits of geosocial dating apps, but, rather, to understand how participants perceive and use them. The picture they painted through their responses is quite nuanced—and sometimes even contradictory. Overall, however, the challenges posed by dating apps were often presented as simply the nature of things. Most participants expressed annoyance at the interactional challenges they experienced on dating apps, but not enough to cause them to quit using the apps altogether. It is possible that the conservative—and sometimes rural—nature of the region where the research was conducted may cause participants to feel somewhat consigned to finding partners through dating apps and other virtual mediums. The limited time-frame and geographical scope of this research did not allow for comparisons across different cultural and ideological settings. It is possible that experiences with dating apps may improve in regions where homosexuality is not as stigmatized. Less stigmatization could lead to fewer “faceless” profiles and, therefore, fewer interactional and trust-building challenges as well. It is also possible that

individuals who live in regions where stigma around homosexuality is diminished may feel less inclined to use dating apps if in-person interactions are frequent enough. In future research, a comparative analysis of differing regions could shed further light on how stigma impacts the quality of the dating lives of young gay and bisexual men.

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## APPENDIX A. INTERVIEW GUIDE

### *Introduction and Background Information*

I'd like to begin by asking you to tell me a little bit about your personal journey regarding dating as a gay man; Feel free to provide as much background information as you would like.

Are you currently dating or are you in a relationship?

If not in a relationship: how do you meet possible dates?

If in a relationship: how did you meet your partner?

If online apps are not mentioned: are you familiar with any online dating apps?

How did you first come to learn about these apps?

### *General Usage*

Have dating apps played a role in your romantic life?

Which one (or ones) do you prefer? What is different about it as opposed to other available apps? Are there any apps that you won't use or have stopped using?

How often do you use one of the dating apps?

In your experience, what are the pros and cons of using dating apps?

How often do you meet someone in person that you've met on one of the apps?

In what other ways have you met someone you have had a relationship with?

### *Dating Priorities*

What are your priorities when meeting partners from dating apps?

How do you let other men know about your priorities? How have they responded?

What sort of priorities do the men you've met on these dating apps seem to have?

### *Relationship Quality*

In your opinion are the quality of people you meet through the dating apps the same, better or worse than the ones you meet in more traditional ways?

How would you describe the relationships with individuals you've met on dating apps? Have these been long-term relationships? Or more short-term ones? Please elaborate.

Do you think dating apps are conducive to promoting long-term relationship?

Why or why not?

Is there anything that you feel has not been covered sufficiently that you would like to comment on or give additional information about?

## APPENDIX B. CERTIFICATE OF CONFIDENTIALITY



DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH &  
HUMAN SERVICES

Public Health Service

---

National Institute of Allergy and

Infectious Diseases

Office of Research Training and Special  
Programs

Division of Extramural Activities (DEA)

5601 Fishers Lane

Room 4F37 MSC 9824

Rockville, MD 20852

### CONFIDENTIALITY CERTIFICATE

*CC-AI-16-038*

issued to

*Sam Houston State University*

conducting research known as

*“Perspectives of Young Gay and Bisexual Male Users of Geosocial Dating Applications”*

In accordance with the provisions of section 301(d) of the Public Health Service Act 42 U.S.C. 241(d), this Certificate is issued in response to the request of the Principal Investigator, Dr. Karen Douglas, to protect the privacy of research subjects by withholding their identities from all persons not connected with this research. Dr. Karen Douglas is primarily responsible for the conduct of this research, which is funded by:

Under the authority vested in the Secretary of Health and Human Services by section 301(d), all persons who:

1. are enrolled in, employed by, or associated with Sam Houston State University and its contractors or cooperating agencies, and
2. have in the course of their employment or association access to information that would identify individuals, who are the subjects of the research, pertaining to the project known as “Perspectives of Young Gay and Bisexual Male Users of Geosocial Dating Applications”.
3. are hereby authorized to protect the privacy of the individuals, who are the subjects of that research, by withholding their names and other identifying characteristics from all persons not connected with the conduct of that research.

This study proposes to examine the use of geosocial dating applications by young gay and bisexual men. Data will be collected through one-on-one interviews with ten to fifteen participants between the ages of 18 to 29. Geosocial dating applications are defined as smartphone dating applications that use GPS location services to connect individual members to other members according to proximity. Interviews will last approximately 45 minutes to an hour and will consist of open-ended questions concerning the role of geosocial dating applications in the lives of young gay and bisexual men.

A Certificate of Confidentiality is needed because sensitive information will be collected during the course of the study. The certificate will help researchers avoid involuntary disclosure that could expose subjects or their families to adverse economic, legal, psychological and social consequences.

Due to social stigma and the lack of legal protections, gay and bisexual men face the unfortunate risks of employment, housing, and social discrimination. To ensure that confidentiality is maintained, pseudonyms will be used at all times. No identifying information will be recorded on paper or in audio at any time. Additionally, the PI will apply for a Certificate of Confidentiality. All data files will be stored in a private computer database accessible only to the PI and will be encrypted and password protected by a code that will be changed every four weeks for security purposes. Verbal consent will be obtained in lieu of written consent in order to prevent subjects’ real names from being attached to the data in any way. At the completion of the thesis defense all recordings will be destroyed.

This research begins on 06/01/2016 , and is expected to end on 05/01/2017.

As provided in section 301 (d) of the Public Health Service Act 42 U.S.C. 241(d):

“Persons so authorized to protect the privacy of such individuals may not be compelled in any Federal, State, or local civil, criminal, administrative, legislative, or other proceedings to identify such individuals.”

This Certificate does not protect you from being compelled to make disclosures that: (1) have been consented to in writing by the research subject or the subject's legally authorized representative; (2) are required by the Federal Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act (21 U.S.C. 301 et seq.) or regulations issued under that Act; or (3) have been requested from a research project funded by NIH or DHHS by authorized representatives of those agencies for the purpose of audit or program review.

This Certificate does not represent an endorsement of the research project by the Department of Health and Human Services. This Certificate is now in effect and will expire on 05/01/2017. The protection afforded by this Confidentiality Certificate is permanent with respect to any individual who participates as a research subject (i.e., about whom the investigator maintains identifying information) during the time the Certificate is in effect.

Sincerely,

Signed Date:

---

*John McGowan Ph.D.*  
*Deputy Director for Science Management and Operations*  
*National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases*

## APPENDIX C. INFORMED CONSENT



Sam Houston State University  
INFORMED VERBAL CONSENT STATEMENT

Title: Perspectives of Young Gay and Bisexual Male Users of Geosocial Dating Applications

Principal Investigator: Tim Arthur  
Faculty Sponsor: Karen Douglas, Ph.D. Email: [kmd007@shsu.edu](mailto:kmd007@shsu.edu), Phone: (936)294-1513

-----

You are invited to participate in a research study. The purpose of this study is to examine the use of geosocial dating applications among young gay and bisexual men.

### INFORMATION

Information for this study will be collected using in-depth interviews with young gay and bisexual men between the ages of 18 and 29 who use or have used geosocial dating applications. The interview time length will vary, but, in general, will last approximately one hour. The overall project will include interviews with 10 to 15 individuals.

### RISKS

Due to social stigma and the lack of legal protections, gay and bisexual men face the unfortunate risks of employment, housing, and social discrimination. To ensure that confidentiality is maintained, pseudonyms will be used at all times. I will not be keeping a record of your real name or contact information, which means that there is very little risk that anyone else will ever know you participated in this study unless you tell them. Additionally, the data from this research is protected by a Certificate of Confidentiality issued by the National Institute of Health. This means that any information you decide to give will never be subject to a court subpoena.

There are no known social or psychological risks to you for participating in this study; however, it is possible that you may feel sad or angry at times by sharing some of your experiences with me. If that happens, let me know, and we can stop and take a break. Or you can skip that question or we can even stop the interview if you prefer. We can continue it later if you want to or not at all. I can also give you some phone numbers to call if you would like to talk with a professional counselor about these feelings.

### BENEFITS

Through your participation, you are helping us understand the dating and sexual practices of young gay and bisexual men. This knowledge will be helpful for HIV and STD prevention specialists as well as for mental health counselors that work with the young gay and bisexual community.

### CONFIDENTIALITY

All information will be kept completely confidential, and code names will be used when describing the results from the study. Interview conversations will be recorded, with your



transcribed by Tim Arthur only. At the completion of this research project the recording of the interview will be destroyed and the transcriptions of them will be stored on Tim Arthur's personal computer labeled only with your code name, encrypted, and password protected. These transcriptions will only be used by him for research purposes.

#### Certificate of Confidentiality

We have obtained a Certificate of Confidentiality (CoC) for this research project from the National Institutes of Health to help protect your privacy. With this certificate, the researchers cannot be forced to disclose the information that may identify you, even by a court subpoena, in any federal, state, or local civil, criminal, administrative, legislative, or other proceedings. Sam Houston State University agrees to use the CoC to protect against the compelled disclosure of personally identifiable information and to support and defend the authority of the Certificate against legal challenges. The researchers will use the Certificate to resist any demands for information that would identify you.

You should understand that a CoC does not prevent you or a member of your family from voluntarily releasing information about yourself and your involvement in the research. If an insurer, employer or other person obtains your written consent to receive research information, then the researcher may not use the Certificate to withhold that information.

The CoC does not prevent the researchers from disclosing voluntarily to authorities in the State of Texas, without your consent, information that would identify you as a participant of the research project under the following circumstances: the present danger of child or elder abuse or abuse of an individual with a physical disability, suicide, and/or homicide.

You should also know that the Sam Houston State University Protection of Human Subjects Committee (the IRB) and the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs may inspect study records as part of its auditing program, but these reviews will only focus on the researchers and not on your responses or involvement. The IRB is a group of people who review research studies to protect the rights and welfare of research participants.

#### CONTACT

If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures, you may contact the researcher, Tim Arthur at 3919 Woodland Drive Ooltewah, TN 37363, 423.618.7571 or [twu006@shsu.edu](mailto:twu006@shsu.edu).

If you feel you have not been treated according to the descriptions in this form, or your rights as a participant in research have been violated during the course of this project, you may contact Sharla Miles, Coordinator, Protection of Human Subjects Committee E-mail: [irb@shsu.edu](mailto:irb@shsu.edu), Phone: 936.294.4875.

#### PARTICIPATION

Your participation in this study is voluntary; you may refuse to participate without penalty. If you decide to participate, you may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty and without loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you



withdraw from the study before data collection is completed your data will be returned to you or destroyed.

CONSENT

I have read this form and received a copy of it. I have had all my questions answered to my satisfaction. I give my verbal consent to take part in this study.

Yes, you may audio record my interview.

No, you may not audio record my interview.

Date \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX D. IRB FINAL DETERMINATION



**Institutional Review Board**  
Office of Research and Sponsored Programs  
903 Bowers Blvd, Huntsville, TX 77341-2448  
Phone: 936.294.4875  
Fax: 936.294.3622  
[irb@shsu.edu](mailto:irb@shsu.edu)  
[www.shsu.edu/~rgs\\_www/irb/](http://www.shsu.edu/~rgs_www/irb/)

DATE: May 23, 2016

TO: Tim Arthur [Faculty Sponsor: Dr. Karen Douglas]  
FROM: Sam Houston State University (SHSU) IRB

PROJECT TITLE: *The Use of Geosocial Dating Applications by Young Gay and Bisexual Men [T/D]*

PROTOCOL #: 2016-02-27864

SUBMISSION TYPE: INITIAL REVIEW—RESPONSE TO MODIFICATIONS

ACTION: APPROVED

APPROVAL DATE: May 23, 2016

EXPIRATION DATE: **May 23, 2017**

REVIEW TYPE: FULL BOARD

REVIEW CATEGORIES: N/A – Full-Board Review Procedures Used

Thank you for your submission of your **Response to Modifications** for this project. The Sam Houston State University (SHSU) IRB has APPROVED your submission. This approval is based on an appropriate risk/benefit ratio and a project design wherein the risks have been minimized. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

This submission has received **Full Board** Review based on the applicable federal regulation.

Please remember that informed consent is a process beginning with a description of the project and insurance of participant understanding followed by a signed consent form. Informed consent must continue throughout the project via a dialogue between the researcher and research participant. Federal regulations require each participant receive a copy of the signed consent document.

Please note that any revision to previously approved materials must be approved by this committee prior to initiation. Please use the appropriate revision forms for this procedure which are found on the Application Page to the SHSU IRB website.

All UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS involving risks to subjects or others and SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported promptly to this office. Please use the appropriate reporting forms for this procedure. All Department of Health and Human Services and sponsor reporting requirements should also be followed.

This letter has been electronically signed in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within Sam Houston State University IRB's records



Institutional Review Board  
Office of Research and Sponsored Programs  
903 Bowers Blvd, Huntsville, TX 77341-2448  
Phone: 936.294.4875  
Fax: 936.294.3622  
[irb@shsu.edu](mailto:irb@shsu.edu)  
[www.shsu.edu/~rgs\\_www/irb/](http://www.shsu.edu/~rgs_www/irb/)

All NON-COMPLIANCE issues or COMPLAINTS regarding this project must be reported promptly to this office.

This project has been determined to be a Minimal Risk project. Based on the risks, this project requires continuing review by this committee on an annual basis. Please use the appropriate forms for this procedure. **Your documentation for continuing review must be received with sufficient time for review and continued approval before the expiration date of May 23, 2017. When you have completed the project, a Final Report must be submitted to ORSP in order to close the project file.**

Please note that all research records must be retained for a minimum of three years after the completion of the project.

If you have any questions, please contact the IRB Office at 936-294-4875 or [irb@shsu.edu](mailto:irb@shsu.edu). Please include your project title and protocol number in all correspondence with this committee.

Sincerely,

Donna Desforges  
IRB Chair, PHSC  
PHSC-IRB

This letter has been electronically signed in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within Sam Houston State University IRB's records

## APPENDIX E. INTERVIEW SUMMARIES

### INTERVIEW 1: JAMES

Demographics: 24-year-old single white gay male.

Demographics: 18 minutes

Summary: James is an active and current user of geosocial dating apps. He uses four or five dating apps including Grindr, Scruff and Tinder. He describes checking his Grindr account almost every hour, checking Tinder rarely, and checking Scruff a couple of times a day. To him, the apps are addictive so that he will get on them even when he has no intentions on meeting someone. Each app serves a different purpose. For examples, he uses Grindr for sex and Tinder for getting to know individuals in depth. While he would “absolutely” use dating apps to find a long-term partner, his primary focus when using them is sex. He felt as if dating apps have had a positive impact on the dating world of young gay and bisexual men even if they aren’t conducive to producing long-term relationships. He described his generation as a hookup-generation that isn’t really interested in long-term relationships for the most part. His description of dating apps is positive and even enthusiastic. He especially values the ability to get to know someone before meeting in person. Another benefit identified is that the embarrassment from rejection is less intense online than it is in person.

### INTERVIEW 2: ALEX

Demographics: 26-year-old partnered black gay male.

Duration: 38 minutes

Summary: Alex is currently partnered and does not use dating apps when in a relationship. His overall view of them is somewhat negative. He likes the fact that he can

rebuff unwanted advances without fearing blowback from the other person. He also feels like it can be a good tool for self-discovery and networking with similar others. He has, at times, even mentored younger individuals looking for someone to talk to. However, he finds dating apps to be a detriment to relationship formation. He describes them as hypersexualized and full of individuals just looking for a quick rendezvous. Furthermore, they are a danger to existing relationships as they can make cheating easier. The individuals he has interacted with have primarily been below his standards for relationship potential—with some users even sending him unsolicited pornographic pictures of themselves. Interestingly, he still uses dating apps to interact with other gay men and find dates. He also hinted to the fact that he has used dating apps for one night stands as well.

His other qualm with dating apps—and virtual venues in general for that matter—is that they take away some of the benefits of meeting and interacting in person. To him, seeing and hearing the other person is important. He feels like he would have a better time going out on the weekend and meeting someone than he would simply using dating apps.

### INTERVIEW 3: KEVIN

Demographics: 28-year-old single white gay male.

Duration: 39 minutes

Summary: Kevin provided some of the most detailed and colorful commentary of any participant. He has only been in one relationship. He met this individual through an online dating site. Because he lives in a rural area with few gay men, Grindr is a necessity for maximizing the visibility of the gay population there. He feels that if he lived in a more populous region he could simply meet people through everyday interactions

instead. He thinks of dating apps as primarily hook-up apps and uses them accordingly. According to him, no one else is looking for anything serious—everyone is just looking for a one-night-stand. He is clear that he rarely goes on dates, but has sex frequently. Interestingly, he does use dating apps from time to time to find someone to cuddle with in an effort to cure depression and loneliness. One obstacle to making meaningful connections with others he identifies is the tendency among users to misrepresent themselves descriptively or through old or fake pictures. He also describes annoyance at the habit of some users to send unsolicited pornographic pictures of themselves. He does, however, hint to the fact that he will send explicit pictures of himself to others—just not unsolicited. He recommends the upcoming generation of gay and bisexual men get away from apps and bars and find other activities to involve themselves in to find someone. He makes a point at the end of his interview to warn of the dangers of unprotected sex and contracting HIV. He cautions to never take someone at their word concerning their HIV status and always use protection.

#### INTERVIEW 4: JEREMY

Demographics: 26-year-old partnered white gay male.

Duration: 11 minutes

Summary: Jeremy's outlook on geosocial dating apps is overwhelmingly negative. He explicitly calls them "one of the worst things ever invented." He has used them at times but finds them to be counterproductive when looking for a relationship. His primary complaint is that the culture of most dating apps has been hyper-sexualized. In his experience, individuals on dating apps are mostly looking for casual sexual encounters and not long-term relationships. He thinks that dating apps could contribute

positively to the dating experiences of gay men if they were used with more serious intentions. He has never had a relationship with anyone he met through a smartphone app. He did, however, met his current partner through a dating website, Adam4Adam.

#### INTERVIEW 5: HUNTER

Demographics: 27-year-old partnered gay white male.

Duration: 10 minutes

Summary: Hunter is currently partnered and does not use dating apps in general, but especially when he is in a relationship. When he did use dating apps he mainly used Grindr. He and his current partner met at a local gay bar. Once again, the reason given for eschewing dating apps is the hyper-sexual culture. While most participants disliked the hypersexual culture because of its effect on relationship formation, Hunter's main concern was STDs. His view of the population of men on geosocial dating apps is somewhat dystopian. In his experience, individuals are not honest about their HIV status and some even refuse to get tested, preferring not to know. Interestingly, when asked to describe the quality of people on dating apps versus other venues he might meet someone at, he describes them as being about the same. His preferred type of venue for meeting individuals is a coffee shop. He cautions others to always practice safe sex and to get tested.

#### INTERVIEW 6: DAKOTA

Demographics: 25-year-old engaged queer transgender male.

Duration: 35 minutes

Summary: Dakota is currently engaged and no longer uses dating apps, but has used them frequently in the past. Him and his fiancé met at one of the local gay bars.

Interestingly, he has used most dating apps other than Grindr. He felt like Grindr was overwhelming and gave him too many choices. He mentions having used Tinder, Plenty-O-Fish, OK Cupid, Scruff, and Growler. Out of these, Scruff was his favorite. He found Scruff to be more trans-friendly since it allowed him to identify as transgender and left room for individuals to describe themselves and their attractions without having to conform to pre-set categories. He has personally never had a long-term romance with someone he met through a dating app. However, he remains optimistic about the potential of dating apps to produce such relationships. For the most part, he used dating apps for dinner dates and casual sex. Overall, he thinks the intentions of people on dating apps consists of 40% hookups and 60% relationships.

In contrast to the assessment of other participants that dating apps are oversexualized and not conducive to relationship formation, Dakota thinks dating apps are a better venue than bars to meet others. Specifically, he thinks they are safer considering that his fiancé had once been drugged (roofied) at a bar. He also finds individuals he meets on dating apps to be more honest. On the other hand, he does acknowledge that it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between real and fake profiles. He often uses video chat to verify the identity of individuals he is interested in meeting in person. Overall, he feels like dating apps are a positive influence on the dating world of young gay and bisexual men.

#### INTERVIEW 7: JASON

Demographics: 23-year-old engaged gay white male

Duration: 10 minutes

Summary: Jason is currently engaged. He and his fiancé first met through mutual friends and then began to talk on Grindr. Due to growing up in a conservative Christian home, he found dating apps to be a useful tool for networking with other gay men. He also finds that dating apps make it easier to take the initiative and talk to someone. This is primarily because rejection is easier to receive online. Jason sees dating apps as somewhat of a double-edged sword. They can be great tools for facilitating relationship formation, but they can also be a detriment to the sustainability of existing relationships since they make it easier to cheat. For his part, he primarily used dating apps to find casual sexual encounters, but doesn't see them as just hookup apps. In fact, he has had several relationships with men he met through dating apps that lasted six months or longer. He has no preference for what kind of venue he might meet someone through, online or in person. He hasn't found deception to be a major problem in his experiences.

#### INTERVIEW 8: TREY

Demographics: 27-year-old single white gay male.

Duration: 11 minutes

Summary: Trey is currently single and no longer uses dating apps. They have never really played a major role in his dating life, although he has used them at times. He much prefers to meet other gay men in person rather than through an online venue. Anytime that he has met individuals from dating apps he has waited several weeks to months before meeting in person. This gave him time to get to know and trust them before committing to meet face-to-face. His preferred venue of meeting people is at everyday places such as the grocery store. Besides the safety concerns of meeting up with a stranger from the internet, he doesn't prefer dating apps because of what he describes as

a hypersexual culture. It doesn't seem to him that people on dating apps are serious about looking for a relationship. He does, however, identify the ability of people to explore and be themselves without judgment as a benefit of dating apps. He even thinks dating apps could be useful for helping gay and bisexual men find long-lasting relationships if they use them the "right" way, but that most people don't.

#### INTERVIEW 9: SHANE

Demographics: 27-year-old partnered gay white male.

Duration: 22 minutes

Summary: Shane is currently in a relationship and met his partner of one year, Brice, through Grindr. Since getting a smartphone a couple of years ago, Shane has used dating apps to find and meet other gay men. He describes going on dates as well as having casual sexual encounters with individuals he met through geosocial dating apps. He thinks most dating apps are really hookup apps—or that's at least how people use them. He does, however, think dating apps can be helpful for forming long-term relationships. If he were single, he would use dating apps among other venues to look for a relationship partner. Before meeting Brice, he would check his Grindr account frequently throughout the day. It was rare, however, that he would meet up with somebody. He thinks that he probably met up with people less frequently than most others. He seems to associate the gay community with high levels of promiscuity. He notes that this stereotype of gay men exists but backs away when asked if he agrees; saying that it isn't entirely true but that it seems like that sometimes.

Shane has personally been the victim of "catfishing"—a scam in which an individual will use a fake online identity to lure a target into a relationship for emotional,

and sometimes, monetary purposes. He met this individual through an online dating site and eventually found himself talking on the phone every day with him. They had planned several times to meet in person, but each time the other guy came up with an excuse as to why he couldn't come. Shane finally decided to confront him and demand to know his true identity. He was heartbroken to find out that he had been talking to a completely different person all that time. While the person might have been a fake, his feelings for that person were real.

Finally, Shane cautions against the dangers of unprotected sex. He is HIV positive and says that he did not take the threat as seriously as he should've. While he was sure to post his status on his Grindr profile when he found out, that doesn't mean that everyone else is as honest. The best way to be sure, he says, is to protect yourself every time.

#### INTERVIEW 10: BRICE

Demographics: 29-year-old partnered gay white male.

Duration: 23 minutes

Summary: Brice is currently in a relationship with Shane and no longer uses dating apps. Although he met Shane through Grindr, his overall opinion of dating apps is somewhat negative. He doesn't think most people use them to find long lasting relationships, but rather are usually looking for a one-night stand. He thinks many of the people on dating apps are deceptive in this manner. They indicate that they are looking for a relationship or friends when they are really looking to score a quick hookup. Interestingly he says knows how this works because of his experiences looking for a one-night stand. He says that there are some apps like Plenty-O-Fish that are better than others for individuals hoping to find a serious relationship.

Brice fears that dating apps are helping HIV and other STDs spread more quickly. He says that people lie about their HIV status on their profiles and engage in frequent casual sex. In fact, one person he knows has intentionally infected others with HIV and others that have intentionally sought out infection. He recommends treating everyone as if they are positive and protecting yourself.

## VITA

### **Education**

Sam Houston State University, Huntsville, TX 2014-2017 | Master of Arts in Sociology;

GPA 3.91

Bryan College, Dayton, TN 2009-2011 | Bachelor of Science in Business Administration;

Graduated Cum Laude

### **Research Interests**

*sexualities, gender and society, racial and ethnic studies, income inequality*

### **Presentations**

2016 Southern Sociological Society Atlanta, GA

April 1, 2017 Public Defense of Thesis Huntsville, TX via Skype

### **Professional Associations**

Alpha Kappa Delta (international Sociology awards society)

Southern Sociological Society